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CORMAC MCCARTHY'S DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE
IN HIS NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN AND THE ROAD

The Depiction of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men

Reading of Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men is problematic and ambiguous, because the novel consists of two different parts that are loosely connected. These parts are not divided systematically and they are completely different in their language, style and form. One part of the novel gives an account on the life experience of the main protagonist Sheriff Bell and is in the form of inner meditations. The second part of the novel is full of violent images such as drugs, weapons, corruption and violent characters. It is extremely hard to decide which part is carrying the main plot of the novel. The accounts of Sheriff Bell are rather static as they are presenting his own personal visions and opinions about the recent happening in society. The other part is rather dynamic as it gives the action of the novel and the dialogues. It is easy to say that the main plot of the novel is in its dynamic part but what is the role of the Sheriff Bell's inner meditations? This type of division of the novel creates two stories within the novel. The first story is in the form of inner meditations of Sheriff Bell and these meditations are full of worries about possible heading of the world. The second story of the novel is the depiction of the cruel world of contemporary society. What is this novel really about? The novel is about:

"Little guys and big evil forces-we don't see the power brokers or the drug dealers or the users center-stage, but we witness the societal meltdown all around them, the wastage, the carnage."(Lincoln, 145, 2009)

The characters of the novel are only mosquitos of immense violence that surrounds us and Sheriff Bell is trying to understand the world that he should protect. What is the source of that violence is the greatest mystery for him. Sheriff Bell is the main protagonist of the novel. He is not a typical representative of a sheriff that can be seen in the classical westerns. He is not a brave man and he is not fighting against villains and injustice. Sheriff Bell should be a symbol of justice but he only symbolizes the past.

"McCarthy's depiction of Sheriff Bell both at present and in the past (through his meditations, comments, and reminiscences) implies a symbolic expression not only of the process of Sheriff's moral maturation, but also gradual disintegration of the moral values in the United States as observed by Sheriff at narrated present, but also of both the American myth of innocence, the process which the Sheriff himself is partly a representative of."(Kušnir, 4, not published)

We need to see Sheriff Bell as the consciousness of the past. He is the man who should secure the safety of the United States. Instead of this, he is only complaining about the immorality of the world. He is just limping through the world without any real attempt to stop violence. He is comparing the old world with the new world. The old world for him is the world of innocence. Sheriff Bell is trying to understand what is happening in the world, but he is not capable of explaining the immense violence. In his first mediation the strongest and the hardest question of Sheriff Bell is asked:

"What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?" (McCarthy, 3, 2005)

This is the biggest worry of Sheriff Bell. This question implies that a new type of human being is appearing. Are we able to call this new type a human being if it does not have a soul? McCarthy provides us with this new type of human being. It is a vicious murderer from the novel. His name is Anton Chigurh. He is the man that may represent that new type of human being. He just wanders through the country and is completing his evil mission. Sheriff Bell is trying to catch Chigurh, but he is not capable of it.

The Violence of Anton Chiruh

Anton Chiruh cannot be treated as an ordinary killer as he was something more. He was a man without a soul that would do anything in order to accomplish his evil mission on this planet. He is a true representative of sheer violence. He is a devil's instrument. He was a philosopher of violence.

"By killing people with a cattle gun. Chiruh is turning them into livestock, denying their humanity" (Ellis, 137, 2009)

For him killing was not enough, he needed to deprive them of their humanity. For him life of an animal had no value. For him murder was a ritual by which he freed enslaved cattle.

"Moreover, by shooting them in the forehead with it, Chiruh simultaneously deprives them of their living sight while imprinting in them a symbolic third eye—a visual representation of the enlightenment on matters of chance and destiny that he sometimes provides in a brief pre-murder Socratic dialogue." (Ellis, 137, 2009)

It is hard to say that Chiruh was actually murdering them. For him mankind was a livestock and the life of a man had no value for him. By this he completely disrespected the nature of their humanity as people were nothing for him; thus he was a perfect instrument for killing. Chiruh cannot be seen as a typical murderer as he is an archetype of a new breed of a man that Sheriff Bell is scared of. He was a man without a soul that had no limits and was capable of anything. He created only violence around him. Anton Chiruh is a perfect type for survival. He symbolizes the violence in the novel as Sheriff Bell symbolizes the consciousness. The novel is a struggle between the consciousness of the past and the violence of the present. Unfortunately the consciousness is tired and weak while the violence is active and without limitations. All the characters that met Chiruh personally are killed by him. He symbolizes the brutality and exactness of violence.

