

Althusserian State Apparatuses in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* by Will Arbery

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Abstract

The present analysis examines Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* in light of Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and will discuss that the play stages religion, education, family, and political discourse as overlapping sites of ideological power that generate and contest conservative subjectivities. Through a detailed analysis, I show how Catholicism is regarded as a crucial ISA in the play, influencing belief, ritual, and identity while modulating educational and familial practices. Characters are displayed to be interpellated as ideological subjects—called into existence by discourses and institutions—yet their speech and communications also disclose insightful interior skirmishes and misrecognition. By dramatizing ruptures, performative replications, and inconsistencies within contemporary conservative talk and practice, the play reveals the unpredictability of the ideological construction it portrays and the cracks that undermine lucid political identity. Eventually, this Althusserian examination proves how political theatre can both expose and problematize the reproduction of ideology in the present-day American life.

Key Words: *Contemporary American Drama, Ideological State Apparatuses, Interpellation, Political Theatre.*

آلات الدولة الألتوزيرية في رواية أبطال التحول الرابع بقلم ويل أربيري

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المخلص

فحص التحليل الحالي رواية ويل أربيري " أبطال الجولة الرابعة "في ضوء نظرية لويس ألتوسير حول أجهزة الدولة الأيديولوجية (ISAs) ، وسيناقش أن المسرحية عرضت الدين والتعليم والأسرة والخطاب السياسي كمواقع متداخلة للقوة الأيديولوجية تولد وتتحدى الذاتيات المحافظة. من خلال تحليل مفصل، أوضح كيف تعتبر الكاثوليكية عنصرا أساسيا في المسرحية، حيث تؤثر على الإيمان والطقوس والهوية مع تعديل الممارسات التعليمية والأسرية. عرض الشخصيات على أنها تستدعي كمواضيع أيديولوجية —استدعت إلى الوجود من قبل الخطابات والمؤسسات—ومع ذلك فإن خطابها واتصالاتهم تكشف أيضا عن اشتباكات داخلية عميقة وسوء إدراك. من خلال تجسيد الانقسامات، والتكرارات الأدائية، والتناقضات في الحديث والممارسة المحافظة المعاصرة، تكشف المسرحية عن عدم قابلية التنبؤ في البناء الأيديولوجي الذي تصوره والشقوق التي تقوض الهوية السياسية الواضحة. في النهاية، يثبت هذا الفحص الألتوسيري كيف يمكن للمسرح السياسي أن يكشف ويشكل في نفس الوقت إعادة إنتاج الأيديولوجيا في الحياة الأمريكية المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدراما الأمريكية المعاصرة، أجهزة الدولة الأيديولوجية، الاستجاب، المسرح السياسي.



1. Introduction

Heroes of the Fourth Turning (2019) is a theatrical production by Will Arbery, and revolves around a number of young Catholic graduates who come together at their college in Wyoming. Jesse Green (2022) who is writing for *The New York Times*, has referred to this play as "a red-state unicorn" that "explores the lives and ideas of conservatives with affection, understanding and deep knowledge — if not, ultimately, approval." He also acclaimed "its eagerness to admit, and to subtly criticize by juxtaposition, all arguments".

This research seeks to analyze this play through Althusser's theories in order to show how institutions like school, church, family, cultural production, and public discourse interpellate subjects, replicate ideology, and also cover sites of fissure and confrontation. Althusser's dissection between RSAs and ISAs is also a suitable lens for mapping the play's social ecology. Where RSAs act through force and the domination of intimidation, ISAs operate more diffusely through institutes that instruct worldviews and identities: education, religion, the family, and cultural institutions among them.

This paper discusses that *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* stages Althusserian interpellation both as an instrument of social reproduction and as a site in which ideology can be contested. First, the play depicts the Catholic college and parish community as a group of ISAs whose services, programs, and societal outlooks affect subjectivity and political orientation. Second, it shows how cultural practices particularly poetry, vernacular speech, and convivial storytelling, intervene ideological instruction. Third, although the physical presence of repressive apparatuses is minimal onstage, their shadow, the normalization of threat, moral panic, and appeals to order, supports the play's ideological architecture.

2. Statement of the Problem

Heroes of the Fourth Turning has been reviewed by different critics so far; however, no one has analyzed it through the viewpoint of Althusser, and thus, this research intends to fill the existing gap. In this play, a challenging issue is the way in which Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) can be applied to comprehend the multifaceted relations of power, ideology, and dysfunction among the characters of the play. To attain this objective, this investigation seeks to answer this important question: How do the characters represent and uphold Althusser's theory of ISAs through their movements and connections?

