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The Resister Becomes the Participant:

Moral Dignity against Corrupt Culture in Waters' *The Man Who Killed the Deer*

When faced with something perceived as corrupt or unjust, man naturally fights against it. While this technically also applies to battles fought person-to-person, historically the largest cases of resisting against corruption have been revolutions against whole governments and institutions. The latter is certainly the case in Frank Waters' *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, a novel in which an individual man must defend himself against two cultures which are engaged in a power-struggle in the This man, Martiniano, must discern for himself the sources of corruption within each society in order to choose the culture in which he most belongs, or else risk separation from society altogether. But it becomes not simply a matter of assimilation; the corruptions present within each society compel Martiniano to actively resist both, and he only arrives finally at peace when he feels no more compulsion to resist because he no longer feels personally wronged by the corruption within society. Through the text surrounding Martiniano's actions and motivations, as well as through the assimilation of philosopher Susan Wolf, selections from the book of Matthew, and the film *High Plains Drifter*, a clearer idea appears of exactly what it means to morally resist a corrupt culture: Martiniano resists both the American government and part of his own pueblo culture, but finds peace as his pueblo culture begins to demonstrate the intuitive spirituality which sets them apart as individual.

First in the novel, Martiniano encounters the corrupt culture of American society, which imposes its own ethnocentricity upon the natives of the land it has claimed as its own. Its first corruption captures incorrect ideas about property—that because no one has claimed a piece of property though the American legal system, that a property automatically belongs to the American government which can draft a deed

for it; this idea fails logically, because there exist natives who have worked in harmony with the land for centuries and who are all but ignored in the American legal system for property ownership. This ethnocentrism continues its destructive warpath against the natives, who the Americans view as inferior savages, in its intention to give some natives a western education. This ethnocentric, illogical corruption betrays itself in two ways; first, the Americans are here assuming that their own methods of development, in this case education, are superior to those of the Pueblo Indian culture; this conclusion bases itself on only American standards, and it thus gives the Pueblo form of learning and maturing no chance for legitimacy. Secondly, the Americans plan to educate at the “Government away-school” (Waters 19) a select few natives to then deposit them back into their cultures, so that they can spread Western thinking; however, this has almost the opposite effect: the educated natives now enter back into their culture as strangers with trades—in Martiniano’s case, carpentry—that are not needed in the pueblos. Martiniano speaks disdainfully of his education, saying the white man “took [him] away to school” (Waters 19). The language of “taking” implies a force on the part of the Americans, and Martiniano certainly viewed it as wholly corrupt.

How, then, can one resist against a society which has imposed ethnocentricity on a subordinate culture? In Martiniano’s case, he chooses to disregard the arbitrary laws set in place by “white man’s Government” (Waters 19). While the deer season has technically past two days ago according to white law, Martiniano reasons against it: he says, “I am Indian. I am hungry. Why should I hurry for Government men?” (Waters 16). Martiniano expresses his own capacity for moral resistance in this action; he can discern enough to pick out that the white government imposes completely arbitrary laws—he asks why it is appropriate “to shoot a deer on Tuesday but not Thursday?” (Waters 19) and he feels compelled to satisfy his own needs despite this unfair law. In the movie *High Plains Drifter*, the protagonist, called the Stranger, similarly pits himself against a corrupt society in order to suit his own preferences. However, there’s a moral discrepancy between the two protagonists: while both the Stranger and Martiniano find their antagonistic societies as morally abominable, they have contrasting motivations for their actions which defy society. Martiniano satisfies his own needs while doing the least possible

amount of damage. He wishes no harm on anyone caught in his process of resisting, and a deer killed for its meat remains as the only physical destruction wrought immediately by his actions. In contrast, the Stranger resists society because he wants to see harm come to it; he leaves a wide wake of destruction and emotional instability on purpose, because he cares only for the mal-being of those which he resists. The Stranger seeks revenge; Martiniano seeks to separate himself from corruption. Therefore Martiniano, while satisfying his own needs through the deer, stands as much more of a moral resistor against the corrupt American government than the Stranger was against his town.

