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“WORDS OF AN HONEST MAN”

In John Fante’s novel, ‘Ask The Dust’, how are the themes, the pitiful human condition and the struggle with the creation of identity, reflected by the major characters?

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ABSTRACT

Being a successful, well-known writer does not only require talent but also requires luck. John Fante is a writer who couldn't be popular by writing a classic but according to a very well known writer, Charles Bukowski, Fante is one of the greatest writers in the history. When I came across with Bukowski's introduction on the first page of Fante's novel, *Ask The Dust*, it absolutely caught my attention. As an admirer of American literature, I heard Fante's name for the first time. After I finished the book, Arturo Bandini's life, which was based on his desire of being a writer, seemed a lot like of Fante's life. Fante was not only telling the story of Arturo but was also using him to reflect two major themes: a person's basic needs and the struggle with the creation of the identity. As a consequence of my realization, I worked on the question 'how does a writer use major characters to reflect the major themes?' in my essay. While I was analyzing the novel, I tried to point out that Fante did not only create the personalities of the characters but also their backgrounds, ethnicities, lifestyles, vocational tendencies and the environments that they live in order to demonstrate the whole concept of the themes. I aimed to approach from all the perspectives that affect the reflections of the main themes while evaluating the functions of the characters. As a result, I came to conclusion that the explanation of the major problems in a society can only be possible by taking a close look to the individuals. The role of the writer is to choose the correct example affected by the problem, like picking samples. According to the novel, Fante creates the reality that reflects the major problems and chooses Arturo and Camilla in order to demonstrate those problems.

INTRODUCTION

The reflection of the social problems on the non-fiction characters is one of the common qualifications of the literary works. The problems of the immigrants and the discrimination in America are subjects that have been written about and have been criticized heaps of times in the American literature. Despite all the hard conditions and the discrimination that the immigrants face and their efforts on overcoming these hardships; being a part of their new country is a personal need that cannot be suppressed. After all the actions that a person makes in order to have a better life, having a life with worse conditions causes this person a depression. Especially if the reason of this depression based on a problem like discrimination, which is universal, the process of creating an identity ties up in the knots and the person develops an attitude towards the social order and the society. The individuals with the purpose of doing something about arts or literature with their life use this kind of a traumatic background as a trigger in their creativeness. Also during the process of the creation of identity, the pitiful human conditions are one of the most effective factors in the individuals' lives. John Fante gives the outlook on the individual in pursuit, vacancy and pitifulness through the point of view of Arturo Bandini in the novel *Ask The Dust*. Arturo's effort on becoming distinct from the society and aggrandize himself as a result of his desire to be different from the stereotyped people affected by the pitiful human conditions. The most significant difference between these people and Arturo is demonstrated as the perception of morals and money. The discrimination problem that occurs as a result of the structure of this shortsighted society, which is frequently referred in the novel, is demonstrated through the character Camilla Lopez. A person

to call into being is only possible with the creation of an identity, which is accepted by the society. Otherwise, the life of the individual becomes another example of the pitiful human conditions and the individual becomes dragged into a pursuit with an identity crisis. In the novel of John Fante, *Ask The Dust*, the social problems are demonstrated through the major characters. At the same time, the effect of the ethnic origin during the formation of the pitiful human conditions is also shown through the discrimination, Camilla's cultural characteristics and her obsession with names. The other main theme, the process of the creation of identity of the individual is reflected over the effects of the structure of the society on the individual. In order to be accepted by the society, one of the most effective qualifications of an individual is vocation. A person with the desire of being an artist should have social sensitivity. In as much as the artist's works have to be comprehensible by the society in order that the artist becomes distinct from the rest of the society. That's why every kind of eidolon that an artist would aim to create must be affected from the social phenomenon or social problem. Hence the qualifications and the functions of the characters must be studied in order to understand and analyze the themes, which are demonstrated in the novel.

