**Hobos and Vagabonds in Modern Literature**

The movement known as modernity became a link in the chain reaction produced by the Industrial Revolution which quickly spread through the ‘civilized’ world. The working class burdened themselves with hope and with its realization, and even the importance of the monarchies and class distinctions waned. Drawing from the Hobo images presented in Woody Guthrie’s “Bound for Glory” and Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Amateur Emigrant,” This paper examines the common descriptive features of a modern Hobo and compares it to the common perception of the society regarding outsiders. The study aims to highlight the common themes associated with the role of a hobo and vagabond in the society.

The thesis statement the authors would like to prove is that some themes appear in all three books, describing the relationships of hobos towards the society, namely: labeled as an outsider, lazy, purposeless and prejudiced against.

The author also concludes that he serves as a human illustration of the contrast between the pragmatism of traditionalism and the idealism of modernity. The hobo often builds the social dream- only to be excluded from its notice and care after his role reaches completion, and the dreamers dread to learn that their industrial Camelot rests upon fields of tears and sweat, and this paradox aptly captures the Modernist celebration of both increased social possibilities and its ire toward a focused motivation which came to be closely associated with the pitfalls of capitalism. (Habermas 41) The men who built modern luxuries experience the contradiction between their work and the entitlement of those who reap the benefits. This theme is not only present in the two texts examined by the authors, but in Davies’ ‘super-tramp' character as well. According to him, the surest path to the lower classes’ enjoyment of modernity lies in the refusal to stake their lives upon those outcomes.

BACKGROUND

To understand the relationship between modernity, society, and literature, a deeper concept of the presumed meaning of modernity and its actual representations becomes necessary. modernity rebelled against nearly all of the former accepted means of viewing the world and sought “the progressive subjugation of nature…in the interests of the people, at root a composite and collective dream of progress, freedom, truth, and ‘emancipation from want.’” (Muller & Cloete 24) In other words, the broader concept of modernity applied to the American dream and to British Industrialism.

The Industrial Revolution made common workers a negligible factor of production. (Hobsbawm 92-96) The complex changes occurring at different levels of society presented a new conflict between the social obligation to the newly homeless- with ample figurative and literal room for discovery- of the capitalist economy and the cultural progressivism which promised other unique boons to the society as a whole. (Habermas 43)

Industrialization also produced an unexpected side effect in Britain: the island nation known for its strict adherence to tradition began to consider change as natural and as less threatening to their national success than they had in the previous hundreds of years. (Hobsbawm 98-99) The increased mobility of people created a criminalized class within the society, and this was the class of “vagabonds,” which, later, developed into a class of homeless, rootless people, called hobos and tramps once crossing the Atlantic. The mobility increased with the spread of colonization, and people around the world decided to travel to the New Continent. From Irish Gypsies to common outcasts, there were different people landing in a new world. It is also important to note that many of these people moved continent in the hope that they would find more work, stability, and opportunities, but they had to be disappointed.

Allen (13) states that what a vagabond meant in literary romanticism, the hobo was in the modern American society. However, the main difference is that while literary romanticism idealized and “glamorized” homelessness as an expression of independence and free-will, awareness and aspiration. While themes of poverty and degradation appear, they are more prevalent in the modern description of a hobo than in the vagabond literature. (Allen 14)

During the post-war depression of America, (1921-29), a defining movement occurred in the society, according to Smiley, with the appearance of bankruptcy, financial insecurity, homeless people sneaked on freight trains to find better opportunities elsewhere. They had no economic or family ties, so they were free to travel. Neither did they have anything to lose.

CONCLUSION

While modernity embraced the world off-kilter, looking at the present as though it already stretched into the years of memory. The Hobo serves as a human illustration of the contrast between the pragmatism of traditionalism and the idealism of modernity. Woody Guthrie’s “Bound for Glory,” Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Amateur Emigrant” both view the relationship between the Hobo, modernity, and society in different lights, ranging from the more balanced account of Guthrie to the firm, opposite views of Stevenson.

The above review of descriptive features and themes has proven the initial thesis statement of the authors; alienation, “otherness” and exclusion from mainstream society is present in both texts examined. The status of an outsider is a result of having no connections (family or economic roots) to the society, local community, and this also leads to refusal of people living according to social norms. In the “Bound for Glory”, however, the community bounds and dynamics are described in more detail: even though they are rejected by “common people”, the characters find acceptance in the hobo/vagabond community, which has only loose ties, is formed on an ad-hoc basis and has no set rules/norms.

Literature presents the world through a narrow scope, and the author points and tilts the lens to allow the reader to see like them. It is often said that the late years of a person’s life bring new clarity and purpose. Perhaps this accounts for the publication of “The Amateur Emigrant,” which Stevenson withheld in earlier years to preserve his association with the stylized, light-hearted literature which brought fame during his life. (Gray 80) Ultimately, even the bleak account of Guthrie uplifts the unfortunate reader with its rags-to-riches conclusion, exchanging the “pretenses of civilization for the authenticity of the road.” (DePastino 210) Regardless of personal feelings about the virtue of this philosophical stance, the appeal of finding something true and certainly appeals to the majority of people even today.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

Works Cited

Allen, J. *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony.* Psychology Press 2004. Print.

Davies, William H. *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*. 1908. Print.

DePastino, Todd. *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*. University of Chicago Press. 2003. Print.

Edwards, B. H. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 224.

Gray, William. R*obert Louis Stevenson: A Literary Life.* Palgrave MacMillan: NY, NY. 2004. Web.

Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory*. Plume Publishing. 1943. Print.

Habermas, Jürgen. “Modernity: An Unfinished Project” Chapter 1. In: Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves & Seyla Benhabib eds. (1997) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of modernity*, MIT Press. Print.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Industry And Empire: The Birth Of The Industrial Revolution*. The New Press. 1999. Print.

Muller, Johann & Nico Cloete. *To Outwit Modernity: Intellectuals And Politics In Transition. Transformation, 14*, 1991: 24-41. Web.

Pothinos, C. “The Tramp in American Literature, 1873–1939” *AmeriQuest. 5*/1 2008. Print.

Rawlings, P. “Policing: A Short History” Uffculme, Devon: 1999. Willan. Print.

Singer, Ben*. Melodrama and modernity.* 2001. Columbia University Press. Print.

Smiley, G."'Great Depression'. The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics”2008. *Library of Economics and Liberty.* 15 January 2014. Web.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Amateur Emigrant*. 1895. Print.

Weber, L., Bowling, B. “Valiant Beggars And Global Vagabonds: Select, Eject, Immobilize” *Theoretical Criminology* 2008 12: 355. Print.