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Dissecting the Dissection of Isolation:

An Analysis of “The Ideology of Isolation”

How did we get here? Climate change has picked up pace to a terrifying degree, yet very little is systematically done about it, at least in the United States. Why is that? In a Harper’s Magazine article, “The Ideology of Isolation”, Rebecca Solnit informs the reader of a shift that she has observed amongst the right-wing populace of the United States. She states that the standard, modern right-wing ideology can be summed up as a belief in a complete disconnect between all things, and how right-wingers want this to be maintained; left-wingers, on the other hand, see this disconnecting worldview as going against reality. The left sees this view from the right as something that will bring about the end of humanity, ultimately due to the apathy that is felt towards climate change. This case that she has made is overall quite strong, and she displays the faults that come from the right quite eloquently.

One of the strengths of Solnit’s article is the many different literary devices that she uses throughout the article to further her arguments. Solnit, for example, changes up a common turn of phrase (to “boil down” something) in her first sentence of the article, saying “If you boil the strange soup of contemporary right-wing ideology down to a sort of bouillon cube…”. Using this as her first sentence of the article grabs the reader’s attention; the colorful, clever language piques the readers curiosity, getting them to continue reading. Solnit also utilizes capitalization to draw attention to certain words and phrases, while also conveying subtext more clearly to the reader. While criticizing the right’s values, Solnit refers to said values as a “Glorious Disconnect”; her capitalization not only emphasizes her word choice, but it also pushes her sarcastic use of “Glorious” to the forefront. Solnit’s most prevalent device is all the allusions she makes throughout the article; for several paragraphs, she alludes to cowboys, a group the right adulates, and how their faults and desires can be found in the modern right. Solnit alludes to several prominent right-wing individuals, both past and present, to show how the right-wing has shifted, how they’re hypocritical, or how far their mindset is from reality. These are just a small taste of her use of allusion throughout the article, all of which she uses quite effectively to further her point.

Delving deeper into Solnit’s writing style, one can see a very effective trend in how she constructs her arguments. If we categorize her arguments into the different rhetorical appeals, she follows a trend of giving the set-up to her argument through pathos, and typically following it up with either some mix of logos and pathos, or just a purely logical argument. For example, in the fourth paragraph of her article, Solnit brings up how women fit into the right’s ideology of total freedom; more specifically, she speaks of the aspect of total isolation from one another, and how women generally don’t isolate themselves effectively. Solnit asserts that “in this mode of thinking, [women] are too interactive, in their tendency to gather and ally”, and so in order to prevent this socializing, the right starts to suppress women. Solnit concludes as to why this is through both logos and pathos: the right views women as “an undifferentiated part of nature”, rather than as equals to men. This very bold claim is reached smoothly and effectively in a mere 4 sentences, showcasing Solnit’s skills as a writer.

Now, all this praise may make it sound as if there aren’t issues with Solnit’s article; on the contrary, there are a couple choice issues that arise from the article, primarily from some of the comparisons she utilizes. Several paragraphs into her article, Solnit uses an epigraph to talk about cowboys and their “Fear of penetration and [their] fantasy of impenetrable isolation”. Solnit uses “penetration” as a reference to being shot, but she connects these things to being “central to both homophobia and the xenophobic mania for ‘sealing the border’”. One can probably see what Solnit was going for by saying this; however, comparing a strong homophobic trend amongst the right-wing population with the human desire to not be fatally wounded is simply ridiculous. These homophobic trends could probably be more strongly attributed to Christian fundamentalism amongst right-wing Americans instead. Solnit also sometimes doesn’t cite significant statistical claims in her article; about a third of the way through the article, she claims that “nearly two thirds of American gun deaths…are suicides” without providing any sort of citation. This lack of citation really sticks out, since Solnit isn’t averse to referring to others for claims or quotes, as she does it several times in her article. These mistakes are a blight on what otherwise is a great article.

Solnit’s essay has mostly good points made along the way but has a few points that she should either expand upon or drop. Solnit’s reputation precedes her due to her ability to convince others to at least move closer to her viewpoint with her skillful writing; she does so best when she provides her case and her case alone. She brought mostly her best here, and it shows.

Works Cited

Solnit, Rebecca. “The Ideology of Isolation” *Harper’s Magazine,* HarperCollins Publishing, Jul. 2016, <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/07/the-ideology-of-isolation/>, Accessed Sept. 23, 2019