

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

**EXTENDED ESSAY
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Research Question: *“To what extent are the characters in the novel “They shoot the horses, don’t they” influenced by the historical and social context?”*

ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses on Horace McCoy's masterpiece *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* with regard to the influences of social-economic conditions of the Great Depression period on selected characters. McCoy narrates the story of ordinary people who fell down to the bottom of society in the aftermath of Great Depression; and he creates a masterpiece by narrating the ordinary stories of desperation in an extraordinary storyline, which is of a dance marathon. Robert and Gloria are the main characters examined, their inner talks, dialogues with each other and other competents generate the main line of story and, by this way, social-psychological mindsets of people who suffered from Great Depression are depicted. In addition to Robert and Gloria couple, Kid, Mattie, Jackie and Mario will also be examined regarding their back stories, present conditions which dragged them into such a desperation and their deformed but still alive hopes and expectations. The existential themes given subtextually enrich the plot as well as it enriches the content of this paper. In this sense, desperation, death, sarcasm and hope could be qualified as the keywords of this paper. In this context, McCoy's novel gives us a chance to be acquainted with the Great Depression period at a multidimensional level; all characters present us a different and distinctive part of what had been happened. Due to these points, this novel is worthy of study and in this paper the influence of that period on the characters is examined.

242 Words

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Could the literature be imagined apart from the historical stage within which it was born? Like any kind of the fine arts, literature also takes nourishment from the context in which it blossoms. What Hobbes had written in his masterpiece *Leviathan* was, inevitably, under the influence of the political and social atmosphere of Hobbes' hometown, United Kingdom just as Picasso's *Guernica* drawn under the influence of Spanish Civil War. Great social events are not guideboards influencing the flow of the history only at macro level; contrarily, they have always been influential at micro level on the lives, perceptions, mentalities and relations of ordinary individuals.

Horace McCoy's novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They*, together with Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* or *In Dubious Battle* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, is a book that witnesses, observes and narrates a historical period with regard to its micro-level impacts. In this sense, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They*, as well as its congeners, immortalizes a pixel of the big picture of history. What McCoy did with this book is more sophisticated in terms of content and characteristic which makes it valuable and worthy to examine. He not only pictures and narrates a desperate dance marathon which displays the pessimism, misery and despair of people, but he also makes a sociological analysis of the Great Depression period, writes a psychological novel focusing on the influences of economic and social conditions on individuals and presents an existential-philosophical work examining the pessimism and even cynicism derived from the concrete existence of human beings in the search of an essence.

In 1929, the Great Depression, which was the biggest social and economic crisis of the 20th century at worldwide level, took start in America and sprang up to the rest of the world. Its impacts had continued until early 1940s; but despite the reconstruction of the economic system, traumas of people witnessing this period have been immortalized by the touch of art and intellect.

McCoy built his story within the context of a long-termed dance marathon; and his main characters are contesters in this competition. The story is presented as a first person narration, by Robert Syverten who is also a contester in this marathon, and all characters and events are narrated to us from his point of view. He and his partner Gloria Beatty, at this point, are the first and most important couple which will be examined and analyzed in this paper; and the rest of components, which will be taken into hand in detail, will be examined in accordance with the exposition of Robert. At this point, it is necessary to warn the reader, it would be simplifying to qualify this novel as “a satire on the exploitation by racketeers of a desperate, debilitated society, or as a scathing parody of the Hollywood dream-factory, or, worse, as a severe reproof of the social system that produced bread lines and relief agencies during the Great Depression”¹; contrarily all these points made about the novel are only peripheral figures of the storyline; “none provides proper access to the author’s timeless emphasis. Nor does the outline of the action stand as his central propulsion to relate the down-and-out condition of the novel’s anti-heroes”². In this sense, what are used as the core constituent of his way on expressing his central propulsion are the characters created diligently with regard to their peculiar personalities and the nihilist-existentialist elements embedded within the plot.

¹ Richmond, J. Lee. “A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Horace McCoy’s ‘They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?’” pp.92, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol.17 no.2 (Apr., 1971), pp.91-100.

² Richmond, J. Lee. “A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Horace McCoy’s ‘They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?’” pp.92, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol.17 no.2 (Apr., 1971), pp.91-100.

Although almost all characters narrated symbolize quite interesting and peculiar points which enrich the storyline; some characters will be specifically examined here to understand how the social-economic events may change the lives, perceptions, relations and even existences of individuals. In this sense, the couples focused on, besides the couple no.22 of Robert and Gloria, are James and Ruby Bates, Mario Petrone and Jackie Miller and Kid and Mattie. Of course, these couples are not chosen randomly among tens of couples attending the contest; each has their peculiar qualities symbolizing and presenting different dimensions of the influences of the Great Depression; and by this way it would be easier to get a bigger picture about the period with regard to the pixel this novel focuses on.