1. PITIFUL HUMAN CONDITION

In the novel *Ask The Dust* by John Fante, the themes, that are discussed, are demonstrated by the major characters Arturo and Camilla. From what these characters demonstrate, the most conspicuous situation is the effect of the pitiful human condition in a person's life.

1.1. PERSON'S BASIC NEEDS

In a society, the priorities of the individuals can show variability. In the novel, these variations are demonstrated by the major characters. The prior need of Arturo Bandini, a young man with the desire of being a great, well-known writer, is to have his ego satisfied for a happy life. In the situations where he feels lowly, he becomes an unhappy and mean person. In contrast to the general perception of the society, the money –that he needs to keep his life standards in an acceptable level- is always on the second plan for him. The importance of the assurance of life is shown through the other major character, Camilla Lopez. The prior need of Camilla is to be sure that she is safe and has an assurance in her life and that need of hers always gets in the way of her emotions.

1.1.i. Self-Aggrandizement

In the novel, the most needed things by Arturo are satisfaction of his ego and getting the spotlight off himself. Either in his social relations or in his vocational tendency he prefers the things he would get attention. His self-praise also grounds his desire to

satisfy his ego. His effort to aggrandize himself by humiliating other people is mostly demonstrated by his relationship with Camilla. In the novel, he is convinced that he is a great, successful writer and he always tries to make people around him believe that idea too. This ideal reality causes him to feel superior and more successful than the people in his society. The humiliations he faced in his background make him do everything not to let something like that happen ever again after he moves to Los Angeles. After he first came to Hotel Alta Loma, he signs the magazine, which includes his short story ‘The Little Dog Laughed’, for the landlady Mrs. Hargraves in order to prove himself and acted like this is a great gesture of him. Even if this arrogant act did not impress Mrs. Hargraves, it was enough for Arturo to satisfy his ego, him signing his story as ‘*For a woman of ineffable charm, with lovely blue eyes and a generous smile, from the author, Arturo Bandini.*’ (Fante, 51) becomes a proof of his lack of self-reliance. As a habit, with his interior monologues, he usually aggrandizes himself to feel better.

1.1.ii. Money and Morals

From the beginnings of the novel, Arturo is always demonstrated as a person with problems on managing his money. He never looks on money as a need, and thus he always wastes it as soon as he gets some. When his neighbor, Hellfrick, tries to pay back the money he owes to Arturo by helping him steal, Arturo loses his temper and withdraws his offer. ‘*This looked like an attempt to squirm out of the debt he owed me. I shook my head. ‘No thanks, Hellfrick. I like to consider myself as an honest man.*’ (Fante, 25) Even if the idea of prioritize money not his morals irritates Arturo, he could not overcome his hunger after a while. The result of the crime that Arturo commits is not satisfying and that demonstrates the idea of morals and the relief of

being a good person being the base of happiness. Money is not a need but a luxury for him. After earning some money from a short story, his behaviors change. *“Not from you,” she (Camilla) said. ‘You’re poor.’ ‘I used to be,’ I said. (...) ‘You’ve changed,’ she said. ‘You’re different.’* (Fante, 67)

1.1.iii. Assurance of Life

Camilla suffers the lack of assurance of life in America because of not being a real American and this situation of her manages all her behaviors and actions. Even if the idea of getting married with a real American and being an American citizen does not given in the novel directly, Camilla’s love for Sammy and her avoidance from Arturo, no matter what he does, shows how she hates her immigrant life. In spite of Sammy’s hate for Camilla, his relentless tortures to her and his abuses, he is Camilla’s assurance and her love. *‘...hear you say that Sammy hated you, that you drove out the desert after work, and that he slugged you twice for waking him up at three in the morning. I said. ‘But why see him?’ ‘Because I’m in love with him.’* (Fante, 151) On the other hand Arturo is of Italian origin and he always faces with discrimination. No matter how passionate she is for him or how he always stands for her, Camilla never feels safe around Arturo. *“ ‘Why can’t you be him! Oh Jesus Christ, why can’t you?’ She began to beat me with her fists, pounding my head with rights and lefts, screaming and scratching in an outburst of madness against destiny that did not make me her Sammy.’* (Fante, 157) Her belief of being safe around Sammy, but not Arturo, allows her to glorify Sammy who is an awful writer without any financial gain and with a year left in life.

