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# Societal Rebirth: The Importance of Spirituality

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Dr. Vogel

### Societal Rebirth: The Importance of Spirituality

Rejuvenation is a goal society has sought throughout the scope of history and in modern times. Rejuvenation can be viewed as the historical idea of a societal rebirth. The idea of rejuvenation has been adapted to meet the crises faced by different societies. In traditional terms, the methods in which societal rebirths fix crises, namely through employment and steady food source availability, have been surrounded by controversy. Although a society can function and grow within certain limits utilizing these methods, it cannot achieve the desired rejuvenation. The failure to reach the desired dream can be viewed as a societal rebirth failure. The texts, *Grapes of Wrath* and *Black Elk Speaks*, lead the reader to question how anonymous forces of modernization act upon societies and effect their connection to the land. The two texts introduce another aspect of social rebirth, known as the spiritual connection to land, that has not yet been deemed as important. The modernization of land and society forms a distance between a group of people and their land, ultimately resulting in a societal rebirth failure.

According to traditional terms, a societal rebirth is defined in terms of the Western concepts of food and job availability. If a society has an abundant food source and job availability, it is assumed that the society will flourish. However, this view is flawed as it fails to consider the action and consequences of modernity on people and their land. For example, Roy Perrett, a modern theorist, argues that, “Traditional Western conceptions of immortality characteristically presume that we come into existence at a particular time (birth or conception), live out our earthly span and then die” (Perrett, 41). Perrett hones in on the idea that life can only

be achieved once when in fact a rejuvenation of life may occur multiple times as long as the spiritual belief is there. As such, Perrett brings attention to a flaw in the Western concept as it produces a destructive cultural attitude that allows modernity to alienate society further from spirituality. This attitude lessens the possibility of a rejuvenation as society is fixated on conforming to the expectations of modernism. This idea is flawed in the way it integrates modernity into the conversation of societal rebirths. This integration highlights the question, “what are the social consequences of the ways that modernity strips away religious-human relationships to the land.”? The essential element of spirituality is lost with modernity.

Therefore, the novels illustrate failed societal rebirths due to a lack of spiritual connection and a focus on conforming to modernity.

The novel, *Black Elk Speaks*, tells the personal narrative of Black Elk. Black Elk is a tribal leader who is gifted with a vision that shows him how to help his tribe. The vision is nature-based and contains features that are intended to assist Black Elk to help his people. However, seeing his nation’s hoop diminish and fearing that he can’t help, he chooses to distance himself from the nature-based vision. The government forces the idea of modernity on Black Elk and his tribe as a transition to reservation life is made. This transition shatters the tribes’ spiritual belief in the land and results in a failed societal rebirth.

The text, *Grapes of Wrath*, tells the story of the Joad family and their forced relocation by the banks from their native land to California. Rose and Tom Joad are spiritual characters who demonstrate how modernity alienated the Joad family from believing in the land. The story highlights the concept of cultural displacement and the effect it has on society and the desires people and society hold in mind.

The concept of alienation from land can be seen in the *A Sand County Almanac*, written by Aldo Leopold, as he writes on the experiences he has within his own society. Leopold illustrates the idea of how a society's connection to the land is vital to maintaining a balance between the ecosystem and spirituality. Leopold believes that, "the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts" and that those interdependent parts are linked to every aspect of society including, "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold, 12). The idea of the earth being in balance is extremely important to Leopold as he believes a human is only one element of society, shared by all living and nonliving entities.

The texts cited previously can be closely linked to the theoretical ideas of chronotope and land ethics. Bakhtin's theory of chronotope can be defined as the interdependent relationship between time and space in working together to create a world. In utilizing Bakhtin's theory, it is essential to understand that individuals produce the place/space by the way in which they live and this is then translated into literary prose. One can draw comparisons between chronotope and landscape when deciphering this as they both allow individuals to understand the space and how they act upon that space. Bakhtin says, "Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they coexist, they may be interwoven with (each other)..." (252) signifying the overlapping of multiple chronotopes to exist. For example, a space is shared by different entities and exists through the collaborative nature of the entities working together. This idea relates to land ethics. Land ethics is defined as, "a nonanthropocentric perspective of ethics, in which *Homo sapiens* is seen as simply a member of the ecosystem and not as the master of the Earth" (Silva). This theory states that all land deserves recognition and praise due to the offerings it provides to people and must be in balance

with nature to live effectively. Therefore, chronotype and land ethics both highlight the need for coexisting balance.