The historical context within which the plot is placed provides us a general framework for what to be expected from characters, their psychological conditions and their relations with each other. A dance marathon organized in 1930s America, in this sense, is a perfect way of picturing the period at a multidimensional level. Since the attendants of such a contest have no homogeneity and since the format of the marathon is appropriate to gather people from different social cleavages -like Hollywood filmmakers and prison breakers- together under the same roof, all characters are created originally and are placed within the context to rise different points about the period and its reflections. In this regard, they are more than fictitious novel persons; they are attitudes, traditions, ideas, psychological and philosophical stances; and for this reason they are timeless and, in a specific sense, universal historical ante-types.

II. ANALYSIS

II.a. Robert and Gloria

Although the narrator of the story is Robert, it would not be exaggerative to claim that actually Gloria is the key character of the storyline. The plot is shaped by her stance towards life and all the happenings and by her dialogues with other characters. Robert at this point,

serves as an observer, who helps us to comprehend the psychological-philosophical situation in which Gloria stands, like an off-voice in a documentary; and this means undoubtedly more than a simple narration. Robert's narration provides more than an objective picture of happenings; furthermore he displays the complex mentalities of characters and their dialogues that have deep subtext messages derived from distinctive stances of those characters.

The novel starts with the meeting of Robert with Gloria. Before going on, it is necessary to point out that from the very beginning, Robert's narration concentrates on expressing Gloria in detail as much as possible. By this way, storyline ties the reader to the story with sub-textual expressions which continuously and deeply evaluate and analyze characters. It is clear that this sort of a writing style is not chosen randomly. Contrarily, with the help of this way of exposition, characters find an opportunity to be more abstract and, by this way, to symbolize and rise some intangible points. Gloria Beatty, at this point, comes to the scene as nihilist-existentialist pessimism in the form of a young woman. Right after they met, they decide to attend dance marathon with tacit hopes for future and with pragmatic reasons like free food and bed. However, despite all advantageous sides of entrance into such a contest while looking from outside, context of marathon is actually inhumane. For ten minute breaks at the end of each two hours, competitors have to dance until all but the one of the couples stay. Of course, commercially this marathon is presented in a presentable and attractive format. Indeed, what makes this marathon attractive is not its vague promises on having a chance to be famous as an actor, actress or a director; its charm has more telluric motives like free food and bed for a given time period. In this sense, it would not be unfair to claim that this dance marathon, as expressed by Robert and Gloria in different ways, is a marathon of survival rather than of fame.

Depending on what and how Robert depicts the setup, it is clear that hypocrisy is one of the core components emphasized together with cynicism and melancholia, which can be found in almost all characters, and this hypocrisy in its broadest sense, is the thing which augments Gloria's desperate, melancholic and cynic attitude.

Although the narrator is Robert, actually, the storyline is set up cyclically around the center of gravity; and at the center, contrary to the expectation, Gloria stands as the main character instead of Robert. All characters mentioned above, are actually judged, qualified, and, even, classified by Gloria with her peculiar way of understanding the world. What Robert could only do is narrating what she presents. His obedient and mild attitude towards her during her interactions with him and other people in the marathon, actually gives the reader clues about the end of storyline. At this point, it would be beneficial to examine all characters in relation with Gloria; for their peculiar characteristics are presented as a kind of anti-thesis of Gloria's stance towards life and people. Even, the narrator Robert presents himself within a thesis - anti thesis framework with Gloria. He provides us the anti-thesis of who Gloria is and how she perceives the world and acts accordingly; but at the same time he does not foment her cynic, pessimistic, even hysteric behaviors.

Robert comes on to the scene as the stabilizer of Gloria. He, with his indifferent attitude against negative things around them, his decisiveness to carry on the marathon, and his well-hidden but still existing hopefulness, balances Gloria's excessive sensibility towards the happenings around them, her unabated tendency to give up, and, lastly, her despair which could only be ended up with her death. For example, Gloria's dialogues with Ruby and James couple, and her offensive attitude towards Ruby's pregnancy and their general approach to having a baby is balanced and a crisis which may emerge between Bates couple and Gloria is prevented by Robert's moderation.

