

You'll Never Get Out Alive: Identity and Oppression in Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom*

by Allison Massey

According to Louis Althusser (as summarized by David Hawkes in *Ideology*), "ideology exists before the individual. When the concrete individual comes along, ideology has 'always already' determined a specific set of roles, a particular subjectivity, into which the individual will be slotted" (119). This slotting is partly achieved through interpellation or "hailing" of the subject and through hegemonic utilities such as Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses which serve to uphold the prevailing power structure through their ideological influence. In the poem "A Reporter from New York Asks Edith Mae Chapman, Age Nine, What Her Daddy Tells Her about the Strike" (Fisher 57), the coal-miner father comes to the realization that he has been objectified by the ruling class (the mine operators) and attempts to modify the prevailing ideological structure by removing himself from the institutions that support it. This attempt, however, ultimately fails because capitalistic ideology permeates every aspect of life, rendering it impossible for any human being to function outside of its realm.

The ideological modes of control highlighted in the poem include the company store, which serves as both a Repressive and Ideological State Apparatus, and the Ideological State Apparatuses of school and church which serve to reinforce the ruling class ideology. While on strike, or most likely before the strike occurs, the father comes to the realization that all of these apparatuses only serve to oppress and objectify him while forcing him to subscribe to ideology that belongs to the company as opposed to his own autonomous self (what Marx would describe as bourgeoisie vs. proletariat), as evidenced by his attempt to distance himself from these apparatuses. The company store is the most prevailing mode of control over the miners because of its connection with money, the ultimate idol around which everything in a capitalistic society falls down in reverence. As Edith Mae pontificates:

We ain't to go to the company store, mooning
over peppermint sticks, shaming ourselves like a dog
begging under the table. They cut off our account
but we ain't no-accounts. (II. 1-4)

The punishment for striking is removal from access to money through a cut off of his account at the company store. The directive to avoid the company store entirely illustrates the father's desire to pull himself and his children away from their dependence on and reverence toward the repressive structure of money and the channels of access to it which are controlled by the dominant class. The use of the term "mooning" (I. 1) is especially illuminating here because it highlights that the father does not want his children to act as though they are infatuated with the material goods no longer available to them, indicating a further removal from capitalistic ideals.

The company store can be seen as both a Repressive and an Ideological State Apparatus because it does in fact use a form of violence, though not overt, to influence and manipulate the mining community. Violence can be defined as "an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power, as against rights or laws," (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*) and it can be argued that the company store embodied that definition by acting as an extension of the company to force dependence through debt and social exploitation. According to Crandall A. Shifflett:

The company store was the social and economic nexus of the company town . . . Groceries, furniture, clothing, boots and shoes, window and door screens, buckets, nails, drugs, black powder, miner's lamps, refrigerators and washers, radios, garden tools, ice, and household gadgets were just some of the great variety of items available. Haircuts and hairstyling, movies and bowling, shoe shines, sodas and ice creams . . . as well as laundering and dry cleaning, were just some of the many offerings at these service and recreation centers. (176)

It is important to note that Shifflett refers to the company store as not just a store but a "service and recreation center." As can be deduced by the long list of items and services provided there, the company store was an influential center of the town, put in place and controlled entirely by the mine operators.

Having so many services in one location might have seemed like a convenience to many, but in truth, it made the miners and their families completely dependent upon only one site of commerce. There was no competition, so while it may have seemed as though they were congregating at the store willingly, they in fact had no other choice. This made it quite easy for the company to victimize the miners through the store, their beloved site of "communal life and affiliation" (Shifflett 177), which they did through the use of scrip:

Scrip was a form of currency issued by the coal company through the company store. A miner's wages might be paid in scrip, and once paid in that form, scrip could not be converted back into U. S. currency, but instead had to be redeemed in merchandise at the company store . . . It is through the scrip system where miners could fall prey to the worst the company town had to offer—outrageous prices, a monopoly on essential food and supplies, and crippling debt. (Shifflett 179-80)

The company store truly acts as a violent oppressor because as an extension of the mine system it forces dependence and oppression and does not leave the miners with any alternatives for opting out of the subjugation process through this dependence. The pay system within the mining society and symbolic order detaches the miners from the outside world and forces them to become participants within the mine owners' created ideology of control.

