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The Search for Oneself

“If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely... only then will I be free to become myself,” (Heidegger). Spending a lifetime thinking about life and death is a waste of time (and life). In fact, the author of the quote would probably agree, even though he spent his life doing this. His name was Martin Heidegger, a leading German philosopher of the twentieth century. His thoughts primarily contributed to the philosophical movement known as existentialism, which deals with the meaning of life (Naess & Wolin). In an age of rising nihilism, many have sought to express such ideas in art, but here, in the genre of short stories, noted author Amy Bonnaffons is one of the few to do so. In her short story, “If Wishes Were Horses,” Bonnaffons captures the essence of Heidegger’s philosophy. Namely, she portrays how one finds meaning amidst a meaningless life. Chronicling the transformation of the main character into a horse, this exemplar of magical realism deals with these questions of being and non-being. Through a variety of rhetorical and literary devices, Bonnaffons weaves a tale of the utmost intimacy while critiquing various social injustices. As such, the characterization of the main character and the critiques of modern society, from Amy Bonaffons’ “If Wishes Were Horses” are representative of Martin Heidegger’s thoughts on the meaning of human existence.

First, one must analyze the way in which the main character is characterized, as this will elucidate similarities to Heidegger’s philosophy. Cassie, as she is referred to in a single instance,

is a forlorn figure. As the story takes place in the first person, one is often given intimate knowledge of how Cassie views herself. An example of this is when Cassie is asked why she is becoming a horse. She replies, “‘Boredom’... without hesitation” (Bonnaffons 4). From this statement, and various aforementioned descriptions of her lethargy, one accepts that boredom is a mainstay in her disposition, at least leading up to her transformation. This ties into Heidegger in the fact that he believes dread, or an underlying current of anxiety, to be the catalyst for deep introspective thought (Heidegger 43). This then leads back to Cassie, who describes the underlying reason for her wish to transform into a horse. In an attempt to describe her course of action to her roommate, Serena, Cassie engages in a dialogue with Serena’s unborn child stating: “This is your aunt Cassie. She was restless and turned herself into an animal,” (Bonnaffons 13). Not only does this affirm the role of Heidegger’s angst in the story, this escapism, or casting aside of everything worldly in the pursuit of a life truest to oneself, is the essence of Heidegger. He states that, “The beholdenness of existence to no-thing on the basis of hidden dread is the surmounting of be-ing as a whole, transcendence,” (Heidegger 54). Heidegger is stating here that one must encounter the meaninglessness in their own lives from a state of constant boredom, and by doing this, are able to transcend their existence. In the story, Cassie realizes the meaninglessness of her life as a result of her boredom, and ultimately transcends into a new form of existence. Thus, one can see that the characterization of Cassie is clearly reminiscent of Heidegger’s philosophy.

Alongside this, Bonnaffons’ critique of modern society is similar to Heidegger’s stance, in the opinion that it is a barrier for self-actualization. As was discussed before, Cassie wants to get away from the barriers placed on her by society. From the introduction, Cassie proclaims that she no longer wants to be, “a person--no credit cards, no fad diets, no existential questions, no

more boring meetings or family dinners, no political allegiances or disappointments, no responsibility to anyone but yourself,” (Bonnaffons 1-2). She decries all the things that modern society is concerned with, and the superficiality behind it (i.e. a fad diet). Heidegger shares the same general viewpoint, in that humanity has reached an unprecedented level of obsession with the superficial; that there is an insatiable longing for the perfect without working towards it (Heidegger 14). In fact, Heidegger’s thoughts lead him to the claim that this disconnectedness stems from technology and its use as a means for organizing the world (Heidegger 20-21). This is fundamentally what Cassie is trying to break: “I wanted to do away with constraints entirely,” (Bonnaffons 2). Heidegger believes that in this process of codifying the world and using technology to do it, humanity not only loses touch with the world but begins to see everything as a means to an end. However, realizing that technology in and of itself is not the villain, but rather the approach to and usage of technology, gives humanity the opportunity to correct its ways by shifting its mindset. This is, in essence, what the horse-transforming technology is: a shift in mindset that allows one to renew their connection with the natural world. Thus, through an exploration of Bonnaffons’ critique and her symbolism of technology, one finds a unity in her thought with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

To conclude, as seen through an analysis of the characterization and critiques of modern society, Amy Bonnaffons’ “If Wishes Were Horses,” is integrally linked to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of being. While the purpose of this essay might have been to analyze the way in which an author crafts a short story, there is also the purpose that through this interpretation one might find a deeper meaning behind the text. In a world of growing mental illnesses, more people are unable to reconcile with such existential crises and often resort to self-destructive measures. The thoughts posited by Heidegger offer a solution. That one must not despair at this

condition, but realize it for what it is: a means for actualization and transcendence. Heidegger summates his thoughts on technology by stating that the arts are a field for scientific thought (Heidegger 34). That this abstract and uniquely human field allows humanity to deeply ingratiate itself with the world (Heidegger 35). Bonnaffons' story has done just that, and while it might be easy to see the ending as a tragedy, the transcendence of Cassie is something to be marveled at. It was something that she willed by herself and fully actualized. That, while all of humanity does not need to transform into horses, the strength one needs to become one's truest self, has always been within them.

Works Cited

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