

The Land of Death: Exploring the Application of the Death Penalty in Bruce Graham's *Coyote on a Fence* (2000)

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Abstract

The implementation of the death penalty as a form of punishment is concurrent with the birth of the American nation. The challenges that the death penalty creates socially, politically and ethically seem to strongly affect and problematize playwrights who continue employing the death penalty issue in their writings even in recent years. In *Coyote on a Fence*, Bruce Graham communicates his ideas utilizing the death row as the course of action. His depiction of an educated middle-aged convict and his relationship with a young mentally challenged man who is convicted of a racist crime explores the legal structures surrounding the application of the death penalty in the USA. Through the characters, Graham castigates the judicial mechanism's inadequacies vis a vis punishment and attribution of justice in general, and, of individuals with particular psychological and mental difficulties, in particular.

Keywords: Bruce Graham, *Coyote on a Fence*, contemporary drama, the death penalty

American society has had an interwoven relationship with the death penalty ever since it was established. Its presence signaled not only the formulation of the legal system of the United States, but also the cultural acceptance and adoption of such a means of punishment that enhanced the development of a national consciousness which sanctioned the death penalty. Even though its implementation as a federal form of punishment was concurrent

to the nation's birth,¹ the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a rise in executions.² In 1999, the number of executed individuals was ninety-eight, an unprecedented number of annual executions in the United States, which was a result of the general political upheaval caused by terrorist attacks on American ground, the government's war tactics in the Middle East, and the ensuing collective feelings of fear and insecurity.³ This sense of anxiety, cultivated by feelings of insecurity due to terrorist outbreaks, seems to breed more violence in internal social structures. In this sense, when violence occurs, as in the case of terrorist attacks, the State is ready to take even stricter measures to respond to it. As Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux observe, "[v]iolence, with its ever-present economy of uncertainty, fear and terror, is no longer merely a side effect of police brutality, war or criminal behavior; it has become fundamental to neoliberalism as a particularly savage facet of capitalism" (3). In other words, the State presents violence, in its various forms, as an integral component of safeguarding society, exploiting the public's general sense of fear and doubt. This sense of vulnerability encourages the formation of a predatory society in which fragmentation and the belief that the individual is solely responsible for their fate is cultivated.

In this time of violence and insecurity, playwrights such as Bruce Graham have attempted to capture the political and social conditions, as well as explore the issue of the death penalty by

¹ "Britain influenced America's use of the death penalty more than any other country. When European settlers came to the new world, they brought the practice of capital punishment. The first recorded execution in the new colonies was that of Captain George Kendall in the Jamestown colony of Virginia in 1608. Kendall was executed for being a spy for Spain. In 1612, Virginia Governor Sir Thomas Dale enacted the Divine, Moral and Martial Laws, which provided the death penalty for even minor offenses such as stealing grapes, killing chickens, and trading with Indians" ("Early History of the Death Penalty").

² There were historical periods when the use of the death penalty was minimized, as in the 19th century during the abolitionist movement and the years following WWII, and even suspended by the Supreme Court for a short period of four years in the 1970s.

³ Among the 28 States which use the death penalty are Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia and Texas with most executions carried out in the South. In the late 1990s, there was a peak in sentencing individuals to death (almost 600 sentences in 1998 and 1999) ("Fact Sheet").

emphasizing the destructive relation between state violence and human relationships. The end of the 1990s was indeed a period of particular turmoil in the United States, with domestic discord and the “culture wars”⁴ through the “ever-present conflict between pressures for change and the desire for continuity and tradition” intensifying (Crockatt 378). These pressures came amidst the need for security which was elusive, particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and placed emphasis on establishing security procedures to locate terrorists both domestically and internationally.⁵ But even before September 11, 2001, the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 were two terrorist attacks at the heart of American reality which led to stricter measures, among them the application of the death penalty for those convicted of such actions.⁶ It seems, then, that the sociopolitical climate of the time bred even more violence through the American government’s response to it.

