



## FIGHTING AGAINST MACHINE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF EDWARD ABBEY'S *THE BRAVE COWBOY*

**K. Vaideki**

Ph. D Research Scholar Department of English Annamalai University

**Dr. SP. Shanthi\***

Assistant Professor Department of English Annamalai University \*Corresponding Author

**ABSTRACT** This paper attempts to demonstrate why and how some of the characters in Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* confront their rival, the machine. It also traces different aspects of nature that appear in the novel. The cultures, wilderness, and rivers all reinforce the experience of nature in their special form. And endangered by the advancing machine, they are worth defending. Yet, on another level these components of nature may also portray the conceptions of environmentalism, rebellion, anarchism, and freedom, notions that are accentuated by the characters in the novel. Abbey's outrage towards the power of modern society is presented in novel will deal with how the novel present different parts of the machine. The machine is signified in diverse ways in the novel, *The Brave Cowboy*.

**KEYWORDS :** Nature, Environmentalism, Wilderness, Machine

Edward Abbey is a writer that carves himself in the realm of the literature of the American West. He is one of America's most influential environmentalists and benefactors of his nation's wilderness. Abbey writes during the blooming of modern environmentalism and the pinnacle of the counter-culture movement. He is someone that goes through a constant oscillation between society and solitude: manifesting a main conflict in American culture: the pressure between civilization and wilderness. Abbey's language and style challenges the reader. In his writings, Abbey has a way of being crusty, quick, and sharp and to the point in one moment, only to shift to expressive elaborations and alliterations in the next. His literary style of going straight to the point is and is quite unique compared to other contemporary writers.

Abbey's main concern is for the human nature which he saw is increasingly endangering the land thereby undermining its own existence. To him it is man and his culture that is in the greatest jeopardy, not the environment, and he is convinced that the planet would heal itself through fire, flood and volcanism as it always had. This concept separates Abbey from many contemporary environmentalists who proclaim that their aim is to save the planet. Abbey, however, regarded all equal whether animate or inanimate, humans included.

Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* (1956) is set in 1949. This novel recounts the tale of Jack Burns, an anachronistic, twenty-nine years old cowboy who has "fallen to herding sheep" (26). The story opens with the cowboy sitting on his heels in the light of the dawn, drawing faint flames through a few twigs and dry grass. The opening with the hero and his horse alone in the open desert is a typical opening of a Western movie. Having heard that his friend Paul Bondi waits in Duke City jail to be transported to a two year imprisonment for draft resistance, Burns sets off to free his friend. In order to aid Bondi, the brave cowboy picks a brawl in a bar, gets arrested and ends up in the same cell as his friend. Bringing with him hacksaw-blades hidden in his boots, Burns reveals his plan: "The idea now is to break out before they break you" (100). Failing his attempt to persuade Bondi to escape with him, Burns breaks out of jail only to end up on the run tailed by the sheriff's office, an Air Force helicopter, and an Indian tracker. After a rousing chase, Burns and his stubborn mare Whisky manage to escape to a forest plateau south of Duke City. Their luck ends abruptly when, crossing the highway in the rainy night, they are struck by tractor-trailer carrying bathroom fixtures. *The Brave Cowboy* starts out as a typical Western story with an independent hero, followed by the problem he has to overcome, and how he goes about finding a solution. The end, however, challenges the common Western as the hero's final experience is a tragic one.

*The Brave Cowboy* is the novel that gave Abbey the confidence he needed to continue as a writer. He has thought about the book some years back, but has had difficulties with its credibility. "How can be (Burns) hope to persuade Bondi to give up his martyrdom in prison for the ridiculous life of the outlaw?" Abbey writes in his *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-89*, "Yet that is exactly what he proposes... Impossible. Not credible" (120). The discussion between Bondi and Burns on whether Bondi

should escape or not, is of considerable length in the novel.

