

Portugal, Nicholas

HON-100 – Honors Rhetoric

Dr. Maria Jerinic-Pravica

September 21, 2015

The Significance of Sovereignty in Walker Percy's "The Loss of the Creature"

As human beings, we are ethically compelled to respect the beauty, dignity, and historical significance of our world, and willfully engage ourselves in appreciating a foreign experience for what it is and not through a camera lens, or what we attempt to 'enhance' it to be for consumerist benefit. In his acclaimed essay, "The Loss of the Creature," Walker Percy alludes to various sites of interest blighted by a profusion of consumer-friendly facilities obscuring their real meanings to local cultures and ecosystems, demonstrating a profound loss of "sovereignty" at work (464). Sovereignty is analogous to authority and self-determination, which Percy consistently indicates throughout his essay to captivate the core of the true human experience, employing a logical sequence of events beginning with portraying the existence of a loss of "sovereignty," how one surrenders his/her sovereignty, how one can reassert sovereignty, and how losing it should be perceived as doubly depriving oneself from embracing an authentic, yet completely unfamiliar, experience. From the Industrial Revolution to the present, the technologies developed to improve what should be naturally alluring and immersive sights have positively affected how we interact and accommodate themselves in new destinations; however, they have negatively blinded our instinctual curiosity to identify and explore our "sovereignty" in an uncultivated environment.

In his introduction, Percy recognizes a loss of "sovereignty" in how tourists immerse themselves within the destinations they visit. Rather than experiencing an epiphany similar to

that of Cardenas, the Spanish explorer who stumbled upon the area we now know as the Grand Canyon during the medieval period of conquest and exploration, the average tourist today would draw infinitesimally less inspiration from such a fascinating natural wonder. He relates this in a mathematical context, “A counterinfluence is at work, however, and it would be nearer the truth to say that if the place is seen by a million sightseers, a single sightseer does not receive value P but a millionth part of value P” (459). The Grand Canyon has been transformed by the influence of consumerism, its fundamental purpose of which is opposite to that which is typically accepted and praised on travel review websites, which Percy concurs: “The thing is no longer the thing as it confronted the Spaniard; it is rather that which has already been formulated—by picture postcard, geography book, tourist folders, and the words *Grand Canyon*” (459-460). Images of the Grand Canyon, whether in print, online, or from the descriptions of those who have traveled there and recommended their experiences to family members or friends, all contribute to its branding and iconic appearance on social media, history books, e-cards, etc. As opposed to an examination of the beauty of the Grand Canyon’s intricate natural formations of flora and fauna, today’s tourists have become overwhelmingly pre-occupied with activities present within the Bright Angel Lodge, as Percy refers to, the improved hiking trails, and mountainous overlooks where families create memories through snapshots of themselves to prove to their relatives and friends of their presence at the world-famous Grand Canyon.

Subsequently, Percy explicates the significance of ignoring or failing to be aware of the dignity of specific entities, which Percy deems to be the surrender of “sovereignty,” signifying one’s ability to be in control of his/her situation and place in the world as a “creator,” not a mere “consumer receiving an experience package” (467). To describe just how one surrenders his/her sovereignty, Percy explains, “A reader may surrender sovereignty over that which has been

written about, just as a consumer may surrender sovereignty over a thing which has been theorized about. The consumer is content to receive an experience just as it has been presented to him by theorists and planners” (465). Personally, as a civil engineering student, I highly respect and gain inspiration from professionals in this particular discipline. When the drafter on a civil engineering team project publishes scientific articles online, where I gather information for the purpose of research, I tend to overestimate their credibility, believing their every theory as truth and valuable instruction for my own academic development, thereby representing a characteristic method of surrendering “sovereignty” to the content of scholarly publications. In addition, if a water management engineer proposes a novel solution, or a “thing which has been theorized about,” to the fluctuating issue of drought control, as an inexperienced learner, I would pay close attention to how this idea would effectively benefit society, but I never see the solution come to fruition through models, videos, or construction site observations. As a result, I would obtain an especially limited understanding of the concept behind the solution, while those who compiled it were thoroughly involved in the research and investigation of tentative construction sites, the types and costs of materials to be used, or geotechnical analyses. Essentially in any scientific and engineering application, it is important to develop abstract procedures in the development of any project, adhering to the scientific method or the eight steps in the engineering process. This is where Percy’s argument does not hold relevance, because he states, “The problem is to find an ‘unspoiled’ place” (463), and in developing an abstraction, the professional or ‘expert’ must refer to his/her knowledge or ‘expertise’ and “that which has already been formulated” (459) in order to create something truly inventive and applicable to society’s use of the device and/or structure. However, as a student learns the ropes of civil engineering practices and implementations, it is

essential to experience them in action firsthand rather than simply reading and taking note from abstractions in this manner, which is precisely what Percy suggests.