3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it offers an Althusserian examination of contemporary American theatre, and clarifies how ideology affects subjectivity via religion, education, and family. Also, it shows the illogicalities and brittleness of conservative belief systems. Moreover, the present study displays the key role of theatre in echoing and questioning ideological power. And

finally, it contributes to scholarship on political theatre, ideology, and post-2020 American drama.

4. Literature Review

4.1. On Theory

Louis Althusser (2007) is an outline to Louis Althusser, comprising his life, hypothetical impressions, and core attitudes. Althusser was accredited for his writings in Marxist theory (pp. 12-16). In addition, Althusser's idea of interpellation, which is about the way by which human beings are hailed into subjects by ideological issues, is a crucial issue in the analysis since it shows how people implement the prevailing ideologies and add to their own subjectification.

Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses (2012) is a substantial book by Althusser, in which he alludes to the multifarious relationship amid ideology, power, and the apparatuses by which ideologies are retained and fulfilled by people in society. The important issue in the study is on how principal ideologies help the comfort of the prevailing class and are supportive in the conservation of social synchronization and stability (pp. 1-5).

In this book, it is claimed that ISAs are linked with interpellation. As well, Althusser believes that RSAs, such as the police and the judiciary, make societal responsibilities compulsory and preserve order through force and dominance. Even if RSAs are significant in leading obstruction and guaranteeing compliance to dominant ideologies, Althusser highlights the more understated and principal importance of ISAs in indicating people's perception and identity. "Louis Althusser: Ideological State-Apparatuses and Subjection" (2013, pp. 147-178) by Rehmann similarly delivers a scrupulous review of Althusser's idea of ISAs and the apparatuses of subjection in society. The research alludes to Althusser's revolutionary examination of how ISAs transport chief beliefs and guarantee social unanimity. Rehmann's article also centers on Althusser's model of interpellation, which indicates how people are hailed to undertake particular responsibilities.

4.2. On the Play

Heroes of the Fourth Turning is about a reunion dinner, and shows a number of graduates from a Catholic college. Gina, Emily, Justin, and Kevin are the main characters, and the story revolves around their multifarious religious views, politics, and responses to recent happenings, resulting in deep debates about devotion and faith. The play's main themes are faith, identity, and the importance of art, transported with a darkly comic tone.

Over the course of a long, late-night reunification at a farmhouse in their hometown, old pledges and common views are tested when a guest who signifies a dissimilar viewpoint (and a set of painful questions about politics, art, and faith) shows up. The evening's chat changes from friendly memories to fiery dispute, causing the characters to challenge differences in theology, ideology, personal trauma, and what it means to be part of a community.



Michiels (2021) argues that Arbery's play is extraordinarily inert, because it mostly includes the characters' protracted viewpoints regarding a number of sensitive matters such as the association between Catholicism and conservatism or the (non)sense of sympathy. In this article, Michiels has examined the diverse types of suppleness that can be perceived in the selected play, despite its ostensible lack of movement. Michiels claims that,

It is conceivable to regard the male characters' routes as withdrawal, while the women both make a difficult progress. Eventually, what audiences and characters alike are left with is a sensation of uncertainty, which could deliver a tool to rise beyond the political moment the play represents. (p. 78)

5. Theoretical Framework

Marxism denotes a financial and political way of life introduced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx's theory of society is entrenched in the idea of class struggle and the division of society into the sovereign class and the working class. As said by Marx, the reigning class adjusts the means of production and benefits from its influence to preserve control over the working class by maltreating their heavy labor for attaining their own monetary welfares.

Louis Althusser has enlarged Marx's ideas by coming up with the concept of ISA as an apparatus through which the reigning class uses its power and reproduces principal ideologies in society. ISAs comprise organizations like the family and determine human beings' sentiments, values, and identities through ideology rather than overt domination.

Also, ISAs could be observed as psychosocial as they try to train approaches of perceiving and measuring things, events, and class relations. Rather than enunciating and imposing order through severe subjugation, ISA spread ideologies that fortify the power of a governing class. People tend to be co-opted by dread of collective denunciation, e.g. derision and exclusion (Althusser, 2012, pp. 299-300).

Also, Althusser's perception of interpellation suggests that basically, human beings are "interpellated" into differentiating themselves as subjects of a particular ideological background, supporting the present circumstances and conserving the authority of the governing class. As specified by Althusser, The certainty that people (you and I) are subjects is an outcome of ideology. Althusser claims that interpellation has got two roles. One "recognition" and the other is "misrecognition. (Dolar, 1993, p. 77)

It has to be also added that in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, I am going to disclose how the characters in the play are interpellated by different ISAs, accompanied by shared expectancies, which control their behaviors, ideas, and interactions. By inspecting the way in which these characters are positioned in the ideological structures of society, this study will provide a significant enquiry of how Althusser's outlooks regarding ISAs and interpellation are symbolized in the play.

