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Seeking Forgiveness in a Conflicted World

In the novels *Cal* and *Mother to Mother* authors Bernard MacLaverty and Sindiwe Magona each delve into the intricate aspects of societal conflict and the effects violence has on the individuals involved. While these two novels address completely different societal issues, by closely examining the ways in which the authors portray these characters, readers can draw connections between conflicts in literature and in the world, while also fostering a deeper understanding of these novels as a whole. The novel *Cal* written in 1983 takes place during the conflict in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles. MacLaverty follows eighteen-year-old Cal and centralizes on his involvement in a murder authorized by the IRA. Although he was not the one to commit the murder, his association as the driver burdens him with immense guilt and he earnestly seeks redemption. In *Mother to Mother*, the author depicts the true story of Amy Biehl's murder in Cape Town, South Africa during the events of apartheid. The narrative is in the form of a letter to the victim's mother told by the mother of Mxolisi—the man responsible for Amy Biehl's death. The novel serves as a nuanced plea for understanding and offers profound insights into the effects of colonialism and apartheid on South African families. While some might not see a rooted connection between these two novels, it is evident that Bernard MacLaverty and Sindiwe Magona both allegorize and problematize their characters Cal and Mxolisi as Christ-like figures, which in turn reveals the societal tendency to seek scapegoats during conflicts, the profound impact of their environments on their actions, and the overarching themes of forgiveness and redemption in the face of violence.

Amid the conflict in Northern Ireland Cal believes he needs to become the scapegoat or in other words, the sacrificial victim to atone for his sins. In the article, “Blood, Shit, and Tears,” Peter Mahon introduces the concept of “sacrificial reading” in relation to *Cal*. He defines this process by stating, “it seeks to divert violence away from the community onto someone or something else” (Mahon 73). No matter the conflict, there is always blame, and with it comes the burdens of guilt. Interestingly for Cal, instead of someone blaming him, he becomes his own worst enemy and desires to take on the role of the sacrificial figure himself. However, for Mxolisi in *Mother to Mother*, he does not possess this same desire to become a sacrifice but is instead molded into the role by his environment. Cal’s role as the scapegoat stems from his lack of belonging in his community and his desire to remain on the outskirts. In certain aspects, his absence of aggression paints him as an ideal Christ-like figure, resonating with the renowned peaceful nature and teachings of Jesus, which advocate nonviolence and the avoidance of conflict. However, as his guilt deepens and he forms a relationship with Marcella, Robert Morton’s wife, his intense fixations and cravings for her begin to complicate and problematize the Christ-like allegory. Cal harbors impure thoughts and succumbs to temptation that goes against Jesus’ teachings, showcasing that he as a Christ figure is flawed and corrupted by a sinful nature. Despite this fact, Cal’s will to become a sacrificial figure is prominent in several moments of the text, specifically when the crucifixion painting is mentioned. MacLavery writes, “The weight of the Christ figure bent the cross down like a bow; the hands were cupped to heaven like nailed starfish; the body with its taunt ribcage was pulled to the shape of an egg timer by the weight of the lower body” (MacLavery 165). By using a simile to describe that the figure “bent the cross down like a bow,” the author not only depicts the weaponization of Christianity in the war, but also Cal’s fear of hurting Marcella. The word “starfish” is purposely

used to describe his hands because their regenerative quality signifies resurrection. MacLavery also describes Christ in the shape of an “egg timer” which could be representative of Cal’s borrowed time with Marcella, and the fact that he is living on a timer that could go off at any moment when the truth is revealed. In the article, “Redemptive Suffering” Lanta Davis notes that “Cal is surrounded by images and references to the crucifixion, and is even gradually transformed into a kind of crucifixion image himself” (Davis 83). This consistent insertion of Christ visuals in *Cal* further articulates the desire for a sacrifice in times of conflict, and through this abundance, Cal feels as though being turned in is his only path to freedom.

