

The shipping news by annie proulx- navigating essay



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Formal Response-By Henri Rutherford Annie Proulx's prose fiction novel 'The Shipping News' explores the complexities of individual's navigation in our modern and increasingly globalised society. Proulx would agree with the statement 'The global cannot be all bad nor the local all good. In our lives today, the two must coexist and we must learn to navigate both', and her text provides evidence to this effect. The novel does not present the simplistic dichotomies of the global being negative and the local being positive, but instead focuses on characters navigation through both.

Proulx demonstrates that these two different and often opposite sets of values can coexist in our lives and are both equally dependent on each other.

The novel also explores individual's responses to the changing realities of global culture, whether a retreat, an embrace, or a response in between these two polar extremes. Thus Proulx denotes the myriad of ways in which individuals can navigate their environment. Petal Bear, Agnis Hamm, Quoye and Jack Buggit provide significant examples of this within their emerging global context.

Although the global can be bad, to try to isolate oneself from it can be detrimental to human existence.

At the beginning of the novel the protagonist Quoye, is portrayed as a dysfunctional human being living in the dysfunctional town of Mockingburg. The negative implications of the global on the individual are explicitly evident through Quoye. Proulx rejects Quoye's way of navigating in this global setting, a self-imposed retreat which is evidently failing. This is his

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response to the changing realities of global culture, he chooses to attempt to isolate himself from global influence.

Quoyle is looking to retreat to the local aspects of Mockingburg, but this local culture and community has been almost wholly disintegrated by global forces.

His seclusion from the world around him can be seen through the passage which elaborates on Quoyle only reading 'The Mockingburg Record', for whom he fragmentally works. 'So (Quoyle) managed to ignore terrorism, climatological change, collapsing governments, chemical spills, plagues, recession, and failing banks, floating debris, and disintegrating ozone layer... religious frauds, defective vehicles and scientific charlatans, mass murderers and serial killers, tidal waves of cancer, AIDS...mutant viruses... the discovery that the galaxies were streaming apocalyptically toward an invisible great attractor like flies into a vacuum cleaner nozzle'. Proulx employs accumulative imagery with hyperboles and similes to show Quoyle's lack of knowledge of the global world. Although negative aspects of global culture are stated, his lack of acceptance of these things, Proulx shows, is what causes him to become a 'failure'.

Through this we can see that Proulx recognises that the global and local must coexist to make it possible for characters to successfully navigate through both. The global is generally associated in this novel with bad aspects of modern life. Mockingburg is depicted as a subsection of global culture by Proulx, which can be seen through the quote 'bedraggled...A place in its third death. Stumbled in two hundred years from the forests and

woodland tribes, to farms, to a working-class city of machine tool and tire factories.

A long recession emptied the downtown, killed the malls. Factories for sale.

Slum streets, youths with guns in their pockets...’ This personifies Mockingburg while making reference to negative global and historical trends, such as colonialism, urbanisation, industrialism, and economic trends, painting the global environment as a whole in a negative light. Later in the text though, Proulx shows how this environment can be used positively, and how the local can also be bad. Petal Bear, Quoyle’s wife, is a resulting offspring and the epitome of globalization.

She represents the worst aspects of her culture: a consumer of men and motivated only by sexual conquest, no sense of morality, only self interest, lack of responsibility and loyalty. She defeats, intrudes and controls Quoyle, who could be said to be a representative of the many overwhelmed and marginalized local society. This is her way of navigating a complicated world and her eventual death is a symbol, suggesting that Proulx believes this way of navigating is ineffective and that she disagrees with the things she represents.

Agnis Hamm, Quoyle’s aunt, successfully navigates and responds to the hanging global world in the novel, through the useful cohesion of the global and local. We discover this information and her story in various fragments throughout the book. Agnis retreats, or more accurately withdraws, from her local birthplace of Newfoundland. This is due to various factors of the community that were affecting her adversely. It is revealed that her father
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raped when she was a young child. Alongside this is the depiction of the past Quoye's as inbreds, pirates and primitives, occupants of a parochial, limited and isolated community.

This quote relating to Agnis's move from the local shows this '...away from isolation, illiteracy, trousers made of worn upholstery fabric , no teeth, away from contorted thoughts and rough hands, from desperation'. Proulx's depiction of this local community disregards the notion that the local is always good, replacing it with an anything but positive view. In this case the lack of global values and influence within the local is what leads it to being so defective. The global allows Agnis her autonomy and independence, something that was in this case unattainable at the local level.

