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Uncertainty in the Post-Modern West: Finding Meaning On Broadway

Certainty, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means to be determined, fixed, unchanging, and “avoiding ambiguity from confusion with sense.” This definition of certainty as fixed and logical has etched itself onto the world of critical theory, with different theorists and schools of theories attempting to define particular methodologies for determining meaning within texts. But can the meaning of texts ever truly be certain and complete? The certainty of a text, for earlier literary theorists, is a concept that was inseparably linked with purpose and intentionality, but the provocative nature of twentieth-century Post-modernism calls into question what it really means to reach certainty. For Post-modernist Jacques Derrida, certainty is simply an arbitrary goal that humans themselves have forced upon the reading of texts. Even if we, as critical readers of literature, were to use more inclusive theories to understand texts, like the specific methodology described in Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, which optimistically engages in dialogue with several different schools of theory, we would never know for sure when or if we had fully and completely explained a text’s meaning. But what if uncertainty is precisely what allows for meaning to be produced in the first place? Maybe all we can be certain of is that there is no attainable certainty; even if you knew an author’s true intentionality, his or her text would still possess a level of uncertainty since social, political, and cultural influences unbeknownst to even the author may exist. Yet, it is the looming presence of those influential elements that allows for further meaning to be yielded. Perhaps our goal, then, as critical readers, is to bring certainty down off its pedestal. It is not certainty that we should be trying to reach, but rather, uncertainty that we should be attempting to find.