1.2. EFFECTS OF ETHNIC ORIGIN AND RACISM

The most significant characteristics of the main characters are their ethnic origins. Especially the Italian writer, Arturo and the Mexican waitress, Camilla both have lives with low level of welfare because of their ethnicities, in their extremely segregationist society. The metamorphosis in Arturo's racist point of view and his crescent feelings for Camilla's culture and her name shapes the course of events. By the character, Arturo, the phenomenon of racism shows alteration depending on the flow of events all along the novel. Despite his Italian origins, Arturo always insults Mexicans while calling himself an American. *'My God, a Mexican! Women like that should draw the colour line. I hated him, the Spick, the Greaser.'* (Fante, 17) Arturo had always faced with the humiliations and abasements as *'Wop and Dago and Greaser'* (Fante, 48) by his classmates when he was a kid and claims that this background of him caused him to turn out as a segregationist man. It is possible to say that by the end of the novel, Arturo realizes one of the most important things that create his personality and identity is his ethnic origin. As a proof of that, in contrast to his former opinions about Camilla's huaraches, which leads him to humiliate her as *'a filthy little Greaser'* (Fante, 44), he declares that Camilla is trying too hard to become an American and she turns out to be *'a disgrace to her people'* (Fante, 141). The most significant proof of that are the huaraches -which is frequently presented to the reader as a leitmotiv- that she got rid off after Arturo's interference. *'Maybe it's just water after they boiled your filthy shoes in it. (...) But if I were a girl I wouldn't be seen in a Main Street alley with those shoes.'* (Fante, 34) *'Those huaraches – do you have to wear them, Camilla?'* (Fante, 44) Her huaraches symbolize her ethnic origin and her culture.

2. THE STRUGGLE WITH CREATION OF IDENTITY

In the novel, another situation, which is given through the major characters, is the depression that a person becomes dragged into because of the effects of the circumstances in the society during the creation of identity.

2.1. THE SOCIAL ORDER

During the process of the creation of an identity, the most important issue is the social order. The reason for this is that the effects of the phenomenon, which are imposed by the society, differ in terms of the external dominancy of the phenomenon on the individual. In the novel, both Arturo and Camilla aim to create their identity in the directions that their personalities orientate.

2.1.i. Vocation

Arturo's vocational tendency shapes around his desire of being prestigious, while surpassing the exigency of satisfying his basic needs. Always living like a shadow and never being came to someone's attention drives Arturo to a vocation, which would allow him to show himself. *“Did your mother read the story, too? What's your name?” I smiled proudly. ‘Of course, you already know my name,’ I said. ‘I'm Arturo Bandini.’ ‘Oh yes!’ she (the little girl from the Alta Loma) breathed, and her eyes widened with such admiration I wanted to throw myself at her feet and weep. I could feel it in my throat, the ticklish impulse to start sobbing.* (Fante, 57) Because of seeing Arturo as a great white hope, Hackmuth is a great writer for him. *‘But it's from*

a great man. He could send blank pages, and it would be good news to me.' (Fante, 60) Arturo believes that Hackmuth's name is known by masses and he is a very respected person and that leads him to desire to reach that point in his life. Hence, it is important to understand his vocational tendency and its bases in order to resolve his identity crisis.