Symbolism of Violence

The novel is full of violent images such as: drugs, murders and weapons. These violent images are symbols that represent the disintegrating state of the contemporary society.

"Rape, arson, murder, Drugs, Suicide. So I think about that. Because a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is going to hell in a hand basket people will just sort of smile and tell I'm getting old." (McCarthy, 196, 2005)

McCarthy does not need to use demons or fallen angels to show that something terrible is happening in society. He is using the products of society to reflect its state. Criminal activity and drug addiction is Satan of contemporary society and not some higher entity. What is rather shocking for Sheriff Bell is that younger society does not see it like that. Unfortunately for them it is a natural part of contemporary society in which we live. Violence is nothing extraordinary for them. This is the fact that distracts Sheriff Bell. He is not able to understand when violence and rudeness became natural to young generation.

The violence within the novel is depicted symbolically in order to create a language that reflects the state of society. By the violence in the novel the author is not trying to scare us but to warn us about the happening in society.

"Drugs turn out to be the point. The heroin is more symbolic than realistic." (Ellis, 146, 2009)

All evil things, inventions and characters from the novel are the symbols of violence. It can be said that McCarthy is trying to create a new form of symbolism for the 21st century. The 21st century was not affected by inventions or by art extremely. Unfortunately it was affected by the new form of violence. This form of violence is displayed in the Media in the form of Global Terrorism, suicidal attacks and the constant threat of a nuclear catastrophe. The society of these violent images created its own son. When we look at Anton Chiruh we can deduce that he would not have a problem to commit any kind of crime. For society which acknowledged violence as its natural part in the form of computer games and movies Anton Chiruh can be only possible threat. By the creation of Anton Chiruh the author of the novel is warning society. Maybe he is scared as he sees the violent state of society and he is afraid of the possible product of that violence and Anton Chiruh is the product.

In the novel violence is adopting new forms and shapes in new weaponry that is used by the characters. The characters have it in their houses and they can buy it in shops. The force that should stop this violence is not so developing. Sheriff Bell is just waiting while the Chiruh and Moss are using

the newest form of weaponry. They are changing it and even developing it for better usage. The novel is trying to describe the world where violence is natural and is developing extremely. When we look at the symbols of violence in isolation then each of them have their own meaning. Drugs represent moral collapse and addiction.

“But the drugs here only briefly serve the direct purpose of providing evidence (among other evidence cited by Bell) that civilization is falling apart.” (Ellis, 145, 2009)

Maybe then murders represent the soullessness of contemporary society and the weapons represent our own dependence on our mechanical inventions. Close relationship between machinery and human beings is strengthening the cold atmosphere in the novel. Without machinery the characters would be helpless. Without them their world would be empty.

We need to search for a force that is causing the existence of those violent things. What is it that interconnects the violence of the novel? Definitely it is a satchel of banknotes that is found by Lwelyn Moss. It can be said that the satchel has a symbolic meaning as it represents the obsession of society with money. All the characters are connected by the chase for money. Money is a driving force that is behind everything. The characters in the novel would do anything for money as money is representing God of society. McCarthy created a dark society where everything is affected by money. Everything is interconnected with the flow of capital. The center of the universe for contemporary society is money.

“Chirugh is like a ghost and disappearing on the symbolic path of the flow of the capital across regions leaving only blood, murder and violence behind him when tracing the money that is the capital.” (Kušnir, 3, not published)

In the novel everything that is related to the flow of capital is corrupted and violent. Chirugh is representing the true core and nature of the consumerism of contemporary society. The core is violent and full of blood. By this the author of the novel is criticizing the consumerism of society as he sees it as the major cause for the collapse and fall of society. What is even intensifying the power of the capital throughout the novel is the fact that Sheriff Bell is not able to trace the source or the reason for the raise of violence and consumerism. This may indicate the absurdity of the condition in which contemporary society exists. It is impossible to understand the reason for the violent consumerism but our lives are affected by it in all aspects. The inability of Sheriff Bell to stop Chirugh is intensifying the helplessness of society because the power of violence is much more powerful than the power of consciousness.

The Victory of Capital

The victory of capital emphasizes the helplessness and the absurdity of the condition of contemporary society. Instead of fighting against it; society resigns and confirms the supremacy of capital and materiality.

“We`re bein bought with our own money. And it aint just the drugs. There is fortunes bein accumulated out there that they dont nobody even know about. What do we think is goin to come of that money? Money that can buy whole countries.” (McCarthy, 303, 2005)

The reason for the collapse of contemporary society is its obsession with money and the inability of society to fight against it. The generator of the violence that threatens society is money. The novel does not give us a positive view of the future as in the novel capital is represented by Anton Chirugh and he successfully accomplishes his deadly mission. The power of capital is unstoppable as it is much more powerful than the power of consciousness of mankind. The consciousness is old and tired and simply cannot understand the condition and is defeated by it.