Although Mahon explores the concept of “sacrificial reading” within the context of *Cal* in the novel *Mother to Mother*, Mxolisi similarly emerges as a scapegoat figure in his society. When Mandisa finally sees her son after the incident Mxolisi pleads with her saying, “Believe me, I was just one of a hundred people who threw stones at her car...many people stabbed her...I was not the only one there” (Magona 195-197). Mxolisi chooses not to share the names of the others who were also involved, but he faces isolation from his community when those who are also responsible go free and point the finger solely at him. Like Cal, several textual clues lead readers to acknowledge his Christ-like similarities, even if it may appear unconventional. Mxolisi as a Christ figure is problematized and perhaps clashes with expectations as to how a Christ figure should act because he engages in this act of murder out of his own free will. At the beginning of the novel Mandisa questions, “For the years he has lived, hasn’t he learnt anything at all? Did he not know they would surely crucify him for killing a white person?” (Magona 3). The word “crucify” directly signifies Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross and the responsibility that Mxolisi now has to face for his crime. In the article, “History and Intertextuality” Pearl Amelia McHaney acknowledges his sacrifice stating, “Mxolisi, of a virgin birth, named for St. Michael,

who is a caretaker of his sister, a leader of the youth, speaking softly and wisely, is sacrificed in the struggle against apartheid” (McHaney 175-176). Mxolisi was born when Mandisa was a virgin symbolizing the Virgin Mary and was named Mxolisi, meaning “He, who would bring peace” (Magona 136). Although his name contradicts expectations, Magona demonstrates the reality that even those who are typically nonviolent, during times of conflict may find themselves succumbing to bottled-up anger, unwillingly allowing it to seize control of their actions. As a result, Magona’s writing produces a modern, conflicted depiction of a Christ-like figure who is forced to become the scapegoat in a conflict that extends beyond initial interpretations.

MacLavery and Magona also strategically allegorize their characters, Cal and Mxolisi, as Christ-like figures to emphasize the profound impact of their surroundings on their actions. This artistic choice suggests that when confronted with conflicts, even individuals who initially embody the goodness and purity reminiscent of Christ may, over time, find themselves falling into the hands of violence and sin. When Cal tells Skeffington and Crilly he does not want to assist them in Robert Morton’s murder, Skeffington manipulates Cal by stating, ““But it has to be done—by somebody. Because we have committed ourselves, Cahal, it is our responsibility. We have to make the sacrifices”” (MacLavery 19). Skeffington believes that these acts of violence are necessary for a righteous cause, and he uses the word “sacrifices” as though this violence is a noble act rather than a crime. By doing this, he is attempting to rationalize their actions, but more so is manipulating and pulling Cal into a war he does not want to fight. This is an entirely different notion of sacrifice than what Cal experiences at the end of the book when he is turned in. In this case, the sacrifice is very contradictory to Christ’s behavior of peace, and therefore Cal does not want to be involved. Caught in the web of Skeffington’s manipulation, Cal agrees to be the driver causing him to lose himself to the clutches of sin. While Cal may not be directly

responsible for the murder, the weight of his immense guilt creates an impression that it is entirely his responsibility. MacLaverty alludes to an awareness of Cal's innocence when he and Marcella eat veal. Mahon in "Blood, Shit, and Tears" notes this saying, "Marcella remains somewhat aware of the calf's innocence (even if she does not want to completely acknowledge it; nor does it stop her from enjoying the benefits and fruits of the violence done to the calf)" (Mahon 92). The calf could not be accused of having done anything to deserve death, similar to how Cal does not necessarily need to call himself a murderer when he was not the one to pull the trigger. In the bible, a calf was seen as an offering, and Cal embodies this role with his desperate need to be turned in. Just as Magona highlights that Mxolisi's name signifies peacemaker, Cal's name is just one letter away from the word "calf" which further emphasizes the Christ-like allegory and his innocence, even though he was persuaded to be Crilly and Skeffington's abettor in a violent crime.