6. Discussion

6.1. Religion as an Ideological State Apparatus

Heroes of the Fourth Turning, as noted already, revolves around five characters who come together one night in a very small town in Wyoming. Teresa, Kevin, and Justin were the students of the conservative Catholic Transfiguration College, which their ex-teacher and counsellor Gina will now head. In fact, the reason why everyone has come to Wyoming is to honor Gina's selection as the head of the college. Likewise, Gina's daughter Emily is present; she recognizes her mother's students but went to a different school.

Also, ideology is an influential vehicle since it influences the world and the people in it. It has the supremacy and competence to affect the opinions and knowledge of different cultures. And whether we like it or not, ideology is in the hands of those who are in the reigning class or the bourgeoisie which gives them the command and right to make the proletariat the rule abiding and obeying people. The dominant social order enforces its ideology to the minds of the regular people and this occurrence affects the proletariat's perspectives and living.

Louis Althusser (2012), a French Marxist philosopher in the 1960's, claimed that "ideology, which traditionally had been characterized as a species of "false consciousness" is a set of practices and institutions that sustain an individual's imaginary relationship to his or her material conditions of existence" (p. 693). He also presented the idea of interpellation or hailing. Proclaiming that ideology has two purposes which are the function of recognition and the function of misrecognition, he states that "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser, 2012, p. 699). According to Althusser, religion is a part of the ideological state apparatus. Accompanied by schooling and the media, it spreads the overriding ideology and upholds deceitful class perception.

There is a quote in which Kevin says, "All we know how to do is make things Catholic. That's all you taught us how to do. At other schools, they allow for different conclusions. But here, we're in the pursuit of the same conclusion... What you want isn't different conclusions, you want better poetry to get us to the same place" (Arbery, 2019, p. 80). This part obviously proves how the characters' educational and social background that is entrenched in Catholicism, forms how they think and argue. Kevin's argument shows that their college instilled a Catholic viewpoint that frames not only views but modes of discourse as a central role of an ISA in Althusser's terms.

Similarly, in the same scene Gina states, "The thrill of reason and rhetoric, prayer and poetry — a slow working out... And God, let the understanding be slow" (Arbery, 2019, p. 80). Here Gina's speech links Catholic ceremonial and intellectual life together as a meticulous way of life. This illustrates how religious discourse interpellates characters by calling them into a specific ethical and intellectual subject position that agrees with conservative Catholic life.



While not always openly framed as religious ritual, there are other interactions about belief and identity that act correspondingly; for example, Teresa utters, "Catholicism is the panopticon, this is a holy space" (Arbery, 2019, p. 32). This line implies that the play allegorically features Catholicism as a universal surveillance and ethical command. Thus, the ISA of religion in *Heroes* functions without direct force, mirroring Althusser's idea of ideology as lived and internalized.

6.2. Education and Intellectual Formation

Althusser has referred to the role of education as ideological control, since school is a means for private enterprise. Because the regime regulates instructive rules, students are ideologically manipulated to obey the standards and principles of capitalism. Thus, education is an influential Ideological State Apparatus. Althusser was under the influence of Gramsci's ideas regarding class power and domination. Nonetheless, Althusser notably opposed against Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Balibar, 2014, p. xv). Ruuska (2023) notes, Ideology is not only goal-oriented ideas (e.g., private ownership and its preservation), or specific attitudes (e.g., 'the poor are lazy'), practices (e.g., wage labour), norms (e.g., compulsory education) but also a mixture of worldviews (e.g., market liberalism) and beliefs (e.g., 'private sector is more efficient than the public sector'). For Althusser, ideology has also a material dimension, which crystallizes, for instance, in the form(at) of state education (e.g., the physical layout and structure of a classroom, and school buildings). (p. 251)

In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, education and intellectual formation are seen as important themes, and function as secondary Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) that influence the characters' opinions and political perspectives. Via academic discussions, sessions, and intellectual meetings, the play displays how education legitimizes and communicates ideological knowledge, while also acting as a space for ideological reproduction and contestation.