The nature of capital is described symbolically throughout the novel and is manifested in the behavior of the main characters of the novel. They are cold and emotionally sterile and they are obsessed with money. What is ironic is the fact that the characters are defeated by capital and capital is a human invention and it became more powerful than its own creators. The power of money is absolute. In the novel there is no God that rules this world. The force that is behind everything is money not God. The story of the novel is a sad story about human obsession with its own artificiality without a positive ending. In the novel there are no heroes. There are only villains and one old sheriff.

The ultimate power of capital is clearly shown in the Anton Chirugh's game of Coin toss. For him it was just a coin toss but for his victims it was a deadly game.

"What's the biggest thing you ever saw settled?"

I don't know.

Chirugh took a twenty-five cent piece from his pocket and flipped it spinning into the bluish glare of the fluorescent lights overhead." (McCarthy, 55, 2005)

The irony of this image is the fact that the value of the money is so small yet it has the power to decide about human life. By this image of a coin is shown the ultimate power of capital. In the game of coin toss there is no logic. There is only luck. Through this game Anton Chirugh is directly connected to the flow of capital as it is not his decision that decides but it is the decision of capital. He is only the instrument of the flow of capital. It can be said that he represents the will of capital. The flow of capital is invisible but its will is materialized in the novel through the image of Anton Chirugh.

The feeling of absurdity is intensified by the fact that the proprietor of the shop does not know the true value of the coin.

"What do I want with that?"

Take it. It's your lucky coin.

I don't need it." (McCarthy, 57, 2005)

In the answer of the proprietor is shown that mankind is not aware of the power of capital. For the proprietor it was just a coin but in fact it was life for him. Only Anton Chirugh knew the true value of that coin.

The Conclusion

The author of the novel does not give us any plan how to solve the crisis that affects contemporary society. He only depicted its state in the form that would correspond with its present condition. He also identified the main cause for the collapse of society. The main cause for the collapse is the overwhelming influence and power of capital. The influence and power is its ability to turn human beings into cold and sterile monsters with violent instincts which are described in the novel. The world of the novel is godless and the role of God is replaced by artificial capital.

The Depiction of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's novel: The Road

Violence and namelessness

These two words (violence and namelessness) are the nouns which are shaping the pilgrimage of the protagonists of the novel.

"The journey of these two protagonists across indefinite wasteland is reminiscent of the situation after nuclear disaster in a post-apocalyptic space. Despite this, however, McCarthy's narrator does not mention any war, any past, any motivation that might have possibly caused it." (Kušnir, 3, 2012)

We do not know, what exactly has happened. We do not even know the names of two protagonists. There is only a man and a boy. The namelessness creates a haunting atmosphere of whispering. The novel whispers that this can happen to anyone. Everything in what we believe and what we have is gone in one second. All our memories, desires and dreams are gone. Only the rotten evidence of the past is apparent. Only what is left for the man and the boy is a violent struggle for existence in the hostile world.

The violence is depicted in the novel in its real essence. The violence is cruel, dark, evil and apparent everywhere. The world was destroyed by violence and the surviving mankind is violently hunting each other.

"Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotten clothes. The small wad of burning paper drew to a wisp of flame and then died out leaving a faint pattern for just a moment in the incandescence like the shape of flower, a molten rose." (McCarthy, 48, 2007)

Human beings are the products of the world. If the world is full of colours and happiness then human beings are full of colours and happiness. This world is a rose which was given to us in its full beauty. We search for beauty in arts, but the real beauty is hidden in nature and mankind. Violence is the greatest sickness of human history. Violence can be easily compared to cancer. Every human being has the seeds of violence inside his own body. Violence is a necessity for our survival. Violence

was a necessity for the father in the novel. He wanted to defend his son; furthermore, he wanted to feed and clothe his son. He wanted to be a real father for his son. I do not want to excuse violent behavior but violence was a necessity for their survival.

In the novel there are two main attitudes towards the use of violence. The first attitude is represented by the father, because he understands violence as the necessity for their survival. The second attitude is represented by the innocence of the child. The boy is naive and he still believes in the innocence of mankind. Their relationship can be described as the struggle between the consciousness and the necessity.

“The idealisation of the child is reflected in the Road : the father`s determined pragmatism in the face of potential danger is constantly challenged by the boy`s assertion of the claims of conscience.” (Cant, 189, 2009)

The boy`s soul is untouched by darkness of the world. He was born to the world of darkness. The connection with the world of beauty is his father. Is his father capable to transfer the beauty of the lost world to the soul of his son?