Edith Mae then continues to relay that "we ain't to go to school/ so's the company teacher can tell us we are [no-accounts]" (II. 4-5). These lines indicate the father's

resistance against interpellation as a “no-account” (I. 4) or worthless human being and his desire to withdraw from the current symbolic order and form his own identity outside of the ideological confines put in place by the operator/miner paradigm. As long as there is a ruling class there will be a subservient class, and the educational systems, put in place by the mine owners, serve to reinforce the roles that each person has been placed into. By refusing to allow his children to go to school and therefore be interpellated into a certain subjectivity, he is rejecting the current ideological structure.

Finally, Edith Mae discusses the last Ideological State Apparatus when she tells the reporter:

We ain't going to meeting and bow our heads
for the company preacher, who claims it is the meek
will inherit the coal fields, instead of telling
how the mountains will crumble and rocks
rain down like fire upon the heads
of the operators, like it says in the Bible (II. 6-11).

Edith Mae relays how the company preacher “claims it is the meek / will inherit the coal fields,” (I. 6-7) and this revelation implies the overt manipulation used by the company preacher to instill a sense of docility within the miners. Therefore, inculcated within the coal miners is a sense that any attempted rebellion will be contrary to meekness, and thus they will be excluded from inheriting the coal fields. Moreover, the inheritance that the company preacher is referring to is the hope of an afterlife inheritance of the earth's coal fields, not a present inheritance. Embedded within this religious manipulation is the ideology that the coal miners will never inherit the coal fields of this present earth, and that they should accept that “meekness” (I. 7) is the only way they can ever hope to do so in the hereafter.

Since the oppressive regime of the coal operators uses the ideological state apparatus to further their power and objectives, they need a more substantive force to not only lend credibility to their objectives but to also provide a definitive moral authority. The coal operators rely on the forces of religion to instill their notions and perceived renderings and interpretations of right and wrong, with the intent to implant their morals in the coal miners through this use of religion. The Ideological State Apparatus of religion functions as the ultimate entrapment for the coal miners. Religion allows a buffer for the operators since it acts to ward off any potential rebellion on the part of the coal miners. Specifically, religion is what gives the absolute moral authority to the state apparatuses mine owners who benefit from putting them in place.

The father no longer subscribes to the ruling class version of “truth” that is imparted to them through the company formed religious structure, and therefore, he wishes to distance himself from this mode of control as well. Even the ideology of what constitutes right and wrong has been tainted by its formation through the ruling class's ideals, as evidenced by the father's belief in the misinterpretation of the scripture by the company preacher to benefit the mine operators.

Through rejection of the Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses the father in “A Reporter” is showing his realization that the current power structure which serves to form all of their ideas and beliefs is a façade put in place by the ruling class to objectify himself and all of the other miners and their families. He wishes to break free of the current symbolic order and function outside of the ideology set in place by the ruling class, but this feat will prove impossible because of his ultimate dependence on this ideological structure. The ruling class ideology and the “fetishization of money”

(Hawkes) have become so ingrained into society that one cannot function outside of them. As Hawkes states while summarizing Adorno, "the completely commodified world does not permit one to opt out of this process [of objectification]" (131). Society revolves entirely around money, and when the father rebels against the prevailing social order, the ruling class cuts off his access to money, rendering him helpless. What's more, often the ruling regime will interfere with overt force to place the subordinate class back into their subjective slots, as evidenced by the eventual outcome of the Battle of Blair Mountain. After the rebellion was effectively quelled through threat of United States Army interference (an extension of the ultimate power structure of government at the national level), gains were made but it is still very clear that miners are being oppressed to this day and that the companies hold all of the power. According to Robert Shogan, "workers in post-industrial America have not come close to keeping pace with soaring corporate profits while the maldistribution of wealth accelerates. In the 21st century, as in the 20th, labor's leaders are still on the defensive, battling to forestall further losses of political power and protections for their members. The bosses still hold all the high cards" (226). Rejecting capitalistic ideology so as to gain personal rights means giving up the modes of survival (money and the institutions that support money usage) and risking the threat of blatant violence against self, insuring that everyone will play along with the power structure and continue to be oppressed and objectified whether they realize it or not.

Works Cited

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