However, the deer's death does not only stir waves of resentment in the American government; it also causes uproar in Martiniano's own heritage, the pueblo Indians. They become upset because Martiniano, regardless of whether he shot the deer inside the limits of white Government's parameters, did not properly complete the spiritual ceremony for taking a life, like a deer, from nature. He lacked the time to complete the personal ceremony because of time crunches imposed on him by the very council which disapproves of Martiniano's behavior. Martiniano says,

The Council does not give me the privileges of others since I have come back from away-school. It would not give me my turn at the thresher for my oats, my wheat. So I had to thresh them the old way, with my animals' hoofs. It took me a long, long time...it was two days after hunting season had finished (Waters 19).

At the fault of the meaningless council laws, imposed upon Martiniano for no legitimate reason, Martiniano feels too rushed to complete the prayers which the council says are necessary. This unjust imposition characterizes the corruption which lies at the heart of the pueblo culture against which Martiniano feels so compelled to fight: the pueblo culture completely obsesses over the upkeep of its complex legality that it loses touch with its original roots in spiritual harmony.

Here, Waters draws a contrast between the corruption in the American and Pueblo societies, the discrepancy of which Martiniano is not fully aware. While all of American society as portrayed in *The Man Who Killed the Deer* focuses on the ethnocentric goal of civilizing people who are already civilized, only half of Pueblo culture has become morally corrupt in the way that Martiniano views corruption. The

group mentality of the corrupt side of Pueblo society rises as a response to the cultural threat that the Americans pose. In an effort to keep their integrity against an imposing American threat, the Pueblo Council has developed a strict adherence to issues of tradition, ceremony, and legality, rather than to spiritual connectivity and harmony within nature, two characteristics of the original and “pure” side of Pueblo culture. The Pueblo Council mirrors the concept of biblical Pharisees, particularly as outlined in the Gospel of Matthew:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 20-22).

The Pharisees were concerned with only the letter of the law, and not its implications on the heart; Jesus rebuked them most about this subject. But the Pueblo Council acts the same way toward its own laws, in that the council concerns itself with the law’s upkeep and appearance rather than their culture’s spiritual implications. This dichotomy of intentions creates hypocrites within the Pueblo, individuals who will ignore a deer in court, but ask for pieces of it when they are no longer under the watchful eye of their own legal system: Martiniano recalls “the friends and relatives coming for a piece, stroking the deer and saying ‘Thank you,’ [and] the old people with chest sickness coming to ask for blood to warm and drink” (Waters 43). This hypocrisy, in which the discerning and moral Martiniano will have no part, casts Martiniano as an outsider in his own tribe; against this injustice, he resists.

Throughout the first half of the novel, he continually wars with Pueblo corruption: Waters describes him once as “Martiniano who would not cut the heels of his shoes and the seat out of his trousers; who would had refused to dance, had married a Ute girl still childless, and had driven his wagon across the plaza during the time of standing still” (Waters 159). The Pueblo government subjects Martiniano to almost every arbitrary law they have made, and still he does not surrender under the

pressure of the law's conformity. He is the outsider in his own community, and a self-thinking individual in a culture which makes decisions on a group basis; he wholly alienates himself through his actions to resist laws put in place by the pueblo council, and yet this only shows his strength as a moral resister against corruption.

However, with the help of his wife, Martiniano begins to change his style of resistance against the Pueblo Council. Another illogical and discriminating law set against Martiniano is the public whipping he must endure when retrieving his blanket back from the government, intended as a public humiliation in order to own his simple but meaningful possession which all Indians are title to. The blanket represents a kind of family adherence to Indian heritage, and so it would seem bizarre that Martiniano would even want his blanket back. But his wife, Flowers Playing, wants the "fine Navajo blanket to put on the floor at daytime, and over us at night" which they used to have, and so for her, he endures a whipping to retrieve it. Yet this punishment inflicted on Martiniano has different implications than the rest of his resistances have had; in the past, Martiniano has hard-headedly put his foot down to resist the corruption of the Pueblo. But now he willingly submits himself, a totally humbling action which contrasts his other actions and suggests that because Flowers Playing has asked him to do so, he becomes willing to submit to the Council. But his action certainly still contains an attitude of resistance, even if a different kind. While the Council intends his whipping as a public degradation, Martiniano's willingness to submit himself to the whipping undercuts the sting of its humiliation. Rather, Martiniano humbles himself, offering his own ego rather than letting the Council strip it away from him without consent; his actions here blend with those of Jesus, who defied the laws of the Pharisees without ego, saying "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Martiniano transforms from the egotist which boldly defied Pueblo laws; now he integrates into those laws—on his own terms—and submits himself anew as an example of moral resistance which does not boast for ego's sake.

