

Week 3 Discussion

edited minimally for style and flow

More On Birds

Professor Ingram: Does Horace become a bird?

Tanner: Horace genuinely expected his deal with the demon to come true. He wanted control of his body, and eventually took drastic measures to gain that control. I saw his death by suicide as him gaining this freedom that he longed for. In the beginning of the book he is excited to become a red-tailed hawk, envisioning himself flying above the tobacco fields he and his family and family before him worked in. Horace wants to control his body and be free of what his community deems as sin. Horace begins to think of “life beneath the ground” and admits that it is “attractive in a macabre way” (234). I found the description of his death interesting, particularly his eyes fixating on the sun through the “Canopy of tree limbs” (254). I related this to the way a bird might look at the sun on any given day.

Cade: It’s honestly hard to say truly, but I think that Horace’s view of the bird transformation is indicative of the way he copes with his problems generally. I feel like he was forced to live his life through a fantastical lens due to the outright rejection he faces from reality. A small example which really struck me was the shorthand notation of his theater crush’s name: “ECH IV” (218). It’s a small detail, and maybe meaningless, but to me it almost reads as dehumanizing, and also science-fiction-like. He’s known to escape to these worlds, like when he desperately retreaded all of his favorite works looking for an answer to his shame towards the end of the novel, and it seems to affect the way he interacts with people. “ECH IV” sounds more like the name of a spaceship, which is a point of fiction he surely venerates, and I think that this notation of the name alludes to a kind of blurring of lines for Horace. ECH IV could in many ways be an escape for Horace: just as he retreats into fiction, so does he with his momentary flings, escaping the pressures of his family expectations with his indulgences. However, this is somewhat dehumanizing, and in turn these “escapes” lead Horace to treat the objects of his affections somewhat cruelly, like with his dismissal of Gideon. Basically, it feels like the bird ritual is probably not a reality for Horace, but just an attempt to bring his fantastical escapes into his real

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life, and perhaps the absurdity of this one perhaps fully immerses him in the reality of their fictitiousness. It's very possible I'm reading too far into ECH IV, but I feel like it belongs in the discussion here, at least for fun.

Kyrsten: And beyond that it is interesting to think about whether or not Horace is actually possessed by a demon or is imagining this demonic possession. Because I think your question is extremely important and yet we can't ever fully answer it. This moment of the unknown at the end of the novel goes into the liminality I mentioned briefly last week. We know Horace wanted to be a bird because of the freedom it would give him to just exist and be himself, and birds exist both literally and metaphorically in a liminal space of the in-between, so perhaps his spirit does gain that freedom. However, I think it is also important to note that Horace is living and growing in a society that is telling him everything about him is wrong, and trauma can lead to moments of disassociation. So there is also a level that Horace has perhaps lost his grip with his reality and is now existing in his own liminal space. Within the scope of this novel, we have to ask ourselves if we think the demonic possession was real or metaphorical – so can Horace turn into a bird, or is he just falling into a space that he cannot crawl out of because he has constantly been told that his existence is essentially wrong?

Cheyron: What is more important: if the possession is “real” or if it was real to Horace? Jimmy completely dismisses the idea that possession can happen, which is interesting as a preacher: to be possessed, you have to believe in the magic you are practicing, and Horace completely believed in the magic that he was practicing. What is also interesting is how easily dismissed Horace's realities are at almost every junction.

Oakley: Jimmy says, “You're too intelligent, Horace, to fall for that crap. It's a copout” (253). Not only is he dismissing Horace's belief of possession, but he is kind of belittling what he believes in rather than attempting to coax him from it. He keeps asking him “why?”

Cade: I somewhat agree, Oakley, it is dismissive of the real depth of the situation, but I think it's more of an effective metaphorical device for the difficulty we as people have in connecting to each other's feelings. What may seem ridiculous or performative from our perspective could be

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an absolutely unavoidable reality for the person in observation. How do we, especially when clouded by our own beliefs and experiences, come to deal with other people's feelings, especially those which do not align with said beliefs? I don't think it's Jimmy's goal to dismiss him, but rather the impossibility of understanding the depth of Horace's situation due to Jimmy's limited perspective. I find that a lot of the novel is about this, the fact that our pretenses and personal beliefs (especially religious ones) are effectively a barrier between people.

Jimmy as Character, Jimmy as Horace

Kyrsten: What do you all think about the duality of Jimmy and Horace's character? Jimmy and Horace, and then Gideon and Horace, are in a sense doubles of each other, two sides to the same coin. I see Jimmy and Horace as opposite sides to the repression of identity. Jimmy has gone full-fledged repression of any potential gay or bisexual desire by conforming to the church, getting a beautiful wife, and playing the hetero-normative game of society. Horace, however, does not seem to want to fall into that section of society, thus he strives to become a bird, a creature that can live freely. However, that self is seen as one that cannot exist in the society he lives in, so he decides to leave it literally by becoming something else. Gideon, on the other hand, is the one who can remain free, is free because he is out. He does not strive to repress who he is, and we learn that he goes on to college and lives his life, seemingly free from this stigma that Jimmy and Horace exist with.