II.b. Ruby and James

At this juncture, it is necessary to give some detailed picture of Bates couple, in order to better understand how Gloria perceives and reacts in the novel. Ruby and James, as Robert narrates, is a couple regularly attending dance marathons at different regions of the country. Despite Ruby's pregnancy, they still carry on attending such contests; for this reason, they become the target of Gloria's mordacious and offensive attitude. For Gloria, "It's a shame for that girl to have a baby" because she believes that it would be "better off if you'd never been born"³. Here, it is clear that she does not specifically offense Bates couple about having a baby; her problem on having a baby is mostly existential. Bates couple, in this sense, is created by the author to exhibit Gloria's pessimistic comprehension of life and giving birth.

On the other hand, the Bates couple presents us a depiction of hope nested within despair like the Road family of Steinbeck's magnum opus *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even under the unnerving circumstances of the period in which they try to survive, these characters, with their behaviors more than their sayings, imply that there is still hope and desire to continue life. In this sense, Bates couple is a strong anti-thesis of who Gloria is and of what she believes. Ruby Bates, as a pregnant woman, dignifies the reproduction and continuation of life under any circumstances –even at the bottom- while Gloria, although she has also the power of giving birth, rejects this power since, as Robert said, "she's just sore on the world, that's all"⁴.

As another point of comparison, the approach of Gloria and Bates couple towards the idea of public wedding must be highlighted. When promoters ask Gloria and Robert for a public wedding ceremony during the marathon, Gloria, as expected, fiercely rejected this offer, while Robert was thinking in a more moderate way. His moderate attitude towards such an offer, of course, derived from his worries about being disqualified unless they do not

³ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp.17-18.

⁴ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp. 24.

accept this offer. However, being disqualified or staying within the contest does not matter for Gloria. Actually, her indifference is not specifically towards the contest and their possibility of disqualification; contrarily, she is swinging in her inertia and indifference. Her understanding of the life and world is stuck in the idea of ending life and getting rid of the world. Public wedding, in this sense, is quite unacceptable for Gloria not only because of commercial and pragmatic motives behind this action, but also of existential reasons. On the other hand, Ruby and James, who are depicted as a couple “dignified and so much in love with each other”⁵ by Robert, got married in a dance marathon with a public ceremony. The way they see their public marriage, at this point, gives us some clues about the social-psychological impacts of the conditions in which they live upon their characteristics and their perceptions of the world. For example, Ruby, while talking about their public wedding, mentions the “three hundred dollars worth stuff”⁶ they got as wedding gifts. Ruby’s approach to public wedding in such a manner is pathetic, but understandable with regard to the economic and social conditions they confront. Although Gloria persuaded Robert to attend marathon with free food and bed arguments, it is obvious that she does not care how she could get benefit from this contest in material sense. Rather, it seems that she attends this competition just to spend time, to pity herself more and more, and, even, to end her life after all.

II.c. Kid, Jackie, Mattie and Mario

When the contesters of the dance marathon taken into hand are examined, it is clear that Robert and Gloria stand apart from the rest of couples. The core motive which gets them into the act for competing couples except for Gloria and Robert seems pragmatic reasons. Free food, a hundred dollars prize for the winner, and the possibility of being discovered by filmmakers or any other potential employers captivate participants. At this point, the peak

⁵ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp.68.

⁶ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp.68.

point of pragmatism shows itself in the re-arrangement of contesting couples in the aftermath of Mario's arrestment and Mattie's disqualification due to health reasons. Although Kid and Jackie had lost their partners, for the sake of free food, bed and award, they carried on dancing as a new couple. Here, it would not be exaggerative to infer two points related to their personal-psychological conditions and to a philosophical fact. The desperation and economic deprivation, into which they fell, trigger increasing individualism rather than reinforcing solidarity. On the other hand, this attitude Kid and Jackie have implies a kind of Machiavellian realism and, more importantly, pragmatism in which the targeted end justifies all means.

Here, before moving on to the re-arranged couple of Kid and Jackie, at first sight it is necessary to take a look at the original couples that are couples of Kid and Mattie and Mario and Jackie. Mario and Jackie, based on Robert's narration, seem as a couple that came together randomly, like Gloria and Robert. Even, Mario is a fake name; it is manifested when some detectives came to arrest Mario, whose actual name is Giuseppe. He, without having a chance to say goodbye to his partner Jackie, had to go with detectives and then was put in jail. Until he was identified and arrested, he and Jackie were making extra money by special dance shows. Reader, while reading these special dance episodes, of course has no idea about the real identity of Mario; however, independent from who he is, here the point is the commercialization of those people with their own consent. People from different social cleavages, from different life experiences and with different expectations, as a result of the worldwide depression in its broadest sense, started to commercialize themselves for bare survival, or, maybe, for the sake of fame and an ambiguous hope to change their fate. In this sense, it might be said that the case of Mario and Jackie presents us a different dimension of the despair which urges Bates couple to attend dance marathons in different regions of the country.