In addition to its early anarchist-flavoured criticism of the American society, *The Brave Cowboy* also pays tribute to individualism and environmental ideas. In the novel the neon wilderness of the urban social institutions is seen in opposition to the open desert landscape and to the individual's rights. Burns demands and represents individual freedom. And in the novel, there are two means of resistance to the authorities. The passive is represented by the egocentric Bondi who chooses to subjugate the government by imposing a two year sentence on himself instead of challenging them. "But good lord, Jack - its two years, not a lifetime... But surely two years in prison is better than a whole lifetime as a haunted man. 'Not for me,' Burns said" (99). The other means, represented by Burns, is the active resistance. Believing in his abilities as an individual, Burns states, "Nothing can hurt me; I'm like water: boil me away and I come back in the next thunderhead" (27). He subverts and confronts the establishment by refusing to conform to their laws which restrict the freedom of individuals. It is only possible to maintain a sensible culture by means of a sane human nature.

And in novels such as *The Brave Cowboy*, society is the usurper. In *The Brave Cowboy*, the wilderness functions as a complement and mirrors the world of Burns. Through Burns we learn how strong and important the bond is between man and wilderness. He has become attached to nature by learning to read and respect its laws. While imprisoned, he felt like a desolate floundering through a mechanical world he cannot comprehend. After his escape to the mountains around Duke City, his instincts and senses are regained, and his mentality restored. Now "Burns felt eager, hungry, and intensely aware of every shade, sound, smell and movement in his environment... For the first time in nearly two days and nights he felt himself to be a whole and living creature" (206). Burns' personality changes once he is back in his environment. He feels relieved being free again, and the fact that he is "eager," "hungry," and "aware," indicates that his spark of life is rekindled.

Burns' pleasant experience in the desert changes dramatically once he is aware that he is being tracked down by the authorities. At the opening of the novel, Burns is unwinding in an area with rolling mesas, arroyos and tumbleweed. The landscape is pictured as open, friendly, and familiar to him. However, being pursued, Burns' suffocating experience in the jail cell follows him to the mountains. There it, as Ann Ronald mentions in *The New West of Edward Abbey*, "recurs later to diminish (Burns') relative freedom" (21). When Burns flees from the dusty bars and dirty walls of the prison cell into the New Mexican desert, it is only to find similar barriers in the wilderness. The first chapter of *The Brave Cowboy* of his escape begins:

The great cliffs leaned up against the flowing sky, falling through space as the earth revolved... But the light had no power to soften the ragged edges and rough spelled planes of the granite; in that clear air each angle and crack cast a shadow as harsh, clean, sharp, real, as the rock itself... the cliffs held the illusion of a terrible violence suddenly arrested, paralyzed in time, latent with power. (200)

In this passage the slick-rock resembles the slick walls from the prison

cell. The high granite walls cause a sense of illusion as they are falling through space, making Burns dizzy and insecure. The sunlight, which also is blocked from his cell, has on power to light up the new barrier. The open wilderness, as it is portrayed in the three novels, invites a life in freedom and peace from the constructs of culture. It is important to be able to see the wilderness without the screen of human culture. This means that we should free ourselves of cultural and human restraints in order to understand and fully appreciate its value. The notion of wilderness as a quiet and sacred place is described in *The Brave Cowboy* where Sheriff Johnson, on the hunt for Burns, enters a narrow canyon. He felt like an intruder, "...as conspicuous and self-conscious as a tourist tramping into a silent cathedral" (232).

Water is an important symbol in Abbey's novels. Its quality of metamorphosis enables it to adjust to the environment. This transforming ability gives water its strongest character, namely that it is difficult to control and handle, and once stopped, it will always seek another way out. In *The Brave Cowboy*, water is used to illustrate the spirit of resistance against the establishment. Anarchist Burns, in convincing Jerry of his invulnerability, expresses this notion in *The Brave Cowboy* when he says: "Nothing can hurt me; I'm like water: boil me away and I come back in the next thunderhead" (26-7). As the pressure in a boiling pot increases when the lid is on, the quote suggests that any authoritarian suppression will only make people's resistance more tenacious.