In the play, education is regarded as a tool through which characters engross and adopt central ideologies. This is apparent in the numerous debates and intellectual interactions that happen amid the characters; this issue echoes their conditioned reactions to bigger social chronicles. Moreover, the characters unveil a series of political dogmata shaped by their educational experiences. For example, when talking about their outlooks concerning the present-day problems, the play discloses how education has formed their viewpoints. Kevin states, "Education isn't just about learning facts; it's about understanding the world through a specific lens" (p. 16). This feeling underlines how their academic development supports specific ideological perspectives, thereby legitimizing those theories.

Additionally, intellectual discussions all over the play act as a basis for both the reproduction and contestation of ideology. For example, in a frenzied argument, Emily says, "You're not questioning the very foundations of what we were taught; you're just repeating it" (p. 18). This moment captures the intrinsic



tension in educational settings where ideologies are both supported and disparagingly inspected.

6.3. Family and Socialization

Louis Althusser observed the family as part of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which comprises institutions such as schools, religion, and media. Through socialization, the family conveys capitalist standards like compliance to power and approval of discrimination, to the next generation. Althusser argued that an important task of the family is to instruct the subsequent generation to observe and succumb to the upper class, i.e. the bourgeoisie.

Will Arbery has also dexterously shown the family as a principal Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that overwhelmingly affects the characters' beliefs and viewpoints. In fact, the play exemplifies how familial relations are filled with allegiance, expectations, and pressures to obey predominant ideological standards. Therefore, the family unit in the play can be regarded as an influential ideological force, which interpellates the characters into particular identities.

During the play, characters talk about their multifaceted feelings of loyalty and pressure to fit in, which mirrors the effect of familial ideology. This pressure to stick to family-imposed ideologies is a serious feature in their socialization procedure, implying Arbery's explanation of the unescapable nature of family dynamics in ideological construction. Moreover, whereas the family's ideological authority is daunting, characters display opposition or try to reinterpret the ideologies forced upon them. Teresa says,

We're full of energy. We're more upbeat and engaged. We're more sexually modest, we believe in no sex before marriage and we return to conservative family values. (Arbery, 2019, p. 68)

This citation is a substantial case concerning the affiliation between familial ideologies and individual ideologies as a result of apprehending some important themes relatable to an Althusserian outline. In fact, Teresa's declaration shows how the family is a considerable Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), and indorses a particular sequence of standards and beliefs that support conservative ideology.

By uttering that they are "full of energy" and "more upbeat and engaged," she displays pride in these opinions, which indicates that devoutness to conservative values is observed as leading to her identity and self-perception. Similarly, the citation of being "more sexually modest" and the faith in "no sex before marriage" accentuates the burden on human beings to obey conventional ideological principles relating to sexuality and morality.

This pressure specifies the prospects employed upon Teresa and her peers by their family and community, also reverberating an Althusserian perspective on how ideological state apparatuses convey and fortify particular beliefs. The stress on "returning to conservative family values" shows a conservative

viewpoint against apparent social changes, replicating the family's repercussion in forming a sense of identity ingrained in conventions.

Teresa's relationship with these ideologies illustrates devoutness to her family's standards, and replicates how familial ties can influence one's moral environment and social dogmas. This adherence can repeatedly bring about burden for people who seek to reunify their individual cravings with familial outlooks, demonstrating the separation of ideological authenticity and individual compromise.

6.4. Interpellation and Subject Formation

Interpellation is a practice, in which we come across and embrace our culture's ideologies. Interpellation articulates the idea that an idea is not just yours alone (such as "I like blue, I always have") but rather an idea that has been offered to you to follow. In the play, the notions of interpellation and subject formation play an essential part in understanding how characters become ideological subjects formed by different Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

Through the dialogue and personal thoughts of characters, Arbery demonstrates the mechanisms of consent and internalization that uphold ideology and also disclose reservation and conflict that defy these ideological structures. Interpellation as a concept devised by Althusser, shows how human beings are "hailed" into particular roles and identities by social structures. In the play, characters like Teresa and Kevin are subject to manifold ISAs such as family, religion, and culture. These ISAs influence their feelings and communications, enthralling them to symbolize specific ideological identities. The following encounter between Teresa and Kevin proves how these hailing procedures happen through dialogue that strengthens the prevailing standards and expectations,

TERESA: I think you blame your problems on demons, but really you're just morally lazy. KEVIN: Okay I'm sorry – I won't talk about anything anymore. It's just I wanted to have a big conversation, and you just said everything. You had the whole conversation by yourself. TERESA: Oh I'm sorry did you want to contribute more? You're not actually a good conversationalist, Kevin. You make everything about yourself, Kevin. Good conversations elevate the conversants. You, without fail, bring it back down to your own shit. (pp. 23-24)

Teresa's sentence, "I think you blame your problems on demons, but really you're just morally lazy," not only denounces Kevin's deficiencies but also reflects Teresa's own internalization of ideological values that link individual liability with ethical authenticity. Her propensity to utter these views discloses her acknowledgement of the familial and cultural ideologies that shape her perspective.