But a change in ego hardly becomes the only change within Martiniano: Flowers Playing, who represents the deeper spirituality of their nature-connected culture which the Council lacks, helps Martiniano begin to see this division between the good, or spiritual, and the corrupt, or legal, of his own

culture. Because of her, he submits to the council's whipping, and because of her, he endures it: he admits that "the strange look of exalting triumph in his wife's eyes made the lashes easier to bear" (Waters 162). Flowers Playing represents a mysterious power which Martiniano has never experienced. He doesn't understand her ability to lessen the pain of the whipping, but he can appreciate it for its power. Likewise, while he doesn't *like* the mystery of her power, Martiniano *appreciates* the power Flowers Playing has in connection to nature; he describes her as "a strange woman with the same wilderness and gentleness which had first drawn his eyes to her as she danced—a woman no longer his wife, but as a deer clothed in human form and thus possessing the power to draw and control the great shapes that moved toward her" (Waters 198). She is impalpable, untouchable for her connection to the spiritual harmonies with nature. This powerful connection with nature and spirituality that she embodies happens to be the exact connection which the Council has begun to lack for their obsession with tradition and legality, and it therefore brings Martiniano to realize the embodiment of the good in Pueblo culture stands before him in the form of his own wife—interestingly enough, a Ute woman, and therefore someone who was also once an outsider to the Pueblo Culture.

With the help of Flowers Playing, Martiniano realizes the nature of the good side of Pueblo culture and begins to see himself not as a moral resister, but as a moral participant. She embodies exactly what the Council lacks that makes them so shallow and arbitrary: they lack their heritage, the connection with nature which guides man's spirituality. Flowers Playing fully embraces this, to the point where Waters begins to describe her as "Deer Mother" instead of "Flowers Playing" (Waters 213). And though he doesn't fully understand it, Martiniano accepts this power that she has become. This action would be praised by philosopher Susan Wolf, who would argue against how Martiniano has been acting so far in the novel. She would say that his focuses too narrowly on the morality in resisting corrupt, and that in order to be a truly decent person by any standard, he would have to widen his behavior to include activities which are not connected in any way to morality. She asserts that if a moral person devotes all his or her time to morality, "then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand, and...a life in which none of these possible aspects of character are developed

may seem to be a life strangely barren” (Wolf 421). The corruption within morality which Martiniano has consistently fought is not the only standard to action; if it was, Wolf would argue that Martiniano lives too narrow an existence. Rather, Martiniano accepts Flowers playing for her mystery and her talent in connecting with nature—for example, he accepts her talent for dancing in connection with nature’s spirit: she says, “I shall dance well. I feel inside the power and the grace already given me” (Waters 209), and Martiniano accepts this as reason to love and respect, if not fear, the power his wife possesses. With this acceptance of spiritual connection more powerful than the corrupt nature of the tradition-obsessed Council, of this, he begins to participate—on his own terms—in dances and races and other community events because he now understands them as not connected to the corrupt aspects of Pueblo Culture. He participates because he wants to do so, because he feels his heart leads him to do so, and would not participate if the Council demanded he do it if he did not feel motivation stirring inside himself. Through the lessons he learns in Flowers Playing, Martiniano “had gone back to the blanket” (Waters 256). He realizes that being a part of a culture is not about actions or reactions to the injustice within it, but rather about “clothing” one’s self in community and allowing the patience to listen for spirituality.

In this way, Martiniano assimilates himself back into the Pueblo culture which at first rejected him for his American schooling. He feels obligated to resist both the American and the Pueblo cultures through most of the novel because he feels a strong moral pull against the corruption present within both societies, but with the guidance of his wife, Flowers Playing, who represents the exact spiritual nature which the Pueblo has begun to lack, Martiniano’s motives change. He no longer fights as the moral resister, but rather becomes the moral participant, stirred to act within the Pueblo community when *nature*, rather than the council, tells him to do so. In this way he learns that the real corruption within a society is the lack of connection to heritage, in the Pueblo’s case a lack of spiritual connection with nature, and Martiniano realizes that if one can live and participate in the heart of a society’s pure heritage, one can live at peace even though the culture may not be morally perfect.

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