

Ana Gonzalez

Dr. Romero

ENGL 4866

8 December 2020

Recuperation and the Classical Realist Novel

In Philip Red Eagle's novella *Red Earth*, protagonist Raymond Crow-Belt embarks on a journey across time to find solace after the Vietnam War. The story aligns with various conventions of the classical realist novel form. However, for all the connections drawn to the genre, *Red Earth* also deviates from this form of literature. Red Eagle's work neither perfectly fits nor entirely dismisses this mode of writing. Instead, *Red Earth* experiments with elements of the classical realist novel to effectively convey a narrative about recovery and understanding.

Firstly, the novella follows certain ideas found with classical realism. Literary critic Catherine Belsey describes this form using three key characteristics, the first of which is illusionism. While the reader believes to have autonomy while reading a classical realist novel, the author remains in the background (Belsey 63), an authoritative figure who weaves the fiction that the reader consumes. This idea posits that these authors push ideologies about the world onto readers through their writing. The illusion in question is that of the public's ability to choose which beliefs to accept and which to refute. Red Eagle details horrific events within his novella, from the suicide of a fellow soldier (Red Eagle 27) to the murder of his lover (41), gruesome occurrences that paint the Vietnam war in a negative light. There is no glorification of battle in this novella. Instead, readers are presented with a dire depiction of the war, compelling those reading to reflect on themselves and their understanding of reality. Red Eagle creates a hideous

illustration to acknowledge the suffering of veterans and cause readers to consider the darker side of this historical period.

Next, *Red Earth* employs a hierarchy of voices, one of Belsey's other characteristics of classical realism. She describes the term as a privileged voice that subordinates all other voices found within the piece at issue (Belsey 65), a prioritization that Red Eagle utilizes to frame his novella. The majority of the story focuses on Raymond, an Indigenous man who suffers through the war and goes about seeking peace by relying on cultural practices. While readers do also view the story through the eyes of a Vietnamese soldier (Red Eagle 70-2) and also through those of a female Native (73-6), nowhere do we see a white character's perspective. The author's choice to unravel his story through the eyes of minorities communicates a viewpoint rarely seen in mainstream literature. The people of color who served in the Vietnam War perceived the bloodshed in different ways than their white counterparts and Red Eagle utilizes the perspective of a Native protagonist to champion a diversification of the Vietnam experience. This message is further established in the novella's preface. The author dedicates his work to "all those Human Beings who served" (Red Eagle 5), suggesting that everyone involved in the war, from all backgrounds and allegiances, are worthy of being heard and, in turn, deserving of alleviation. The hierarchy of voices in the novella serves to support specific experiences over others, complicating the reader's views on the war and its harmful effects on its survivors.

Lastly, *Red Earth* correlates with the classical realist novel form in its inclusion of death. According to German philosopher Walter Benjamin, readers of these books look to characters for a particular morbid connection. Namely, Benjamin states that the reader must know that they will share a character's experience of death (101), which, consequentially, makes the reader feel more alive. Many of the recollections depicted in *Red Earth* are traumatic and full of carnage. The

inclusion of these scenes causes those reading to be appreciative of their respective situations in life, which would, theoretically, be much better than the instances found in Red Eagle's story. Readers are drawn to illustrations of death in classical realist novels (Benjamin 101), a grotesque fascination which shapes perspectives on the self and of the world. Those who read *Red Earth*, according to classical realism, gravitate towards the macabre images of the Vietnam War for reassurance of their own beating hearts.

Red Eagle's work exercises elements of the classical realist novel form, but also challenges some of its other attributes. First, *Red Earth* does not entirely align with the concept of closure, the third and last of Belsey's aforementioned characteristics. This idea is described as the dissolution of enigma and the reinstatement of order (Belsey 64-5), the point in which all questions are answered and harmony. Closure is a clean-cut resolution that readers of classical realist novels expect to encounter by the time they've finished a book. Red Eagle's novella, however, does not provide a finale which satisfies all of his readers. His story concludes with the Raymond reuniting with Annabelle (Red Eagle 76-7), with the latter recognizing the protagonist and realizing that he has traveled through time. The author's concept of chronological navigation is never fully explained to the reader. There is no mention of scientific parameters nor is a theory provided for readers to examine. Instead, Raymond is somehow saved by his grandfather during the war (Red Eagle 33) and commences his own travels across time through the performance of Native rituals (51-2), moments which are not elaborated upon for a non-Indigenous readership. Instead, readers are left with the idea that Raymond is able to time travel, alter aspects of his traumatic past, and find old friends in the present. There is a finality to *Red Earth* in that the novella does end on page 77 (Benjamin 100), but this ending does not afford non-Native readers an intelligible explanation of Raymond's ability. The author positions those without Indigenous

beliefs at the mercy of the very narrative he weaves, one that refuses to clarify the mechanics of time travel or the Indigenous practices rooted in the phenomenon. The story ends without answering any questions on Native beliefs. Red Eagle instead chooses to focus on creating a story of healing while declining to derail his narrative for the sake of clarity.

Next, the way in which Red Eagle unravels his novella is unlike the constructions found in the classical realist novel form. Coherence is an important concept championed by this mode of writing, which is tied to closure as well as to story direction and characters. In his article critiquing classical realist novels and their degree of storytelling, Benjamin focuses on the lack of freedom such novelists have when creating their fiction. Benjamin claims, “(a)ll great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rung of their experience as on a ladder” (102), which criticizes the classical realist novel form for restraining an author’s ability to tell stories as they so choose. Red Eagle defies these restraints in *Red Earth* through the usage of time travel. Raymond switches from being in the middle of the Vietnam War to the present throughout the novella, shifts which refute the constraints of chronological coherence that classical realist novelists commonly adhere to. Just like the rungs of Benjamin’s ladder, Raymond moves seamlessly across time to fix an incident of the past so as to find peace in the present day.

Finally, throughout his travels, the protagonist’s character undergoes change, which challenges the ideas of character consistency in the classical realist novel genre. Belsey states that representations of the world in these stories are explained through consistent subjects (62), which help both authors and readers of this form create meaning and an understanding of the text at hand. Raymond, however, does not remain the same throughout his journey in *Red Earth*. When he travels to the past, he assumes the identity of soldier Gary Ghost Bear (Red Eagle 61), a

name which he uses to find his past lover and to, consequentially, bring about his own consolation. Belsey writes that inconsistency of character is viewed as a weakness in classical realist novels (67), but Red Eagle builds his protagonist via the alteration of identity. Through the usage of the Ghost Bear's name, Raymond is able to his knowledge of his past to begin the healing process. The fake name, therefore, becomes an extension of the protagonist's identity, embodying his determination to alter the death of his lover before it occurs and to begin his road to recovery. Red Eagle's decision to bestow fluidity upon Raymond's character allows *Red Earth* to break out of the restraints found in classical realist novels and helps the author appeal to his readership in ways he would, theoretically, not have been able to do otherwise.

. By choosing which elements of the classical realist novel form to integrate into his novella, Red Eagle creates a story that reveals truths about the Vietnam War while also calling for the healing of all of its victims.

Works Cited

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