

„Remember“ by Joy Harjo

– Deconstructivism and Reader Response Theory (Wolfgang Iser)

The poem isn't written in a traditional form because it has no metre and so there is no regular sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables. Instead of metre it is written in free verse. There are no stanzas and that is the reason why you rather read it like prose. The author uses another kind of dynamic rhythm with many run-on lines. The reader has to pass over the end of the line because the sentence moves on into the next verse. The usage of many enjambements makes the reading more liquid. A persona talks directly to the reader and that leads to the feeling that you read rather a speech than a poem. The fact that the author decided not to stick to the traditional form of a poem implies a deconstructive way of thinking. According to Jacques Derrida there is no clear language system with exact structures and meanings of words. His theory questions the meaning of signs because in his opinion all signs remain incomplete. So a traditional poem with metre and rhyme would stand for a well-structured form of language. The title „Remember“ already implies the Reader-Response-theory of Wolfgang Iser that the text includes an interaction of text and reader. Remembering is used in the poem as an imperative. The voice call on the reader to remember. The overall intention of the speaker remains concealed. If the reader wants to know what the word “remember” means he can only fully understand it by looking at the opposition “forget”. Derrida's theory says that everything only means something due to its difference from something else. But when the one term needs the other one to gain a definition, there is always a trace of the other. When the reader would replace “remember” with “forget”, the poem would get a completely different statement and it immediately suggest itself that the voice which speaks to the implied addressee has the opinion that the addressee or the reader has forgotten these things he wants him to remember. So the speaker tells people which have forgotten their origins to remember their descent. This leads also to a more negative appearance which is a contrast to the positive imagery of “mother earth” and the solidarity which is nearly celebrated (line 21: “Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.”). Also the juxtaposition of the “sun's birth at dawn” and the “sundown” (line 5-6) shows the reader that nothing can exist without its opposition. That the speaker declares the first one as “the strongest point of time” (line 6) shows

the reader that a certain hierarchy exists. That normally the distinction between man and woman hierarchies the men is reversed by the mentioning of the mother at first (line 8) and that the voice ascribes more importance to her than to the father who is only mentioned in one short line (line 11). The deconstructivist Jacques Derrida has the theory that the “minor” term disturbs the stable balance. The whole poem is about balance and disharmony because the principle of the poem seems to be the universal unity of all living humans (line 14 “we are earth”) but the fact “that this universe is you” (line 22) implies that the universe is only a constructed system which means for every person something else. The imagery of the poem is inspired by nature. It deals with images like stars, moon, the sun and also plants and animals. This picture is disturbed by a completely different topic. The speaker mentions “Kiowa war” (line 19) which involve a tribe of Native Americans and the dark chapter of American history. This stands in contrast to “dance songs” in line 20 which is intensified through the enjambement. It is very important to think about the information what is concealed; in fact why war is mentioned at all. Up to this line the expectation the implied addressee have about a poem with the title “Remember” is confirmed. It brings about own memories of family and nature and the call to stop and think about being aware of oneself in this hectic world. Especially the request to “remember the dance (...) that life is.” (line 26) brings about the idea that the addressee should appreciate life more. But the mention of a topic like war doesn't fit in this concept. So it can also be read as an appeal to peace on earth. This would match with the attempt to draw the conclusion that all people are equal. The voice mentions with the words “red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth, brown earth, (...)” (line 13-14) different colours of skins and so shows the difference between cultures and countries at the same time when he says that there are no distinctions. The universal assumption is questioned by Derrida's theory because he states the fact that everything is defined by culture and arbitrariness. Line 25 tells the reader “that language comes from this” in the context of “motion” and “growing” (line 24). This fits to the idea that the meaning of signs remains incomplete. When language is always changing there can't be an explicit meaning of a word.