Returning to the original Grand Canyon example, Percy exemplifies how one can reassert his/her sovereignty after realizing that a “radical” loss has indeed occurred (464). After depicting the monotony of the tourists, he unexpectedly concentrates on a particular individual who values a deeper experience while exploring the Grand Canyon, ultimately distinguishing him from the tourists: “Who is the stranger at the Bright Angel Lodge? Is he the ordinary tourist from Terre Haute who makes himself out to be? He is not. He has another objective in mind, to revenge his wronged brother, counterespionage, etc.” (462). In this context, Percy introduces an element of mystery by implying how the stranger at the lodge isn’t there for the same reasons as everyone else concurrently touring the region, but rather possesses a more ‘sovereign’ objective. He aims to reclaim sovereignty through the invocation of natural disaster, which can present itself in a wide range of forms. Since consumerist facilities blind tourists from what a polluted destination truly has to offer, it is imperative that the ‘sovereign’ individual recognizes the need to eradicate these existing institutions in order to allow nature to reclaim its glory in the natural ecosystem. If the presence of these ‘manmade modifications’ serves to amplify the tourists’ experiences, and given Percy also contends their existence as a result of degrading the true human experience, it is evident the stranger at the Bright Angel Lodge would seem the only normal, Cardenas-aspiring, individual in the perspective of Percy. As current consumers, we are burdened by conventional trends to conform to fashion expectations, having the latest tech devices to capture the moments, and providing interesting online content for followers of social media accounts to maintain an active, reputable image of oneself, which Percy indirectly condemns by discussing the necessity

of natural disaster as a means of exterminating these impurities to the natural environment and successively reasserting our “sovereignty.”

Penultimately, near the end of his essay, and after the reassertion of sovereignty, Percy illuminates that the process of surrendering one’s sovereignty should be reflected upon as a double deprivation, emphasizing the severity of how such irreverence obfuscates an individual’s ability to recognize the truth and essence of entities. As learners, “sightseers,” and travelers, our understanding of new ideas and objects has become increasingly diminished due to the deceptive presentation of those entities. Percy consecutively outlines these factors: “First, the thing is lost through its packaging. The very means by which the thing is presented for consumption, the very techniques by which the thing is made available as an item of need-satisfaction, these very means operate to remove the thing from the sovereignty of the knower” (470). We have all heard the saying that things aren’t always as they seem to be, and this holds relevance to the manner in which a biology student first encounters a dogfish, which is a type of sand-colored shark with a long tail commonly found along the coasts of Europe in schools. Upon receiving a checklist for a dissection experiment, the dogfish was labelled under a Latin scientific name, *squalus acanthias*, but having no knowledge of the name’s meaning or even what a dogfish is, the biology student would be totally oblivious and simply assume it is merely a ‘specimen’ he/she will dissect. “The second loss is the spoliation of the thing, the tree, the rock, the swallow, by the layman’s understanding of scientific theory. He believes the thing is *disposed of* by theory, that it stands in the Platonic relation of being a *specimen* for such and such an underlying principle” (471). In the anecdote of the biology student and the dogfish, the dogfish would not have been presented to the biology student in its raw non-packaged brilliance, being that it must be cleansed or modified in some way in order to be deemed safe for laboratory use, as well as contain no diseases that the

student could be harmfully exposed to while dissecting it and potentially performing an error, altogether culminating in a drastic double deprivation of “sovereignty.” As college students, we can relate to the biology student’s predicament, because not many of us have knowledge of what Latin scientific names stand for, nor would understand the beauty of an animal such as a dogfish without further observations in the real world.

In conclusion, Percy’s arguments contain universal messages that could apply to how any of us who fails to retain our “sovereignty” will not endeavor to receive the authentic experience as Cardenas did hundreds of years ago. Consumerism was, and still is, an enormous influence in our everyday lives, because due to the ever-increasing advancement and presence of technology in both urban and rural areas, mainstream culture and ideas have become incrementally difficult to surpass and avoid. Nowadays, my fellow college classmates and I are experiencing one of the most fast-paced eras of human history, as we are consumed by the amalgamation of happenings on social media, spending time making lifelong friends, learning to become independent adults, and surviving off of basic necessities such as ramen noodles and instant coffee, all while trying to keep our grades and GPA afloat. When it comes to academics, the majority of students will remain content with information taught in textbooks and lectures, without attempting to delve deeper into these subject matters besides what a professor assigns. Percy would deem this a deep-seated “loss of sovereignty,” as well as a major issue with higher education in general. Finally, after analyzing Percy’s essay, I realize how important it is to ascertain my “sovereignty” as a human being in the form of becoming a deeper learner in all of the subjects I pursue and actually taking charge of my education rather than acting as a mere receptacle of knowledge, which is not what college is all about.

Works Cited

Percy, Walker. "Loss of the Creature." *Ways of Reading*. Ed. David Bartolomae and Anthony Petrosky. Vol. 9. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. 459-471. Print.