2.1.ii. Racism

From the beginnings of the novel, Arturo's point of view in discrimination and his dissent from his ethnicity is shown. Arturo's disdain for Mexicans and his assertion of him being an American –despite the fact that he is actually Italian originated- is an outcome of his need of aggrandizement. In order to fit in the American society, he accords with the communal discrimination and racism, acts according to those. *'I was an American, and goddamn proud of it. (...) They (Mexicans) had failed. We Americans had turned the trick.'* (Fante, 45) When Arturo first came to Alta Loma, Mrs. Hargraves asks him to give the guarantee that he is not a Jewish nor a Mexican, this shows the discrimination in the society. Arturo shapes his behaviors around this phenomenon. His lack of self-confidence and childhood traumas caused by his Italian origin affect his relationship with Camilla. In the beginning of the novel Arturo gets mad after seeing a prostitute next to a Mexican man and disdains him, but then he feels in love with a Mexican woman, Camilla. Towards the end of the novel, Arturo's argument, which says that Camilla should own the values of her culture, proves that alteration in his opinions. Therewithal in his internal monologues, the childhood traumas he has and his memories allows him to apologize from Camilla, even if he doesn't directly tells to her, it shows that Camilla awakens some susceptibility in him. *'Ah Camilla! When I was a kid back in Colorado it was Smith and Parker and Jones*

who hurt me with their hideous names, (...) fulfilling the emptiness of their lives under a blazing sun.' (Fante, 48)

2.1.iii. Religion

Arturo's religious beliefs change all along the novel. Sometimes he is demonstrated as a devout Christian and sometimes he is in great confusion as an atheist because of what he wants to believe, and what his cultural background allows him to. Because he actually feels the need to the belief of God and his/her existence in order to seek refuge in him/her. But the perception of the society and the part that he wants be in, pushes him to the Atheism and makes him think of the church as *'the haven of the booboisie, of boobs and bounders and all Brummagem mountebanks.'* (15) Arturo has never generated and will never generate these kinds of ideas on religion because of his beliefs caused by *'sentimental reasons'* (15) as he says. The ideas of people, who have carved out niches for themselves, like Lenin or Nietzsche, are the ideas that Arturo wants to interiorize. Still, Arturo's visit to church and his prayer, which are both caused by (again) *'sentimental reasons'*, are the proofs of him being a religious person. *'A prayer. Sure, one prayer: for sentimental reasons. (...) have You read Nietzsche? Ah, such a book! Almighty God, I will pray fair in this. (...) Amen.'* (Fante, 15-16) Especially the image of a white cross in his mind after he leaves Vera's house, shows the guilt that he feels inside because of having sexual intercourse with a Jewish woman without getting married. His *'mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa (My sin, my sin, my humongous sin.)'* (Fante, 110) words are the most distinctive indicator of his perception in religion. Arturo definitely has a religious man inside of him even if it conflicts with the ideas of the person that he wants to be.

2.2. ANALYSIS OF EIDOLA

An eidolon is the first idea that comes to an artist's mind. It can be the idea of a sculpture, a painting or a novel, such as the novel in the narration 'Ask The Dust'. In the novel, the need for an eidolon is given by the aspirant writer, Arturo Bandini. He always seeks for an idea, for something to trigger his writing skills, an inspiration but he cannot find anything in the depth of his own feelings. Until one night, a mysterious woman comes and changes his perception in all matters.

2.2.i. Vera Rivken

The most significant change in Arturo's social sensitivity appears with the arrival of the mysterious woman, named Vera Rivken. The sudden appearance of this woman and her erratic moves shakes Arturo's self-confidence. And because of her dominant existence, he surrenders. *"I was scared. The sight and nearness of that woman rather paralysed me; maybe it was the shock of seeing her so suddenly, maybe it was my own misery at that moment..."* (Fante, 89) The posture of that woman and the power in her moves causes Arturo to push himself into the background. Later on, after he learns about this woman's past and her experiences, he tries to make her happy, intentionally and self-effacingly. This is the first encounter with the altruism in Arturo's life in the novel. *"...you've got lots of company; you've got Arturo Bandini, and he's got lots to tell you. And listen to this: Do you know what I did one night? Arturo confessing it all: do you know the terrible thing I did?"* (Fante, 98) The wounds of this Jewish lady changes his perception in life and so the course of events in his life. According to her, she once had a beautiful life but then she was cheated on by his husband and dumped him, then in order to stay standing, she started to work

