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How to cope with the fact that you are a bag of meat sitting on a rock in outer space and that someday you will die

We can not prove the past really happened. Everything can be proved with “Last Thursdayism”, the philosophical thought that the universe was created last Thursday, where everything that is here and that you remember was created by an omnipotent being, putting on the grand illusion of reality. We ,of course, can not think this way. Nothing would have a point, and everything would feel shallow. Our relationships with others have to mean something, or our lives will not mean anything. Relationships form a large part of our identities and without them, we would be lost just like if we were not sure if anything is real, because we would not understand the point of doing anything. Cormac McCarthy discusses similar topics in his novel All The Pretty Horses. The novel discusses ideas about loss and its connection with relationships and identity. The novel is set after WW2 in Southern Texas and rural Mexico. The novel follows teenager John Grady, running away to Mexico from his grandfather’s death and his family farm being sold. He meets many people and goes through many different experiences and ultimately matures and figures out how to deal with loss. In All The Pretty Horses, Cormac McCarthy explores the fragility of life and the importance of identity, answering the spiritual question of how we should remember the lost, ultimately explaining the power of legacy through one’s impact on another life.

McCarthy writes about the truly depressing theme of how easily our identity is lost ultimately concluding that we should live life by the moment to build relationships with others. After John Grady starts his journey to Mexico, McCarthy stops the narrative and describes an old horseskull. McCarthy chronicles,

“There was an old horseskull in the brush and he squatted and picked it up and turned it in his hands. Frail and brittle. Bleached paper white. He squatted in the long light holding it, the comicbook teeth loose in their sockets. The joint in the cranium like a ragged welding of the bone plates. The run of sand in the brainbox when he turned it.” (20)

Here McCarthy uses more metaphors and descriptive language to make a statement about the fragility of life. His language creates an almost sentimental atmosphere. McCarthy momentarily stops the progression of the story to describe an old horseskull. By doing this, he gives significance to the segment. McCarthy uses descriptive language describing “the joint in the cranium like a ragged welding of the bone plates.” The ragged welding symbolizes something that is sloppily put together. Ragged welds are not as strong and the joints are easier to pull apart. This is McCarthy’s way of saying that life and memories are fragile and are easily broken. McCarthy also uses descriptive language to describe the nature of the skull. He describes it is “Frail and brittle. Bleached paper white.” Because the skull has been left out in the sun, it loses its color and identity. This represents McCarthy’s recurring theme about how after you are lost, the memory of your identity will eventually be lost. Your identity is who you are, what your experiences are, everything you have worked for. Identity is power. It scares us that it will be lost when we are gone. Because McCarthy uses figurative language, he is able to emphasize his depressing theme about how people are easily lost. At the beginning of the book, John Grady’s father passes away and John Grady looks down on his father in his coffin. McCarthy describes, “Lastly he looked at the fade so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed moustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping” (3) McCarthy uses descriptive language and repetition to describe the fragility of life. McCarthy first describes the “yellowed moustache”. When objects yellow, that means that they are old and less pretty than they used to be. This follows McCarthy’s overarching theme in this book about loss. Everything gets older and decays which reveals the inescapable reality of life. This book talks about how to accept that inevitable loss. Even though death is inescapable, we can learn to accept and deal with it. McCarthy also uses repetition by saying “That was not sleeping” twice to emphasize the importance of the statement. This statement shows the permanent nature of death. When you sleep, you eventually wake up, but when you die, you stay that way. Loss is hard because it easily happens and it is permanent. McCarthy then describes the delicateness of life, describing the “paper thin” eyelids. Paper is flimsy and weak, so McCarthy uses it to draw a comparison to life. Just like paper, life can be easily torn and destroyed at any moment. McCarthy perhaps is suggesting that we should deal with our inevitable loss of identity by enjoying life by the day. The people that remember you are the people that you build relationships with. McCarthy might be suggesting that instead of worrying about our inevitable, permanent loss, we should spend it making relationships with others. In this quote, McCarthy draws metaphors to emphasize his theme about how easily people are lost and how we need and can deal with the inevitability of loss through building a legacy through the people we make relationships with.