It is exactly this period that is the starting point of my research on the death penalty and its representation in theater, making Graham’s play ideal for the investigation of this issue. The earliest performance of *Coyote on a Fence*, for which Graham won the Rosenthal Prize, took place prior to its publication and was staged at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Ohio, between 1997 and 1998. However, Graham had started his career as a playwright much earlier, as in 1984 he took part in the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays (PFT) with *Burkie*. He

⁴ Richard Crockatt underlines in “America at the Millennium” that there were disputes over “guns, gays and family,” which were particularly fueled by “the resurgent evangelical Christian churches [and] favoured a more ‘absolutist’ conception of moral values and an adherence to a more literal interpretation of America’s founding values” (378).

⁵ According to Crockatt, “[a]t the American military base of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the United States set up a prison for suspected terrorists captured in Afghanistan, raising a furore about the legality of the indefinite internment of prisoners without trial or legal representation” (384). As Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean further highlight, “[i]n November 2001, President Bush also signed an executive order legalizing the trial of alien terrorists in military tribunals, outside the jurisdiction of criminal law” (279), underlining the need for security “at all costs, even if it means some restriction of civil liberty” (279).

⁶ The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 was signed by Bill Clinton. It aimed to deter terrorism and provide an effective death penalty by speeding up the processes and reducing, among others, the right of the accused to multiple appeals.

has received many grants and awards⁷ and repetitively won Barrymore Awards for Best New Play and Chicago's Jefferson Award for *The Outgoing Tide*. Furthermore, Graham is the first American playwright to have been invited for two consecutive years to the Galway Arts Festival, which produced *The Outgoing Tide* and *Stella and Lou*.

Beginnings: Bruce Graham and *Coyote on a Fence*

Graham was inspired by the story of the death row convict, James Beathard,⁸ who was also the editor of the *Texas Death Row Journal*, in which he wrote obituaries of inmates at the prison in Huntsville, Texas.⁹ His column sought to highlight the more positive aspects of the convicts' characters/ personalities without drawing attention to the crimes they had committed. In his play, *Coyote on a Fence* (2000), Graham presents an educated death row convict who writes a similar column called "Death Row Advocate." While the protagonist, John Brennan, a white middle-aged man, serves time for beating a man to death during a drug transaction, he meets another, uneducated, inmate convicted for his racist crime of burning a church with African American worshippers inside. Graham explores the concept of evil and punishment as perceived by the two men's different mentality on racism. Through the depiction of these two characters, disparate in terms of educational and social background, Graham ventures to comment on the ills of the American judicial system and offer his perspective on the issue of the death penalty.

Shawna's Role as a Guard at the Death Row

⁷ Some of them are from the Pew Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. He was also the winner of the Princess Grace Foundation Statuette.

⁸ On the first pages of the play there is a dedication to James indicating Graham's influence by him.

⁹ There are no official records of the newspaper. Graham confessed the source of his inspiration in an interview with Daniel Rosenthal on the website of *The Independent*.

Coyote on a Fence's opening scene presents Shawna DuChamps, a female guard who, according to Graham's stage directions, should remain ubiquitous throughout the different scenes of the play as a "hovering presence" (Graham 9) when she does not interact with the other characters turning into an observer of the events. Her power, as representative of prison authorities, remains elusive as she is trapped into a role of abiding by system regulations, while her overall appearance is presented as "tired [and] washed out" (Graham 9). In her monologue-like initial presentation, where she supposedly speaks to a reporter at a bar about an execution, she provides some background information about herself pointing out that she has "been a correctional officer since [she] was twenty, which means in a couple of years [she]'ll have [her] thirty and [she is] gettin' the fuck out. [She doesn't] care" (Graham 10). Her impatience to retire from her position as a death row guard is coupled with a devastating sense of weariness thus highlighting the tremendous psychological toll her job has taken on her.