Kid and Mattie couple, on the other hand, is another couple composed of two people who have no specific bond making them together. Their partnership, as can be understood from Kid's reaction against the disqualification of Mattie, is purely conditional. No personal relation was established between these two; and the mentality behind their partnership, as well as that of Mario and Jackie, is the idea that "a partner was a partner"⁷.

In the aftermath of the rearrangement, with no complaint, Kid and Jackie kept on dancing in the marathon. What makes these four characters interesting, with regard to the historical context, is their indifference. However, the indifference seen here is quite distinct from that of Gloria. When Gloria's apathy is examined, it is seen that her apathy, independent from context and conditions and, even, people around her, does not specifically focus on any concept like dance partners, prizes and such; rather, her apathy comprehends anything happening around her. Her apathy targets whole world and existence; especially her owns. On the contrary, indifference that Kid, Mattie, Mario and Jackie have is a kind of shield, a defense mechanism developed against harsh circumstances in which they try to survive. Compared to Gloria's self-destructing apathy, the apathy of these characters seem quite humane and natural.

Naming Gloria as a suicidal, pessimistic, apathetic and "sour on the world" character, however, would be insufficient and, even, unfair. The core problem here is the contagiousness of her pessimistic, apathetic, self-destructing and "sour on the world" mood. In this sense, it would not be exaggerative to claim that Robert had a metamorphosis progressed through the flow of the storyline. In the beginning, he, without expecting miracles or surprising news which makes him better off, was on his way. With the touch of Gloria to his life with her contagious pessimism and apathy, his lifeline started to change its course through an end in prison, as being sentenced for murder. The change of Robert's personality and perception,

⁷ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp.33.

throughout the plot, could be pursued with reference to his dialogues with Gloria. In the beginning, he strives for healing Gloria by rejecting her ideas on death and life; however, through the end, it is seen that he was also persuaded to the necessity of ending Gloria's life. In the end, he agreed that it would be better for Gloria to die, and this metamorphosis Gloria triggered in Robert's personality resulted with the death of Gloria. In this sense, to what extent it would be fair to claim that the death of Gloria was a homicide committed by Robert. As he said, "the prosecuting attorney was wrong when he told the jury she died in agony, friendless, alone except for her brutal murderer, out there in that black night on the edge of Pacific", for as he righteously said, "she did not die in agony. She was relaxed and comfortable and she was smiling" and that was the first time he saw her smiling. Plus, "she wasn't friendless"⁸; Robert was her very best and only friend. He, by helping her die, actually helped her to end her agony and apathy rather than rolling her deep in agony, as prosecuting attorney claimed.

III. CONCLUSION

They Shoot Horses, Don't They, at this point, is both a social-historical novel presenting us a pixel of a big picture of the period and, at the same time, a psychological-philosophical novel narrating the story of two young people with regard to their psychological conditions, challenges they had to confront, and their relationship with each other that transforms both and changes the lives of both. Life is not always straight; we can feel it in every sense in this novel. It comprises ups and downs, sorrow and happiness, ignorance and faith, hesitations and truths. Gloria as the main character, with her influential but contagious touch, constructs the storyline around her, and by this way, she actually reduces the socio-economic setup of story into a detail which is benefited for exhibiting Gloria's pessimism and nihilism. On the other hand, this novel still protects its peculiar stance as a philosophical

⁸ McCoy, Horace. *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* London, 2010: CPI Bookmarque Ltd. pp.3.

novel witnessing and reflecting a specific part of a historical context. Here, for the sake of correctness, it must be said that this bi-dimensional quality of this novel is the fundamental thing which makes it worthy to examine. When it is read as a social-historical novel presenting the reader one of various influences of the Great Depression upon ordinary individuals, it satisfies the reader within this genre; however, despite the satisfaction of the reader because of reading a historical-social novel based on social-historical facts, it is still incomplete to define this novel in historical-social terms. Gloria is a quite strong character that could not have stayed in the background as an enriching detail of the storyline; contrarily, she is a character which builds the plot around her personality both at social-material level and at inner-psychological level. Therefore, this is a multilayered novel which might be read as a social-historical novel narrating a period of a historical period or as a psychological-philosophical novel which focuses on the Gloria's person and her relations with other characters within a social-historical setup. What McCoy did with this novel, in this sense, would be qualified more than "successful" in literary terms. For this reason McCoy's novel deserves to be examined; not because of its historical-social characteristic, but because of its multi-layered, bi-dimensional construction.

IV.BIBLIOGRAPHY

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