She eventually returns to Newfoundland though, she says it's due to it being '...an ache, just a longing to go back' which reflects the importance of the local in producing aspects such as individuals family and history.

Newfoundland has changed though, certain old values and ways of life have perished in the face of the global mass. The global influence on the local is a constructive development for returning Agnis, though many long-time local dwellers of the land are not so pleased. Jack Buggit, the owner of the local paper of Killickclaw, says when suggesting a new section called ' Lifestyles' that ' There's two ways of living here now.

There's the old way, look out for your family, die where you were born, fish, cut your wood, keep a garden, make do with what you got. Then there's the new way.

Work out, have a job, somebody to tell you what to do, commute, your brother's in South Africa, your mother's in Regina, buy every goddam cockadoodle piece of Japanese crap you can, leave home...Now we got to deal with Crock-Pots and consumer ratings, asphalt driveways, lotteries, fried-chicken franchises, Mint Royale Coffee at gourmet shops. Although he is blatantly criticizing the new global-influenced way of life through the use of extended descriptive language, he is also suggesting the need for the two ways of life to coexist for individuals to be able to survive in Newfoundland. Jack also says at another point in the novel however, when describing the impact of government and other global forces on the community that they introduced 'electricity and roads, telephone, radio...health care, mail service, good education for me kids.' Proulx appropriately uses colloquial and incorrectly used word of '...me' to emphasize that these aspects are a good outcome for the local.

Thus from these two extracts we can see that she is not presenting the local and global as simplistic binary opposites, but is showing that there is good and bad aspects of both and that these need to be balanced and coexist in order for individuals to be able to navigate the separate entities successfully.

In the case of the local Killickclaw, the global has had an impact on the community, and through Proulx's characterization we can see the different ways in which individuals may navigate. Quoye presents an interesting and successful way to deal with the changing realities of his world.

Quoye retreats to Killickclaw with his two young girls and aunt, after a series of terrible events plague his usually bland life, including the death of his

unfaithful wife and the death of his parents. This appears to be an act taken due to an inability to deal with his situation, and he conforms to his aunt's suggestion that he move overseas due to his circumstance.

This is supported by the simile reflecting his move to Newfoundland '... breathing grief like sour gas. Hoped for oxygen soon. ' which suggests that it is a last resort, an emergency.

Also to some extent it could be argued that it is a conscious effort to deal with the situation presented to him. Either way, Proulx is presenting a way to navigate both worlds, and as we find out, successfully. Newfoundland provides Quoye with a locality in which to heal and rebuild his past life, a renewal and ' chance to start anew'.

The local community delves deeper than the surface level Quoye, ' failure of normal appearance', and eventually allows him to develop a sense of self and identity, something that wasn't possible in the harsh town of Mockinburg.

The recognition of uniqueness in local communities is emphasized by Alvin Yark's, a specialized boatmaker in Newfoundland, metaphorical statement ' Each tree grows a little different so each boat you make...is a little different too' which explores the local peoples uniqueness through the uniqueness of local professions. Quoye's uniqueness is clearly acknowledged after moving to Newfoundland which can be seen through Proulx's use of symbolism.

Quoye is referred to by his last name up until the point where he is promoted to managing editor of ' The Gammy Bird' where his identity is added to, ' R.

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Quoyle. ' This signifies he has gained a sense of individuality, belonging and sense of self through the assistance of the local environment, which heals and nurtures Quoyle. This is in stark contrast to the homogeneity of the devastatingly globalised community which he once occupied, which is supported by the extract containing the names of unidentifiable businesses in Mockinburg ' Quoyle bought groceries at the A&B Grocery; got his gas at D&G Convenience; took the car to the R&R Garage... '.

Proulx is therefore suggesting through these aspects of her novel that the local encourages the positive development of individuals which is not possible in the global, and this is effectively used by Quoyle as a navigation tool through the two environments. As is evident Proulx would most certainly agree with the statement ' The global cannot be all bad nor the local all good. In our lives today, the two must coexist and we must learn to navigate both.

' This is explicitly evident through the Shipping News.

She provides characters such as Jack Buggit, Quoyle, Agnis Hamm and Petal Bear to show the differing ways in which individuals respond to the changing realities of global culture. She provides the principally global town of Mockingburg and mainly local town of Killickclaw for her characters to interact with, to show the multiple ways of navigating these settings, both successful and unsuccessful. She presents the global as mainly negative, though there are instances where this is not the case, and the local is

presented positively for the most part, though similarly instance where this is not true.