At the same time, the character provides information concerning an execution which attracted significant media and public attention, underscoring the power of the spectacle in violent events such as the implementation of the death penalty. Graham sets Shawna right after a criminal's execution admitting that it is a "[g]oddamn madhouse tonight. Never seen it like that—never. All them TV trucks? Never seen a crowd like that" (9). The media seem eager to sacrifice any sense of responsibility they might have towards the viewer in order to promote suffering as a pleasurable spectacle. In American society, this appears to be necessary so that "[American citizens] develop a taste for violence, and even learn to appreciate aesthetics of violence, as the normal and necessary price of being entertained" (Evans and Giroux 9). In this way, violence loses its shock value and citizens become accustomed to a reality which equates pain and

suffering to a perverse form of entertainment.¹⁰ At the same time, the playwright underlines the monetary transactions, such as bribing, taking place before an interview. As he points out about Shawna, “there’s a lotta’ reporters wanted ta talk to [her] tonight and [she] ain’t talking for free” (10). Shawna appears to be familiar with the way the media world functions and attempts to benefit from their determination to present exclusive stories. In this way, Graham pinpoints not only the spectacularization of specific angles of society by the media, but also the utilization of money in order for the journalists to reveal exclusive details which will attract more readers to their articles.

This fixation with violent spectacles further cultivates numbness towards the implementation of the death penalty and has damaging effects on the individual. In Shawna’s case, this becomes evident through her effort to remain detached, at least superficially, from the death penalty process. While interacting with John about the convict’s execution and his possible afterlife punishment, Shawna externalizes her indifference:

JOHN. So he’s in some sulfur pit right now, being poked with pitchforks for all eternity. Does that make you feel better?

SHAWNA. I don’t not know —

JOHN and SHAWNA. — and I don’t care. (Graham 13)

¹⁰ Of course, entertainment and violence go hand in hand in American culture. American society has a long history of sanctioning spectacles of violence with the public lynching of African Americans taking place in the South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These atrocious events were attended by white families infusing their children with not only a didactic element on the way they should behave towards blacks, but also the element of violence as entertainment. For more information on the lynchings of the American South, see Stewart Emory Tolnay, et al., “Vicarious Violence: Spatial Effects on Southern Lynchings, 1890-1919.” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 102, no. 3, 1996, pp. 788-815.

She avoids any discussion about the issue of the death penalty and seems reluctant to discuss her opinion, constantly repeating that she doesn't care. The guard's lack of interest in expressing her viewpoint regarding her ideas about punishment in a theological context and her disengagement further expose her possible corrosion by the environment she works in. The legal system creates obedient employees/citizens who become accomplices in the execution of people through their weariness to react. To sustain this process, the State provides them with a job to perform and financial security in order to ensure citizen participation in the process. Graham underlines that "[she] got a job to do, that's all. And if it wasn't [her] it'd damn sure be somebody else" (18-19). The character's equation of working in the death row wing and participating, actively or passively, in the executions to ordinary jobs signals the State's success in involving citizens in this process which is considered a routine by them.

The character then reflects exactly American society's mentality during the time when the play was written. Apathy towards the use of capital punishment accumulates as citizens are "absorbed into privatized orbits of consumption, commodification, and display [and] inhabitants of neoliberal societies are entertained by the toxic pleasures of spectacles of violence which cannot be divorced from the parasitic presence of the corporate state" (Evans and Giroux 53). That is to say, American society's consumerist orientation and the spectacles of violence blur individual and collective activity. The relation of the death penalty to politicians' aspirations has further influenced its application, with politicians manipulating citizens' sentiment to gain voters and individuals believing that, although the death penalty is not effective, it "is concrete it is forceful, and it is final (which nothing else seems to be); it is something, and being for it means that you insist that *something* be done" (Ellsworth and Gross 42). In other words, citizens in the United States wrongly assume that any form of punishment is better than taking no legal action

against crime. Thus, society's orientation towards the consumption of violence as a natural part of its foundation creates a false illusion of such spectacles considered necessary in order for communities to feel safe.

Media's Reflection of Crime and the Death Penalty

The imposition of the death penalty as an integral mechanism of punishment is further enhanced by the media intervention in the depiction of these spectacles. The triumph of the culture of spectacle is evident in the media's presentation of violence in an attempt to increase their power. Graham presents Sam Fried, a journalist who visits John to talk about the paper he edits, to expose the superficial interest of media in criminal cases through the verbal exchange between the two characters. In one of their interactions the reporter admits that individuals sentenced to death frighten the rest of society, emphasizing that "[they]-are-not-bad-guys just because [they] want to protect [themselves]" (Graham 43). Graham sheds light on media portrayals of such a marginalized social group and pinpoints the discriminatory attitude of the journalist, suggesting that the objective role of media to inform citizens cannot but be elusive. They seek to control and depoliticize citizens' experiences isolating individual from collective agency. At the same time, the cultivation of fear and the media's claim that society defends its members against those considered criminals fortify the influence that they exercise upon individuals.¹¹