Kevin's reply, "Okay I'm sorry – I won't talk about anything anymore. It's just I wanted to have a big conversation, and you just said everything. You had the whole conversation by yourself," explicates a crisis in the ideological



interpellation. Kevin feels downgraded and incapable to declare his voice in the exchange, which stipulates that he is brawling against the ideological limitations that Teresa symbolizes.

Teresa's response also discloses the confrontational feature of their association. Here, Teresa places herself as the moral moderator while promptly imposing her ideological ideologies about what establishes reminiscent dialogue. This confrontation displays the limitations of interpellation; while Teresa is decisively engrained in her ideological viewpoint, Kevin's retort states a growing perception of the ideological limitations they both go through.

6.5. Theatre as a Site of Ideological Critique

The theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), as mentioned before, focuses on the way in which ideology is reproduced not principally through force, but through ordinary practices, institutions, and rituals such as religion, family, education, and culture, which affect subjects' insight of reality. *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* also shows theatre itself as a space where these ideological apparatuses are not only embodied but critically questioned.

By playing ideological skirmishes instead of nonconcrete political discussions, Arbery reveals how drama can concurrently reproduce ideology and interrogate it, thus inviting the audience into a procedure of reflection rather than inducement. Rather than exhibiting ideology as a detached system, the selected play stages ideology as lived experience. The play revolves around a small group of Catholic conservatives whose opinions are shaped and strengthened through corresponding ISAs including religion, education, nationalism, and family.

Theatre becomes a place for condemnation since it does not resolve these ideological positions. The audience is not taught what to think; instead, they are perceived as witnesses who observe how ideology is uttered through bodies, language, and associations. This issue is in accordance with Althusser's idea that ideology interpellates people as subjects. The characters recurrently hail one another by testing devotion, summoning collective histories, and regulating limitations of belief.

The theatrical outline shows this procedure in real time, and enables the audience to distinguish ideology not as an unbiased principle but as a force essential for determining identity and action. The play's intimate setting, Justin's backyard after a party is decisive to its ideological work. Ideological scuffles are explained not in public institutions but in private space, therefore featuring how ISAs operate beyond authority. The opening stage direction proves this undoubtedly:

Justin's backyard, empty. There's the noise of a party inside – about 20 people. Most of them on their way out... Justin comes outside – dressed in nicer clothes. A tie. He notices that he's stained his porch a bit, with blood. He gets on his hands and knees and tries to clean the blood. (p. 5)



Emily's entrance, walking with a cane, fortifies the physical cost of ideological devoutness. The characters accurately spread the values of belief in their bodies, stressing how ideology is not nonrepresentational but markedly real. Theatre's visual immediacy makes this cost unpreventable for the spectators. Teresa's monologue later in the play shows how ideology is strengthened under apparent danger:

We're in Crisis. They're coming for our tabernacle... I propose leveling up... Going blow for blow. And being ready for war, if it happens. When it happens. (Arbery, 2019, p. 64)

Here, Teresa's language illustrates how ISAs, chiefly religion and nationalism, produce subjects who comprehend ideological incongruity as existential hazard. The change from "if" to "when" discloses how ideology excludes alternative clarifications, altering assumption into confidence. Notably, Arbery does not frame Teresa as a caricature. Her speech is emotionally intelligible, convincing, and based on collective history. This is where theatre's critical power lies: the audience may distinguish the seductive lucidity of her rhetoric while instantaneously seeing its risks. The play does not disassemble ideology from the outside; it lets ideology speak entirely and in doing so, unveils its interior logic.

7. Conclusion

Will Arbery has attempted to feature an intense ethnography of conservative Catholic subjectivity in which the mechanisms Althusser recognized as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as religion, education, family, and culture are both on full display and under enquiry. Over a long, restless night of discussion, the college chapel and classroom, the rituals of confession and friendship, and the circulating languages of poetry and politics act not only as the play's framework but as dynamic fabricators of belief.

Characters are unceasingly hailed into roles by these apparatuses; they speak in the idioms of their formation, reproduce institutional logics, and defend cooperative identity even as individual reservations surface. Therefore, the drama stages how ideology interpellates people as subjects whose agreement is protected through average practices, speech-forms, and moving pledges rather than unconcealed compulsion.

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