

Possibility of agency in modern literature

Literature



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26 March Possibility of agency in modern literature: Much has been written on the possibility of agency in modern literature. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is one such novel in which some characters are seen engaged in the battle of individuality vs. conformity. Another short story by Ernest Hemingway, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, also speaks of agency, but in a different style. The novel opens with an old man who demonstrates a need for agency when he wants to exercise his impulse to stay late in the bar. Following discussion aims to prove the reality of this claim that “ characters in modern literature seem to enjoy a greater degree of agency and control because their actions, however good or wayward they may be, are directed by free will.”

Father Jean Marie Latour from Cather’s novel is a character who is empowered enough to affect his life. He plans his life his way and regularly governs his actions. The corrupt Mexican priests attempt to defy him, but Father Latour exercises his authority and defeats them eventually. Many themes have been explored in regards to this novel from violence to religion to race to hypocrisy, but I see it as a story exemplifying battle of individuality vs. conformity. This is because the characters are engaged in a relentless struggle to win individuality. When Cather writes, “ In New Mexico he always awoke a young man;” (293), Father Latour’s agency is demonstrated. The idea that New Mexico makes him feel young and free demonstrates his liberty and freedom. He refuses to conform to the traditional ideals of New Mexico society. Rather, he tries to affect his live by making his own decisions. Magdalena is another character of free will from the novel. She shines as a strong and independent nun after having her corrupt husband arrested for homicide. She rejects the notion of submission to men at all

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costs and living in turmoil. She wins a certain degree of agency in her life due to her own actions. We see that the idea of control in her life helps her grow beautiful as Cather writes, " A handsome woman she had grown to be, with her comely figure and the deep claret colour under the golden brown of her cheeks" (cited in Reynolds 36). Magdalena remained dull as long as she allowed someone else govern her life. The level of interest she demonstrates in taking charge of her life illustrates the high possibility of agency enjoyed by characters in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Hemingway's short story starts with the idea of agency. An old man sitting in a bar late at night, however drunk he is, appears to exercise agency by governing his life himself. The concept of free will has many aspects and this story focuses on a different aspect than the one explored in Cather's novel. The old man is stoned and separated from the world, but his need for agency is clearly young. He is reluctant to go home and stays up till late night because that is the way he likes it. " He stays up because he likes it" (Hemingway 15). This explanation of old man's behavior given by older waiter to younger waiter speaks of the character's agency and free will. The old man does not let someone else direct him because he is old and deaf, rather he is the only one in the world to direct his life even in a poor state of life. Compared to the other novel, characters in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* have a minor possibility of agency. It is not like they do not have agency at all, but they are not really free in their lives.

Concluding, characters in modern literary works have more agency than those in old literature. Changing times motivated authors to give more power to their characters causing them to make their own choices and choose individuality over conformity. Both stories discussed in this essay appear to

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favor individuality given the way their characters shun conventional notions holding their agencies high.

Works cited:

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