In my analysis, I will focus on the central element of cultural relocation that is experienced by Black Elk due to the forced removal of the tribe to a reservation. This forced removal is governed by modernity which eroded the connection the tribe had to the land, and hindered the occurrence of a societal rebirth. The central element of *Black Elk Speaks* is the vision Black Elk receives when he is a young boy. While on the trip that begins their relocation, Black Elk is having dinner when a voice came to him and said, “It is time; now they are calling you” (Neihardt, 14). The vision becomes a piece of Black Elk as he helps reconstruct the nation’s hoop. It is important to note that Black Elk receives the vision while his tribe is forcibly relocated to a reservation. This signified that Black Elk should follow and use the vision, step-by-step, as it came at a time in which his people lacked spiritual faith.

Black Elk’s vision featured elements that were vital to his understanding of how to help his people. The elements consisted of the gifts that were given to Black Elk by the six male figures that were relevant to reconstructing the nation’s hoop. The gifts were a peace pipe, a herb of power, a bow and arrow, a cup representing the sky, and a red stick symbolizing the tree of life. After they were received by Black Elk, he was shown a image of his town within the vision which depicted, “And when I looked down upon my people yonder, the cloud passed over, blessing them with friendly rain, and stood in the east with a flaming rainbow over it” (Neihardt, 26). This image showed the power spirituality has in its ability to maintain a tribes life and resist the effects of modernity.

Despite this positive image shown to Black Elk, he begins to become fearful upon returning back to his home. He feels he is alone, despite a higher being reaching out to him, as he stated, “I was all alone on a broad plain now with my feet upon the earth, alone but for the spotted eagle guarding me. I could see my peoples village far ahead, and I walked very fast, for I was homesick now” (Neihardt, 28-29). However, Black Elk is not alone as he has the help of a spiritual being and a vision guiding him on the path to social rebirth. He fails to realize this though and forms an anxiety and fear driven by the idea of modernity.

As Black Elk continues to fear the vision we start to see the land described as “hungry” (Neihardt, 133). This choice of words signals to the reader that the land is hungry for a rejuvenation that is prevented by a lack of connection between the land and people. The nation’s hoop was broken and the systematic relocation forced Black Elk to watch the land diminish in front of him, as modernity strips away at the traditional elements once preserved by his people. Black Elk says, “All our people now were settling down in square gray houses, scattered here and there across this hungry land, and around them the Wasichus had drawn a line to keep them in. The nations hope was broken, and there was no center any longer for the flowering tree” (Neihardt, 133). The square gray houses represent the systematic oppression that Black Elk’s people are facing and the hungry land reminds the reader of the lands need for spiritual connection. The nation’s broken hope represents the failed societal rebirth that is occurring as Black Elk’s tribe feeds into the idea of modernity and loses the spiritual aspect that is needed.

Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope can be applied to *Black Elk Speaks* to understand how the concepts of spirituality and land exist separately, but never cohesively. Upon deciphering this, one can look at how chronotope and landscape are similar as both make individuals

understand the space they occupy and how they act upon that space. Bakhtin says, “Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they coexist, they may be interwoven with (each other)...” (Bakhtin, 252) signifying the overlapping of multiple chronotopes to exist. Black Elk begins to distance himself from the nature vision because he sees the spiritual world mixing with the materialistic or modern world. As a society and character, Black Elk does not know how to properly blend the two, and consequently fears both. For instance, Black Elk, sitting upon a hill while camping looks out over the land being modernized and says, “I thought maybe my vision would come back and tell me how I could save that country for my people, but I could not see anything clear” (Neihardt, 51). There is an internal struggle present here for Black Elk between valuing the vision for its spirituality or taking part in the forced modernity. However, this attitude is flawed as it does not consider that two elements can exist cohesively and be good for a society. Black Elk fears that by accepting modernization that spirituality will be lost, and, on the contrary, by accepting spirituality, he cannot save his people. This is portrayed when Black Elk says, “As I lay there thinking of my vision, I could see it all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body, but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me” (Neihardt, pg.30). This signifies that Black Elk has not allowed the chronotopes of modernity and spirituality to act cohesively.

