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ENGL 3822

II. Short Essay – Option 1

In “Art as Technique,” Viktor Shklovsky argues that the purpose of art is to make objects “‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (12).

Lydia Davis’s story “Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer” uses Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization to create a roughened and artistic reexamination of peas. Defamiliarization is employed through the juxtaposition of object and form, the contrast between peas inside and outside of the package, and through the repetition of the words “pea” and “peas.”

This short excerpt is crafted in the form of a letter, which suggests personal, heartfelt communication. The speaker addresses the Frozen Peas Manufacturer as “you” and indicates closeness through the use of “Dear” and “Yours sincerely.” However, the form is put in direct contrast to the mundane object, frozen peas. The disparity between form and object emphasizes the ridiculousness of a personal letter to a pea manufacturer. In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky compares this technique of defamiliarization as “seeing things out of their normal context” (17). In this way, defamiliarization is employed to make the detailed description of peas strange in comparison to the familiar form of a friendly letter. The emphasis and focus on peas in “Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer” parallels Shklovsky’s example of Tolstoy “describing whole battles as if battles were something new” (15). In describing peas in a strange and unfamiliar context, they are given a sense of novelty and uniqueness.

Throughout the story, the color, size, texture, and aesthetic quality of peas are contrasted to the imagistic representation on the frozen pea package. In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky describes “The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it” (13).

Routinized and automatized perception inhibits the ability to appreciate the artfulness of an object. In order to emphasize their qualities, eccentricities, and uniqueness, real peas are placed in contrast to the purely symbolic photo of peas on the package. The photographed peas on the package are criticized for their “unattractive color,” which is compared to “a dull yellow green” and “the color of pea soup.” In contrast, the real peas are described as “a nice bright dark green.” The peas in the photo are also described as “past their maturity and mealy in texture” and the Pea Manufacturer is criticized for “falsely representing your peas as less attractive than they actually are.” The contrast between real and photographed peas allows for an elimination of the “automatism of perception” and gives the real peas elevated significance (22). The distinction between photographed and real peas creates a rift between the automatic understanding and the slow and methodical perception of an object. Defamiliarization is caused by the accentuated difference between photograph and reality. This discrepancy ultimately leads to slowed perception and appreciation.

Defamiliarization is also accomplished through the frequent repetition of the word “pea” in the story. The words “pea” or “peas” are used fifteen times in only eighteen lines of text. Each reiteration and recurrence draws attention to the arbitrariness of the word “pea.” The organization of letters has no connection or correlation with the qualities, distinction, or aesthetic value of peas. The arrangement of the letters “p, e, and a” are also used in the words “appealing” and “appear” in the same story. Words mean something because they have meaning assigned to them, not because they inherently carry the weight of meaning. Shklovsky describes the “‘algebraic’ method” of recognizing objects “only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics” (11). This is exemplified by our automatic association between word and object. However, the arbitrary

symbol and construction of the word “pea” contrasts with the characteristics, substance, and artfulness of the actual object. The recurrence of the word “pea,” although seemingly routinized, causes the audience to pause and contemplate the connection between the symbol and the object’s essence. This piece functions differently than one of the techniques that Shklovsky describes, making “the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object,” like in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, “The Fish” (13). Conversely, numerous instances of repetition lead to a forced separation between word and object, which results in defamiliarization. This allows the audience to see the object in its entirety and to distinguish the descriptors from the signifier alone.

In the final line, the speaker urges the Frozen Peas Manufacturer to “reconsider your art.” In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky asserts that “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important” (12). The “art” of pea manufacturing is paralleled with the speaker’s ability to interrupt the reader’s automatic recognition of the pea as a simple and easily understood symbol. This short story is significant because it uses defamiliarization to make the reader perceive, reexamine, and appreciate peas through their roughened and artful description. “Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer” disrupts the automatic perception of the symbol “pea” and forces the audience to reconsider what each description stands for and why it is significant. In other words, it defies the “imagistic” or “economical” recognition of symbols as described by Herbert Spencer. In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky describes that the purpose of art is for someone to “recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stony *stony*” (12). Similarly, the technique of defamiliarization in this story draws attention to the essence and spirit of “pea-ness,” which allows the audience to feel, appreciate, and perceive the object outside of its purely symbolic or iconic meaning.

