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ENGL 146

Addiction and Capitalism in *The Starpit*

In Samuel Delaney's science fiction novella, *The Starpit*, addiction is a prevalent theme that affects multiple characters throughout the work. Delaney uses the concept of addiction to critique a capitalist society. In the novel, addiction serves as a coping mechanism for the trauma that the characters experience as a result of unfettered capitalism having eroded any sort of social safety net in the future.

John Hopkins defines substance-use disorder as "a pattern of using a substance (drug) that causes significant problems or distress". At the start of the novel, Vyme's alcoholism is problematic in both his work and family life. He is perpetually remorseful of his actions, yet chooses to drink regardless. He feels such discomfort in his environment that he needs to drink to numb himself despite the negative repercussions that it might have on him.

The fact that Vyme's alcoholism serves as a coping mechanism, is demonstrated early in the novel by his experience almost getting hit by an enormous keeler drive piloted by an apathetic golden. The scene serves as a microcosm for the whole society, where the rich (and goldens) can hurt others with zero consequences and there is absolutely nothing that Vyme can do about it. Delaney describes Vyme clutching the steering mechanism after the incident, writing that, "it got pressed into the ham of my thumb so you could make it out for an hour, I was squeezing the control rod that tight" (Delaney 396). Immediately following the incident, Vyme starts drinking. Delaney writes "When he set me down, I went straight to the bar to cool off" (Delaney 396). The incident with the golden and Vyme's response to start drinking demonstrates

how alcohol is used as a coping mechanism for the immense stress and traumatic experiences of those trapped in this capitalist dystopia.

Later, we get more insight into the childhood trauma that Vyme experienced, and how this trauma is a product of the capitalist society where the novel is set. Vyme says, “I remember when I was about six, right after the last of my parents was killed, and I was hiding out with a bunch of other lice in a broke-open packing crate in an abandoned freight yard” (Delaney 400). This short offhand statement from Vyme, reveals a ton about his traumatic upbringing and the society that he is a part of. He had to process the trauma of his parents’ death at only six years old, and then became one of many homeless children orphaned by one of numerous wars fought over control of valuable resources. Furthermore, describing himself and other orphaned children as lice is extremely cruel and dehumanizing as he compares them to a parasite that serves no ecological purpose and is despised by humanity. Of course, this doesn’t align with Vyme’s actual values through demonstrated action, as throughout the novel he goes out of his way several times to help people that society has cast aside, suggesting that deep down despite his trauma he still holds onto some basic compassion for humanity. Thus, the term “lice” in this context is likely a bit of dark humor from Vyme regarding the way his society values individuals that are not actively providing capitalistic value.

The death of Vyme’s parents serves as another traumatic experience in his life that is ultimately a product of capitalism. In the prior quotation, Vyme skims past his parents’ death. However, Vyme is an unreliable narrator, and the fact that he moves on from his parents’ death so quickly means that it is actually emotionally uncomfortable for him. At the end of the novel, when Vyme is drunk and rambling to a stranger, he brings back up the topic of his parents, saying “my mother, see, she always worried about me, getting sick and things. I got sick a lot

when I was a little kid. She made me mad! - my ma. She was all over me all the time. – She made me mad!” (Delaney 438). Once again, Vyme is clearly an unreliable narrator. While he is seemingly angry with his mother, this is likely just another coping mechanism for him to deal with the trauma of losing her at such a young age. Ultimately, Vyme himself recognizes that his traumatic childhood formed who he is today, saying “my childhood left me a lot younger than at forty-two than I should be” (Delaney 402).

Vyme is also traumatized by the death of his eldest son Antoni, which is again a direct result of the inhumane capitalist system that dominates the future. Vyme says “some of the group got out alive. Antoni and his ma didn't. I mean there wasn't even any water left on the planet” (Delaney 398). This quote once again shows that lives are essentially meaningless outside of their capitalistic value in the future, in this case the planet is only important for its water and what happens to the people that live on the planet after the water is gone is not considered pertinent.

At the end of the novel, Vyme’s interaction with Androcles affirm that he is in fact traumatized by the death of Antoni. During the conversation he thinks to himself “my oldest kid is dead. I know it because I have all sorts of official papers saying so. But sometimes it's hard to remember.” and “god, I want to stop thinking about Antoni!” (Delaney 432). After years of sobriety, Vyme relapses right after his conversation with Androcles. Not only does Androcles remind Vyme of his dead son Antoni, but he symbolizes how goldens are systemically traumatized by society as well due to capitalist incentives, which Vyme can relate to.

Ultimately, alcoholism only exacerbates the feelings of anger and sadness that Vyme compel Vyme to drink in the first place. Vyme recognizes the destructive nature of his alcoholism after destroying the ecologarium, as he says “[I] fled them - guilty and embarrassed over something I couldn't tame” (Delaney 405). We will never know if Vyme will stop drinking

entirely or start a family with Peloski, but the themes of growth throughout the novel make me optimistic for him.

Alegra is another character that abuses substances to cope with reality. Whereas Vyme is an on-and-off binge drinker, Alegra is fully dependent on an unnamed narcotic drug, and has been since childbirth. What's infuriating is that she could have been easily cured of her addiction, if not for her valuable abilities as a "highly projective telepath", an effect of her condition. Society makes the decision for her to remain an addict, which again demonstrates how this society will prioritize capitalistic value, even to the extent of drugging a newborn baby. Delaney writes that "ordinarily a couple of complete transfusions at birth would have gotten the newborn child straight. But Alegra was also a highly projective telepath. She projected the horrors of birth, the glories of her infantile hallucinated world on befuddled doctors; she was given her drug. Without too much difficulty she managed to be given her drug every day since." (Delaney 405).

The imagery that Allegra conjures also serves as a coping mechanism for the people that she influences telepathically, especially Ratlit. In a dystopic society, it makes sense that someone with Alegra's abilities would be extremely valuable, which is why she is put to work as a therapist at only eight years old.

Her death is symbolic of the way society dehumanizes individuals that are no longer producing value. Delaney writes "her translucency of her pigment-less skin under how-many-days of dirt made my flesh crawl. Her face drew in around her lips like the flesh about a scar." (Delaney 424). This horrific description is representative of the way that society strips people of human dignity after they are no longer valuable to the capitalist system.

In conclusion, addiction and capitalism are intertwining themes in "The Star Pit" by Samuel Delany. Addiction serves as a coping mechanism for trauma which is produced by a society that prioritizes profits over people. Delaney ultimately advocates for love and the intrinsic value of our shared humanity.