In *The Brave Cowboy*, the dinosaur image is absent. Yet, the formidable machine is still present. This time it is portrayed by driver Hinton's huge rumbling truck carrying technological devices into the Southwest. Together with the other similar diesel monsters in the novel, the truck symbolises all the features the driver defies. Hinton desires peace, accord, order, and the reassurance of human voices but discovers it nowhere. And in the novel the machine, with its forty tons of iron, glass, steel, rubber, oil, a cargo of metal is contradicted with the simple thing of flesh that drove and is driven by it. The difference between them results in the dynamic machine overwhelming the sick, weak and gloomy trucker attempting to drive it. At the end, Hinton, conscious of something, or somebody, in the middle of the road, fought with the machine for a thousand feet before he could bring it to a full-stop. The thought of machines dominating humans, is not taken intensely by majority of people in the 1950s. The novel articulates ideas that are very strange for that era. The criticism of the industrial and commercialized society is not casual or flip, it is gut level.

By now, the whole society has become more dependent on machines, and their technological potential. In these novels, people have reached a stage where their actions are collared by the vigilant presence of machines. As the authorities begin overseeing everyone's move with the aid of computers, the liberation of the individual is endangered. For instance, the Gang are compelled to pay in cash when they want to buy device, since credit cards could leave a documented trail of their activities. Unfortunately, there are only a few who realize that they are being run "not by a human... but by a machine driving a human" (91). This realization has various effects on people. Seldom is troubled by nightmares.

*The Brave Cowboy* recounts the worries about the cities expanding into their surrounding regions. This anxiety is conveyed through Burns who makes his way to Duke City, the fictitious name of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Burns' first rendezvous with civilization is the barbed-wire fence that runs in an unbroken thin stiff-line of geometric accuracy scored with weird, mechanical exactitude over the top of the rotating earth. The barbed-wire with its cold and hard things stands in contrast to the broken lava rock terrain of the scattered patches of rabbit brush and tumbleweed of the wilderness. Burns is stunned to see nothing but broken, rubbish, and defective things while riding towards the suburbs of the metropolis, as he could not waste things in such a way. As mounted on his horse Whisky, he goes by a "cardboard house trailer resting on two flat tires, a brush corral, and a flatbed truck with dismantled engine, a water tank and its windmill with motionless vanes, a great glittering heap of tin-cans; no men or sheep visible" (13). In *The Brave Cowboy*, questions are raised regarding the clash between the rights of the individual and the modern urbanized social institutions. In this novel there is no space for those who do not want to submit themselves to the restrictive laws of the establishment. Burns is detained for itinerancy and for not abiding to the rules and regulations of this society. *The Brave Cowboy* is written during the Cold-War when America's fear of communism is at its pinnacle. Anyone who did not

submit to American law and order is at once suspected of being an anarchist against all government and worse than Communists.

In *The Brave Cowboy*, Burns is the smart, tough western hero who lets himself get jailed in order to save a friend, although ends up being chased like a coyote by an anarchist-fearing police corps. At the same time he is the noble knight-errant who bakes bread and offers to do the dishes. Throughout the novel, Burns remains a modest but determined individual who refuses to submit to the authorities and their laws and regulations. Letting the brave cowboy stand firm proposes that the ideas he holds should do the same. And to show how dynamic and immortal these are, Abbey ends his last novel with a scene of Burns which brings us back to the spirit in *The Brave Cowboy*, instead of closing with the Western cliché of a cowboy riding into the sunset, we meet the cowboy in the early morning, ready to take on any new confrontations with the Machine.

The wilderness holds a value of tradition. The human species have lived on and in the wild for a much longer period than in civilization. Due to this fact, it is significant to maintain the few wild areas left, in order to connect with our past. It is crucial that this cultural heritage is maintained so that future generations will have the possibility of experiencing it. The wilderness has been the source of inspiration and creativity for man through all times.

## REFERENCES

- 1) Abbey, Edward. *The Brave Cowboy*. New York: Avon Books, 1956.
- 2) ---. *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-89*. Ed.
- 3) David Petersen. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994.
- 4) Ronald, Ann. *The New West of Edward Abbey*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 1988.
- 5) McCann, Garth. *Edward Abbey*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State UP, 1977.
- 6) Tatum, Stephen. "Closing and Opening Western American Fiction: The Reader in *The Brave Cowboy*." *Western American Literature* (1984): 187-203.