The concept of land ethics also plays a critical role in the way Black Elk sees and responds to his land. The concept of ethics is present in his vision as it intends to show Black Elk that, “only those actions that tend to preserve the integrity and stability of the ecosystems at a local and global scale can be considered correct” (Silva). This means only to use the land for

necessary requirements of life, to believe religiously in the land, and to ensure that the land will save the people. Despite this revelation, there is still a lack of religious attachment to the land which results in Black Elk's failure to guide his tribe. The land ethics argument also strongly relates to the idea of spirituality and being connected to more than the conservative notion of religion. According to Bron Taylor, aquatic nature religions, such as fishing and hunting are “beliefs and practices that might not be considered religious by those presuming more conventional understandings of the term” (Quoted in O’Brien). This idea suggests that spirituality is connected to more than just religion and can be represented through natural born life, as seen in *Black Elk Speaks*.

This main argument is also featured in the *Grapes of Wrath*. Similar to the events in *Black Elk Speaks*, the *Grapes of Wrath* features an outside force, in the form of policies and economics, forcing systematic modernization on a group of people. As a result, the Joad family distances themselves from spirituality and sees the land from a modernized view. A central theme of being forced to leave and find a new home parallels the concept of a traditional societal rebirth. In contrast to *Black Elk Speaks*, there is a sense of spiritual connection to the land present within the book at the beginning. This can be seen when Muley and Grandpa do not want to leave their native land because the land built them and leaving would be an injustice. The land is part of the identity of both grandpa and Muley and provides them with a greater connection to the land compared to the rest of society. As the forced removal begins, the people are pushed further from their homes and spirituality. They view the land solely as a commodity rather than rooting themselves deeper in spirituality to resist the modernization.

The Joad family travels to California for employment and are faced with systematic modernization as policies control the roads the Joad family can travel on and direct them to certain farms for work. Upon arrival at the farm, the Joad family work the land simply to live and fail to appreciate the land for the value it holds. For example, in regards to the farm, Tom remarks, "She ain't very purty. Want to go somewheres else?" (Steinbeck, 242). His remark suggests that the land has no opportunity for jobs as there are already tents full of people lined up ready to pick cotton the next day. Here we see how the chronotopes of modernity and tradition can not exist cohesively in balance as one overpowers the other. The concept of modernity has changed the mindset of workers to only seeing the land as a form of money and not for the true value it has. The Joad family has now become blinded by the modernity that was forced upon them.

As the family travels, Rose is pregnant and is always surrounded by bad weather. The rain begins to climb closer to their vehicle and floods the middle of the car where Rose was being kept safe. Rose, now doomed by the elements with the rain overtaking the safety of her warm vehicle, gives birth to a premature and stillborn baby. The baby is placed in the river and the water symbolizes the inability for rebirth as the people and the land have not been saved by themselves or spirituality. Mrs. Wainwright, who helped during birth, described the child as, "Never breathed, Never was alive" (Steinbeck, 444). Her statement symbolized the death of society as no new life could be brought into the world. As the Joad family saw the land as a commodity and worked the land to gain money, the weather worsened. The weather worsening paralleled Rose's pregnancy and alienation from their land bringing in the theory of land ethics and how the environment and society were not in balance.

A key connection that can be used to understand the societal rebirth failure in *Grapes of Wrath* is ecocriticism. Ecocriticism can be understood as, “the examination between the physical environment and literature” (Vakoch). The idea of ecocriticism brings in the theory that modernity urges societal alienation from ecosystems. Aldo Leopold in *The Sand County Almanac* discusses this connection weighing in the idea that

Man is, in fact, only a member of a biotic team is shown by an ecological interpretation of history. Many historical events, explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were actually biotic interactions between people and land. The characteristics of the land determined the facts quite as potently as the characteristics of the men who lived on it. (Leopold, 13)

Leopold is weighing the weight of the land equally to that of the people. This suggests that they both need to be in balance and work together to experience any form of rejuvenation. A major component is evaluating the way nature and humans are seen in text since, “the history of nature writing can be seen in many ways as a history of serious attempts to ameliorate the separation and present new ways of perceiving the interconnections that complicate human relationship with the natural world” (Vakoch, 67). These complications can be labeled as forced modernization and the impact it has on a society. This alienation ultimately hinders the attempts made by society at social rebirth in the *Grapes of Wrath*.

The texts detailed above allow examination as to how individuals allow themselves to be acted on by outside forces which disable one’s connection to the spiritual elements that enable societal rebirth. Storytelling demonstrates the fear of evil and how the balance of the literary and real world allow present society to learn from prose. For modern society, this should leave a lasting impression as we see the earth only for its economic value. This spurs the question, “Will

we become systematically modernized to the extent where all land and air is a commodity and no longer a gift given to sustain life.”?

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