

Backdrop addresses cowboy analyses essay sample

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The male hero could be said to be portrayed in Atwood's poem "Backdrop addresses cowboy" by the cowboy. The cowboy is a clichéd symbol of masculinity made famous by the Western film industry of America. One can immediately conjure him up, square-jawed and handsomely rugged in Stetson and spurred boots, galloping around on his trusty steed rescuing damsels in distress with whom he intends on riding off romantically into the sunset with. This is however not the cowboy that we are confronted with in the poem.

In the first stanza he is described as "starspangled" and "porcelain" which are both terms for decoration or ornament. That his grin is porcelain in line 4 shows fixedness, like a doll with a forever empty smile. This fakeness of his smile is encouraged by the assonance in "porcelain" and "grin" which seems to make the statement sound ironic which in turn makes the reader doubt the validity of that smile. This irony is enforced in the whole first stanza with the repetition of the "s" sound which begins with the alliteration on the words starspangled, sauntering, silly and continues with the words west, porcelain, cactus, wheels and string. It also brings to mind a child's toys or games, making the cowboy seem childish, the opposite of manly which is what one would expect a hero to be. The reader is made aware that he is not a real cowboy by the title as a backdrop is a fake background for use in movies and theatre. Further theatre or movie contrivances are mentioned such as "papier-mâché cactus" in line 5 and "cardboard storefront" in line 21 which could be stage props. If his world is a stage then his existence too is fictional.

However he, or the idea of him, no matter how superficial, still seems dangerous and wildly violent. Lines 7 and 8 stand on their own and are quite different from the childlike image of the decorative cowboy who tows his fake cactus behind him on a string in stanza one. Here he is described “ as innocent as a bathtub full of bullets” the word innocent seeming to continue the childlike metaphor of stanza one paradoxically meeting up a very unchildlike image of a bathtub full of bullets. It draws your attention to Poetry the idea that all is not as it seems, while he seems fake it is perhaps this that is dangerous. This idea could also be said to be suggested in the beginning of the poem when the West is described as a hyphenated “ almost-” with “ silly” continuing on the next line. This reaffirms the word, that it is “ almost” but still not quite completely silly and to think so may be a mistake. The form of the wording here seems to create a pause, almost like a warning to think twice.

Irony is present in the above mentioned paradox as well as in the paradox in lines 14 and 15 “ heroic trail of desolation” The words heroic and desolation do not fit together as a hero is meant to do only good things while desolation and is a very negative word, the connotations of which would be destruction or ruin. Line 13 is also paradoxical as the words “ blossom” and “ targets” do not belong together. The word blossom brings to mind pretty flowering things while targets implies shooting and killing. The entire poem itself is a paradox as it shows the cowboy, supposed hero, in a negative light.

To support this negative portrayal is the motif of violence in the poem. In stanza 3 line 10 he is described as having “ laconic trigger-fingers” the

repetition on the “ gg” sound seeming to make the sound of rapid gunfire which could affirm the word laconic. He is ready to shoot at anything he deems, or just chooses, necessary, peopling the streets with villains (line 11) Further examples of words which are connotations of violence and destruction are “ desolation”, “ slaughtered” and “ skulls” in stanza 4, “ shooting” in stanza 5, and “ invasions”, “ empty shells”, “ bones” and “ desecrate” in stanzas 9 and 10.

The first half of the poem addresses the cowboy which we can tell by the words of address “ you” and “ your” while the second half while still addressing the cowboy is contemplating the speaker, the metaphorical backdrop’s position in relation to the cowboy. The backdrop could be a metaphor for the rest of us, the seemingly unimportant ones, the background upon which the cowboy plays his life. The backdrop is aware of the cowboy’s real nature and is calling the cowboy on it. Instead of “ watching... when the shooting starts... I am elsewhere” (line 24) This could be said to belittle the cowboy, that instead of “ hands clasped in admiration” at his performance of violence which the cowboy may think heroic, the “ I” has better things to do. In the title the backdrop is also given a capital while the word cowboy is not, making him seem inferior when usually a backdrop would be what is unimportant in comparison to an actor.

The “ I” of the poem is also described as something the cowboy wants but cannot have “ confronting you on that border you are trying to cross” in lines 27 and 28 and “ the thing you can never lasso” in line 30. This shows that the cowboy is not infallible and once again puts the backdrop in a superior

position to the cowboy. The speaker is also portrayed as something sacred; something the cowboy “ desecrates” (line 36) as he passes through. The speaker is clearly something good in comparison to the cowboy, who just casually passes through unaware or uncaring of the damage he leaves in the wake of his carelessness: “ scattered with your tincans, bones, empty shells, the litter of your invasions”

Through the wording, form and various poetic techniques mentioned and many more present in the poem Atwood has turned the idea of the cowboy on its head. The reader no longer sees the cowboy they had in mind before they read the poem and would tend to rather lend their sympathies to the speaker as the speaker seems to be a victim. If the cowboy were a hero, there would not be a victim by his own hand. The usually menial backdrop is also given a superior status to the “ heroic” cowboy. The idea of the male hero is reversed in the poem, showing him rather as the wrong-doer and inferior, thereby subverting him and by extension the idea of the male hero.