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America, the Beneficiary



The ever-familiar poster of Uncle Sam's commanding index finger is a common representation of American patriotism. As Americans, we pride ourselves on our gradual and progressive success as a nation stemming from the freedoms that founded our country's way of life. We do this so much so that posters and propaganda like the one of Uncle Sam have become household to the citizens of this country but what they represent is often misconstrued. Symbols like this one are often left with a surface level understanding -- simply seeing a man dressed in red, white, and blue as a figurehead for a burgeoning nation. Upon closely examining this specific picture of Uncle Sam, fixed with the words "I Want You for the U.S. Army!", one can see that it serves as much more than a patriotic call to arms but an understanding of the true authoritative and sometimes demanding nature of the American government.

At first glance, the iconic poster is nothing more than a caricature of an old, concerned looking man. He is dressed in the colors of the American flag, replete with a blue dress coat, a red bow tie, a white button down shirt, and a cartoonish American flag top hat. The immediate style and colors portrayed in the poster instill a sense of bravery and patriotism in those looking on as it strikes an appeal to the love and pride they have for their country. The next, obvious aspect of the picture are the words inscribed at the bottom and the true purpose of the image: "I

Want YOU for the U.S. Army". The text here is also in the colors of the flag as to further the patriotic notion within the beholder. Not only is the text colored specifically, but the actual font that is chosen creates a fierce, commanding affect, that to the viewer, stresses the gravity of his or her application for the U.S. government. It does not take much analytical skill to realize that the word "YOU" is emboldened, underlined, and made to be the center piece of the text. After acknowledging the patriotic themes of the poster and the text, one next looks to the actual man depicted in the image.

One can clearly see that this is an old man with a stern look on his face. He is pointing directly at whoever is addressing the image and he fortifies this strong gesture with a facial demeanor that matches the intensity of his point. It is also important to notice that the man is of caucasian ethnicity, making this image certainly more credible and relatable for the demographic and time period. Although intense, the grandfather-like concern that is expressed in the image further serves to relate and comfort the viewer by rooting them in something they know well -- the supportive guidance of a bearded patriarch. This simple examination of the image provides an understanding of it that is just as simple: "America wants me because I am special." This way of analyzing a medium is comparable to that of the new critics, who viewed forms of art with only the details provided, nullifying any interpretational, historical, or political understanding and influence of the work -- "art for art's sake."

In further concordance with the new critics, one can see this image as iconic. He isn't just any man on a poster but instead he is Uncle Sam! He is a representation of the American virtues that each citizen wishes to uphold and the duties they owe their country for providing freedoms unknown to the rest of the world. Combined with the implication that anyone can be just like him this poster subjects the innocent American citizen to a feeling of grandeur, of being part of something bigger than themselves.

While this may seem to be a positive ideal, it is actually more representative of a government and country that takes advantage of its people, similar to that of colonial France and black intellectuals like Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas. In offering its people freedom and a life void of persecution, American leaders have created a gift with which they can exploit. After instilling in their people a pride unmatched by other parts of the world, America had at its disposal a country full of team members not citizens. These team members, once given the right motivation (i.e. "I Want YOU!"), were convinced that offering their lives to fight in war was not only the right thing to do but to not do so would be dishonorable and unpatriotic.

What was once, from a new critic point of view an image of the caring father of America, now is a daunting expression of an authoritative government system, eager to prey on the vulnerabilities of its own people in order to further itself. The Russian Formalist method involves an aspect of close reading that defamiliarizes the viewer with the piece of art. In the case of Uncle Sam, the dominating understanding is that he is a proud representation of the great country that is America. But when one defamiliarizes this image and analyzes it with innocent perception, without any pre-conceived notions for what the art may be, the image begins to take on a whole new meaning. His warm, bearded face becomes one of urgency and condescension, implying that "YOU" aren't special at all, but in reality are just one of a million other people that America needs enlisted. The driven index finger becomes one the viewer is subject to, not a part of. The colorful top hat no longer dresses a friendly man looking for help but helmets a soldier from the non-domestic bullets of the enemy. And the red, white, and blue of his bow tie tuxedo

is shifts from a costume of patriotism to an outfit of war, dividing us from the enemy. What was once a beautiful, unifying portrait of a young and inspired country becomes a Big Brother-esque warning of our duty as Americans to prolong and support the freedoms the country was founded upon, even if that means relinquishing one's own freedom in order to do so.

Works Cited:

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