McCarthy finally highlights the importance of remembering the past because one must stay grounded with the lost’s memories because significant people make significant impacts on one’s identity, coming to the conclusion that our legacy through others is most important. McCarthy describes John Grady’s family’s tragic history. McCarthy writes,

“his grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires.... Twelve years later when his wife was carried off in the influenza epidemic they still had no children. A year later he married his dead wife's older sister and a year after this the boy's mother was born and that was all the borning that there was. The Grady name was buried with that old man the day the norther blew the lawnchairs over the dead cemetery grass.” (25)

This quote deals with the lost and how memories are passed through children. In this scene, the narrator describes how all of John Grady’s family dies at an early age. His grandfather is the only survivor and only has one kid. Finally, McCarthy explains that “The Grady name was buried with the old man”. We live in a society where the man’s family name is passed down when one has kids. Because his grandfather has a daughter, the Grady name is not passed down. Family names are a powerful way to pass down memories because they are common to everyone in that family. When you have the same last name as your family, you feel a sense of unity. When that name is lost, all these people who died are not remembered as well and lost forever quicker. This quote further emphasizes McCarthy’s theme about loss. With this, McCarthy emphasizes the importance of passing information such as family names or larger ideas such as culture and tradition down to family to prevent people’s memories from being lost forever. Family is incredibly important to one’s identity. They are the people that taught you how to perceive the world and guided you to maturity. When you lose a connection to your family, such as through a last name, you lose an important part of your identity. With this quote, McCarthy reveals how powerful strong relationships are. Without them, everyone’s identities are lost. At the end of the novel, McCarthy eloquently describes John Grady honoring his deceased family caretaker. McCarthy chronicles,

“he stood hat in hand over the unmarked earth. This woman who had worked for his family fifty years. She had cared for his mother as a baby and she had worked for his family long before his mother was born and she had known and cared for the wild Grady boys...and he stood holding his hat and turned his wet face to the wind and for a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead.” (301).

McCarthy again describes life and one’s legacy in a beautiful quote. Here McCarthy describes his family’s caretaker. She worked incredibly hard for fifty years caring for the Grady family. Her memory gets almost forgotten by everybody except John Grady. McCarthy beautifully says the world “seemed to care nothing for the old or the young..Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names.” Even though she worked hard and struggled the world does not care by having no one remember her. The world naturally does not remember you when you die because people who remember you are eventually lost. McCarthy reminds us here that no matter how important you think you are, you’ll eventually be forgotten. But perhaps McCarthy also uses that to explain that we should focus on the present instead of worrying about how people remember you. We should worry about making our own and other people’s lives better rather than worrying about how we will be remembered. Here, Grady’s family’s caretaker is undoubtedly an important part of Grady’s identity. Grady sincerely mourns her loss because of her loss. Grady takes a moment here to really remember someone’s legacy. He has to “slow the world that was rushing away” in order to remember her. The world pushes her memory away, but John Grady pulls her memory back for a moment and keeps his identity grounded with others memories. Memories are how we can prevent lost, but that will not be forever. In this beautiful existentialist quote McCarthy reminds us to be humble because everything will eventually be lost.

McCarthy explains the complex ideas of the easiness and permanence of death. Instead of just staying on that, McCarthy offers a solution of building relationships. We should make relationships with others because you keep part of their identity as your identity or if you’re lost first, your legacy is carried on through another’s identity. Life is fragile, so the world pulls the lost away from us and we should try to keep the past even for a moment to keep part of our identities. McCarthy suggests our true worth in life is how we impact others. If we spend our existence worrying about ourselves, who will carry our memory and identity? Our existence is so short and fragile, so maybe we should find comfort in positively shaping other’s identities and hold each other tight before everything fades.