for a Jewish family and be all by herself. The reason why she follows Arturo is that she is attracted to him in her words but actually the reason is she makes a bond between her old-life and Arturo's life now. Her longing of a social sharing at her knowledge level pushes her to Arturo who is trying to be a writer. *“That's literature! You don't know anything about literature. You're a fool!”* (Fante, 90) Him being different in the stereotyped society and his desire to aggrandize himself idealizes Arturo in Vera's eyes. Besides the feeling of compassion and the feeling of being dominated, another reason for him being interested in her is the bond that he creates in his mind about her situation and his faith. He assimilates his pain caused by his one-sided love for Camilla into Vera's pain. *‘You (God) have to play your tricks: see what you have done to this woman, and to the love of Arturo Bandini for Camilla Lopez. And then my tragedy seemed greater than the woman's, and I forgot her.’* (Fante, 101)

2.2.ii. Social Sensitivity

Because of feeling good by aggrandizing himself causes Arturo to think that humiliating himself will make people feel better about themselves. In the novel, this shows in the process of creating an identity people act according to the egocentrism even if this act is for others or them. *“And then I told her some more; oh, I was no angel; my soul had a few twists and bends all its own; so don't you feel so lonely, lady...”* (Fante, 97) When his humiliation, despite his desire of aggrandizement, does not affect Vera's mood, Arturo starts to talk about Vera and how beautiful she is by pushing himself into background. Arturo's first effort on making someone happy shows that his social sensitivity only comes up when he loses his egocentric trait. His reckless attitude when he sees Vera's wounds makes Vera feel better. As a result of

this, instead of becoming alienated to himself and be proud, he has a grudge against God and his/her injustice. “*She covered herself and her eyes were swimming in joy as she watched me leave. I went down to the end of the hall to the landing of the fire-escape, and there I let go, crying and unable to stop because God was such a dirty crook, such a contemptible skunk, that’s what he was doing for that thing to that woman.*” (Fante, 101)

2.2.iii. The Eidolon

The eidolon that shapes around these feelings of Arturo pushes him to write his first novel. The idea that says a writer needs feel something to have a good idea is firstly demonstrated in that part of the novel. The feelings he share with Vera is enough and intense in order to shatter the need of imagination. Also the sensitiveness and the awareness that Vera gives to Arturo, helps him to better himself as a writer. The biggest proof of this is the first step for him to call himself as a great writer is to write a novel and the novel is based on Vera’s story. “*The good days, the fat days, page upon page of manuscript; prosperous days, something to say, the story of Vera Rivken, (...) Arturo Bandini, already deep into his first novel.*” (Fante, 150)

CONCLUSION

In the novel, *Ask The Dust*, the issues of the pitiful human condition is demonstrated through the antagonist, Arturo Bandini. John Fante portrays a suffering figure in order to criticize the general perception on a person's basic needs. While analyzing the racism issues that dominates the society, he demonstrates the need of self-aggrandizement in order to protect the ego of the non-American person by the eyes of Arturo. He gives the top priority to the inner satisfaction by examining the importance of money and morals. To approach the issue of racism from a different perspective, the life of a Mexican waitress, Camilla Lopez, shows the importance of adaptation and the feeling of security and assurance of life.

On the other hand, Fante introduces the side effects of the dominant phenomenon in the society during the process of the creation of an identity. By the sufferings of both Arturo and Camilla, Fante criticizes the external dominance of the phenomenon on the individual. Arturo's vocational tendency and his unstable perception of religion show the effects of the peer pressure in the society. By exposing an idolon depending on social sensitivity, Fante indicates the importance of awareness for the individual to create an identity and be a part of the society.

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