Mxolisi in *Mother to Mother* was born into a world of violence. From a very young age, Mxolisi suffered from the oppression that was instituted during apartheid. His childhood innocence was ripped from him at the age of four when he witnessed police officers kill two of his friends in front of him. This trauma immediately began to shape his life, and he grew up faster than any child should have. Magona writes, "Mxolisi, now four years old, could tell the difference between the *bang!* Of a gun firing and the *gooph!* of a burning skull cracking" (Magona 146). Onomatopoeia is woven into her writing, not to evoke imagery, but to capture the childlike perspective of perceiving the world in a very dark manner. Children's stories often rely on sounds and onomatopoeia, so this sharp juxtaposition spotlights the youthfulness of Mxolisi when he was first exposed to violence. At the end of the novel when Mandisa describes the day Amy Biehl was murdered she states, "And the song in my son's ears. A song he had heard since

he could walk. Even before he could walk. Song of hate, of despair, of rage. Song of impotent loathing” (Magona 209). The repetition of “song” institutes the idea that these emotions are not merely fleeting feelings, but instead, Mxolisi has been carrying them since childhood. Mxolisi is depicted as a Christ-like figure not to diminish his responsibility for the crime, but instead to suggest the transformative impact of one's environment. The rage-fueled song that is stitched to Mxolisi's life compels him to respond with more violence because it is the only approach he has come to know.

Lastly, the two novels *Cal* and *Mother to Mother* depict Christ-like allegories in their characters to call attention to the themes of forgiveness and redemption in the face of violence. In the article “Redemptive Suffering” Davis argues that for Cal, “His participation in the murder, for instance, is not simply wrong, but a ‘sin.’ He believes he must practice the Catholic cure for sin—penance—to atone for it” (Davis 86). This confession or penance is present at the end of the novel when the police come to arrest him. MacLaverty writes, “The next morning, Christmas Eve, almost as if he expected it, the police arrived to arrest him and he stood in a dead man's Y-fronts listening to the charge, grateful that at last someone was going to beat him to an inch of his life” (MacLaverty 166). This last line of the novel ends the narrative abruptly and discloses the fact that Cal's desire for atonement is far greater than the fear of being imprisoned. The author also notes that he is still wearing Robert Morton's clothes that Marcella gave him, spotlighting the physicality of his guilt. Not only is there a key element of redemption and sacrifice in this line, but MacLaverty also inserts the significant detail that his arrest took place on Christmas Eve. Here, instead of the day being representative of the birth of Christ, this scene holds more similarity to Good Friday when Jesus was sacrificed on the cross.

In *Mother to Mother*, Mxolisi's mother Mandisa is writing to the mother of Amy Biehl in the hope that she will forgive him and understand the deeper roots of why this tragedy occurred. Although McHaney is comparing *Mother to Mother* with a different novel than Cal she writes in her essay that, "In both novels, the actions of these young men, right or wrong, are substantive, but no more so than the forgiveness that must be worked out by their communities" (McHaney 176). This statement is equally representative of *Cal* and *Mother to Mother* because both characters are condemned with guilt and earnestly seek redemption. They are driven to be saved from their sins even though in Mxolisi's case it is his mother that asks this for him. In the beginning, she writes, "God, please forgive my son. Forgive him this terrible, terrible sin" (Magona 4). This tie to God immediately sets up the novel to have a close relationship with religion and forgiveness. Not only is she asking God for forgiveness in this line, but she is also indirectly asking forgiveness from Amy Biehl's mother. Through the eyes of Mxolisi's mother, the author engages in the possibility of ending the cycle of conflict by embracing empathy and seeking understanding, even in an extremely difficult situation.

Overall, the novels *Cal* and *Mother to Mother* by Bernard MacLaverty and Sindiwe Magona each deliberately allegorize and problematize their characters Cal and Mxolisi as Christ figures to highlight the effects times of intense conflict may have on a person. Although one novel is set in the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the other is in the context of apartheid South Africa, symbolisms of Christ are woven into the narratives in order to expose the societal desire to seek scapegoats, the impact of the environment on one's actions, and the desire for forgiveness and redemption amidst violence. By closely examining Cal and Mxolisi's stories side by side, readers can begin to gain a richer understanding of the author's intentions behind the Christ allegory and why the symbolism is so closely tied to the intricacies of each conflict.

Works Cited

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