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“Flight” and Ordinary People

There are many different interpretations of John Steinbeck’s short story “Flight”. Some say the story is about a person humbling himself becoming a wild animal, while others see it as an account of a boy becoming an adult (Belasco 995). Whatever the interpretation is, this short story is about a young man running away from an accidental murder by escaping into the mountains and his journey during the escape. Though his use of similes, metaphors, and imagery, Steinbeck is able to convey the theme of this story to any ordinary person.

The Oxford Dictionary defines ordinary as anything that’s commonplace. With that, one can say an ordinary person is one who is very common among society. In other words, what is the majority – the general public – is what is ordinary. One can then say a story is meant for ordinary people if the majority can easily identify with the story. Steinbeck already tried to make the majority identify with the story in the opening, even before Pepe went to Monterey! He used a generous amount of similes and metaphors comparing Pepe to animals such as a chicken, and Mama to a bird. The use of these similes and metaphors not only drew images in the readers mind, but it also serves as a constant reminder that humans are innately animals. The general public, or the ordinary person, would be able to identify with this idea because all humans are indeed animals by definition.

Steinbeck continued to explore this idea of humans and animals throughout the entire story by first allowing the story’s main character, Pepe, to become a man from an animal-like boy, and later degrade to being just an unnamed animal. Before Pepe went to Monterey, Steinbeck spoke through Mama, implying that Pepe is still a boy when she said “He is nearly a man now”. Since Pepe is only nearly becoming a man, Steinbeck implies that Pepe is not yet a man, but a boy. However, when Pepe came back from Monterey, Steinbeck again spoke through Mama and said “Pepe is a man now”. The sentence is clear that Pepe was transformed form a boy to become a man. This idea is further emphasized when Steinbeck mentioned that Pepe’s mouth looks like Mama’s – a grownup’s mouth. Furthermore, Pepe was equipped with his father’s belongings: hat, rifle, horse, coat, and a knife – representing how he is the man of the household like his father. The idea of becoming an adult speaks well to the general public and the ordinary person as well, as everyone identifies with growing up and becoming an adult. The story does not stop there; in his journey through the mountains, Pepe slowly loses his possessions. From the very beginning of the journey, he couldn’t find the knife. Then, he forgot the hat, lost the horse, took off the coat, and eventually left the rifle. The act of Pepe losing his possessions, which represents his manhood, symbolizes his regression from a man, which he became just hours earlier, to something else. When he lost everything but his rifle, he was already crawling on the ground like a snake. Details like birds hopping near him and lizards crawling by right in front of his face implies that Steinbeck intend to put Pepe on the same level as animals, because normally wild animals does not come close to humans. This idea of Pepe becoming an animal is again emphasized when Pepe lost his ability to speak; and furthermore when Steinbeck used a simile comparing his whine to a dog. Then, Pepe lost everything and got shot dead without knowing who shot him, like a prey successfully killed by his predator. This again further regresses Pepe’s status from being an animal to a helpless prey. Finally, when Pepe lies dead, sand covered his head, hiding his identity. This little detail is important because just like an animal that might die on the side of the road, Pepe is now just an unknown body lying on the ground – no one will notice or care. The irony of Pepe’s drop of status from a man to an animal when he should have continued his manhood and his journey resounds well with the public, because the ordinary person experiences what Pepe experienced when they themselves become a man. In the United States around when the story was written, young men and families, in the thousands, travel to the west to find a better place or to flee from the Dust Bowl; they often end up “no better than how they started off” (Norton 649). These people are just like Pepe, who end up no better than how he started. With this connection, the ordinary people could easily identify with the story. It is clear that Steinbeck wrote this story for the ordinary people.

On the other hand, some argue that “Flight” is not for the ordinary person because it contains unusual, non-standard writing. For example, the dialogs between Pepe and his family contain some Spanish and non-standard grammar; it makes the story harder to understand, and therefore it is not meant for the ordinary person. However, the non-standard English and the mixed Spanish dialog can be viewed as Steinbeck’s colloquial writing, in attempt to capture the realism of Mexican villages in the West. The use of personification describing the families’ farm buildings further emphasizes Steinbeck’s attempt to capture realism, and implies that colloquialism is merely a part of his efforts to mimic the society he observed around him. The use of colloquialism and his attempt to capture realism do not make his writing less approachable; in fact, it does the opposite: It makes the story more identifiable to the general public and among the ordinary person.

In summary, Steinbeck is able to convey the theme of this story to any ordinary person by using similes, metaphors, and imagery. He compared Pepe to animals, and showed how he grew and became a man, but still ended up regressing to the animal status in the end. Throughout all this, he captured the realism of society using colloquial language and imagery. With these two elements, the story is easily identifiable by the majority – the ordinary people. If the story is easily identifiable by the majority, I can argue with confidence that the story – “Flight” by John Steinbeck – is meant for the ordinary person to read.

Works Cited

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