Oakley: This makes me think of McRuer's discussion in "A Visitation of Difference." He suggests that although the various communities Horace is a part of have the "presence of sameness," they are ultimately not comfortable with "difference." With his family Horace is black but not gay, and Jimmy is coming from that same family, so what is Jimmy's identity within the family? With Gideon, Horace is black and gay but does not share this identity with him because, like you said, Gideon is free.

Cheyron: I am going to bring up respectability politics. I am thinking about how *all* the Cross men are described in the book. Strong, steadfast, community-building, patriarchs (remember the poster and the terrible play). Jimmy and Horace were none of those things. Because of this,

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Jimmy and Horace live in a permanent space where they are not allowed to turn off the “code switch” impulse and simply be. Jimmy finds a way to cope but becomes oblivious to many realities – and by doing so renders himself unheard and ineffective in his familial relationships. Horace also finds a way to cope by leaning into the idea that he can find a new vessel not bound by the socio-political norms and societal expectations that have bound him in sorrow his entire life.

Tanner: I found it interesting that Jimmy held a very important position in not only the social hierarchy of the town but within his family, but was not shown true respect or reverence that many other men and women in his family were awarded. I have never heard “code switch” before, but I totally agree with your statement. Neither Horace nor Jimmy could “simply be.”

Cade: To me, Jimmy seemed so unrealized. Not as a writing flaw, but as a character trait. It seemed like he hardly even denied himself the reality of his existence. The only thing he really understands about himself seems to be regret. He doesn’t even seem to know why he believes what he does, such as when Zeke asks him his thoughts on something and he says, “well the Bible says,” which is not acceptable to Zeke. This is very relevant to the brief confrontation between Horace and Jimmy when discussing Horace’s homosexuality – he hardly even says a word. It’s frustrating and also deeply depressing to me. Jimmy clearly cares for others and has the potential to be accepting and even-keeled, but he is constrained by his weakness to others expectations.

May: The hurt and pain could be felt in the words. Jimmy has also been through a lot, but his dependence on pleasing others overshadows who he is or ever finding out who he really wanted to be. “How much I could have learned from her. She had raised her fist to her home, to her God, to her people, and chased after her heart . . . and lived” (121). Jimmy said this regarding his mother’s life and her choices. This supported the idea that Jimmy wondered what it would've been like to live not according to his grandma’s wishes or the Bible but according to his own heart as his mother had done.

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Form in the Novel

Oakley: I wanted to further discuss Kenan's addition of plays within this novel.¹ They are only included in Jimmy's confessions, and I think they show us that Jimmy is playing these scenes over and over again in his head, possibly because of the guilt he feels in how certain parts of Horace's life played out. Is it possible Jimmy wishes these moments would have played out differently? Is it possible that these scenes are different from what actually happened? When someone is watching a play, there is no interaction between the audience and the actors. Jimmy cannot take back or undo any part of his life; he doesn't have a second chance to change the outcome of his life with Horace, his family, his wife.

Cheyron: The dramatizing of trauma can be so important. I think there is something cathartic about rememory, not because you are reliving a trauma, but in the focus on retelling the details of the event. There is also something inherently fictional about dramatic retelling of events that makes them more palatable. There is an assumed exaggeration, and trying to identify where those exaggerations live may make the trauma less fresh. But does not change the *facts* of the drama? Did the aunts talk over Jimmy about the earring? Was the other preacher smirking or smiling at this overreaction? Do these details matter, or does the fact that Horace was berated, guilted, and silenced at a family function matter more than who said what?

Tanner: I also wondered if what happened at dinner was discussed later that night, specifically what Lester had to say. Why was he silenced? He seemed too accepting and in a way he attempted to diffuse the situation. I do believe that who said what is important, as it is the people who raised him and the people he wants to make proud saying these horrible things.

Kyrsten: Yes to all of this. I do think it is interesting that these moments fall specifically within Jimmy's sections, which are first person narrations. These mini-plays have me questioning Jimmy's motivation in using that method of remembrance. Jimmy is the one that is alive, not Horace, so why does he leave so much out of the telling? No, Jimmy can't take back what he did,

¹ There are scenes in the novel written as a play, with stage directions and dialogue. See pg. 181 of for an example.

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but he can choose to relate all of the facts and he doesn't, and that I think is something that is important about his sections of the story. And I think what this tells me is that Jimmy chose to merely live by going through the motions of the life he is expected to live, but without any real love or passion for this existence. Therefore we see how this lack of passion gets put onto Horace, who wants to live a real and passionate existence, something I think we see when Horace admits to Jimmy that he thinks Horace might be gay. Jimmy gives the almost robotic response that it is just a phase and that it will pass, that we have all been there. But Horace feels in his bones that is not the case.