The Father and the Son

What is the role of the father and the son? Who are they? The narrator says:

“We`re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.” (McCarthy, 57, 2007)

The word survivor has a positive meaning. They have survived the catastrophe. They should be glad. For father, they were survivors yet for the mother they were just prolonging their suffering. The father saw their situation as a crisis which could be survived. After the submission of the mother they remained alone. The father was trying to persuade his son that they are good guys and that they are carrying the fire.

“Are we still the good guys? he said. Yes. We`re still the good guys.” (McCarthy, 81, 2009)

“We`re going to be okay, arent we Papa ?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That`s right.

Because we`re carrying the fire.” (McCarthy, 87, 2007)

The relationship between father and son is based on the image of good guys and on their role. Their role was to carry the fire. The image of goodness and the image of fire need to be understood in its ontological sense. Because I think that these two images are redefining the relationship between the father and the son. What is goodness and fire in its essence? The deconstruction of the old world enables us to grasp the essential meaning of goodness and the fire of human soul.

The use of violence in McCarthy`s novel was necessary for establishing the setting, where only the strongest virtues can survive. The whole novel is fulfilled with the father`s love and devotion. The idea of carrying the fire is repeated throughout the text. But there is nothing as a strict definition of the fire. The last moments of the father`s life are dedicated to the fire.

“You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

It is real ? The fire ?

Where it is ? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It`s inside you. It was always there.” (McCarthy, 298, 2007)

This is the clearest definition of the fire within the book. The fire is life itself. The fire is the life in its full eagerness to live. This means that the bearer of fire is eager to live. I have already written about the role of father in the novel. The role of the father is to light that fire that burns inside the boy`s soul. This is the role of the father. Every father needs to enlighten his own son.

The usage of violence

Violence in the novel is the instrument which creates a haunting atmosphere where the fundamental aspects of human existence such as love, sacrifice would restore its powerfulness and importance.

These values are the pillars of humanity. Violence of the novel can be understood as a form of background which is emphasizing the warm core of human love. The novel is called *The Road* and the reading of the novel is a violent journey of re-discovery of human essence.

The Symbolism of Violence

The novel as such is a symbol of violence as the novel is a product of a violent world. Everything in the novel is affected by the violence even the language. The language of the novel is not the language of a happy world but it is the language of a disintegrated world. The novel can be treated as the post-apocalyptic manual for survival.

“What would you live for, die for, abandon, salvage, save, or carry? The book asks the reader to ask. These are essential questions of dedication, survival, courage and purpose in the face of horror and destruction anti-heroic meditation on bearing nuclear winter” (Lincoln, 166, 2009)

The novel is directly asking us whether we are prepared for the end of the world. The violence of the novel is testing the worth of things that we live for and that we die for. The violence of the novel revealed their fragile essence as they were completely destroyed by a nuclear catastrophe. The artificiality of our world was destroyed by the artificial catastrophe. Only transcendent values that symbolize humanity survived. The courage and dedication of mankind are tested by the horror that was created by nuclear catastrophe. What would be the meaning of life in the post-apocalyptic world? Everything that gave a meaning to our lives was shattered. Was it then a real meaning of life? Maybe McCarthy is trying to criticize the consumerism of contemporary society by destroying everything that symbolizes the consumerism of contemporary society. It can be said that apocalypse is a restart for society which lost the true meaning of existence.

The story line of the novel is also affected by the violence as:

“There are no chapter reliefs for 241 pages, no plot line a story are of characters development, just two shrouded figures walking the road and running for their lives, dark figures on a darkling plain”. (Lincoln, 165, 2009)

The violence of the novel symbolizes the absurdity of life without things that made life worth of living. What are those things? Maybe the author of the novel is forcing us to search for those things. There is nothing higher for what the characters should live for; there is only an endless struggle for survival. What is worrying the father mostly is *“the food”* and *“the shoes”* and nothing more. The violence of the novel created an environment where a strong existential problem exists:

“There is an existential crux unanswerable double blind. Nobody wants to be in the world and nobody wants to leave” (Lincoln, 177, 2009).

This is the main problem for the father. To live or to die? Nothing higher. Simple existential questioning. The father's decision to save the boy defined the highest value of the life. The highest value of life is the life of a young boy or a girl with an innocent soul. Another value of life is the chance to light the fire of young ardent heart. The novel does not give anything more than a chance that the world will reestablish its own natural order again.

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