In *Coyote on a Fence*, Graham further refutes the idealistic image of the media as a democratic means. John attempts to persuade Sam into helping Bobby, the mentally unstable convict, to publicize his case in an effort to save him. However, the journalist seems uninterested

¹¹ As Guy Debord illustrates about the power of spectacle, "it is a permanent opium war" (13), which sedates social subjects to submissively consume it.

in examining Bobby's case regardless of his condition (44), promoting the playwright's belief that media lust for spectacles which boost their success instead of investigating the system's discriminatory decisions. They distort the prism through which citizens experience the world and direct their attention to specific spectacles which "serv[e] as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system" (Debord 5). In this way, the media broadcast those aspects of society which contribute to the maintenance of specific cultural perceptions regarding justice and punishment. In Craig Haney's view, "media crime coverage not only shapes public perceptions and heightens concerns over the nature and frequency of victimization and the magnitude of the crime problem but also appears to influence judgments people make about whether to use punitive strategies in order to solve it" (34).

State Violence as a Commodity

The playwright further challenges the function of the death penalty as a tool of contemporary capitalism through which society commodifies death. State-sanctioned violence perpetuates conformity and passivity by inviting citizens to participate in its process which becomes clear in the interaction between the journalist and John:

SAM. This place sort of... dominates the whole town.

JOHN. Employs eighty percent of it too.

SAM. Really?

JOHN. Revitalized the whole county. Most towns do it with a sports franchise. Not us. (Graham 24)

The playwright's parallelism of a sports franchise with the death row facilities signals the consumerist value of such facilities highlighting their commercial benefits. The State

industrializes prison and profits from the death penalty facilities, in particular, through creating zones of dependence with citizens compelled to directly or indirectly partake in the procedures which normalize the death penalty.¹² As a result of this consumerist approach of the death penalty, citizens perceive its application as a means of gaining profits, undermining the moral and democratic challenges its presence creates. The playwright highlights this condition through his reference to a local dinner's sign that "[their] Burgers Are Killers Too!" (24). This slogan encompasses society's desensitization towards the implementation of the death penalty, as well as the commercialization of death and punishment. In Evans and Giroux's words, "the pleasure of killing is not just normalized in war but increasingly indoctrinated into American society as a result of relentless visual marketing and commercial culturalization of killing, atrocity, abuse, and cruelty" (171). In other words, killing becomes a cultural product.

John Brennan: Diverging from the Stereotypical Criminal Presentation

Coyote on a Fence diverges from presenting a stereotypical image of a death row convict, since John Brennan is a white, educated, middle-class man; an image which is not mirrored on the rates of black convicts sentenced to death. According to statistics, although the numbers of white individuals sentenced to death after 1976 are higher, corresponding to 55.9% of all sentences, while blacks' numbers are lower, amounting to 33.9%, one should bear in mind the disproportionate numbers compared to the ethnic groups' population figures in the US. In which 72% are white while blacks are only 12% of the general population ("Executions by Race and Race of Victim"). As Haney explains about these numbers, "[t]hroughout the history of American criminal justice, African Americans have received death sentences disproportionate to

¹²As Evans and Giroux highlight, "[e]conomics now drive politics. In such a society, the ethical imagination loses its leverage, as profit- marketing and financial advantage undermine every vestige of community building, solidarity, and democracy itself" (152).

their numbers in the general population” (193). The frequent criminalization of African Americans suggests the racist mentality which continues to lurk in American society. In an attempt to move beyond this reality and, perhaps, endeavoring to capture the spectators’ unbiased attention, Graham constructs a white protagonist, whose eloquent use of language clearly emphasizes his educated background. It seems that the playwright wants to lure his spectators away from the dominant racial stereotype that associates black men with violence and criminal behavior. John diverges from the usual representation of a criminal, since demographics show that “52.3% of death row inmates did not finish high school and 12.7% attended only to the eighth grade or less” (Cunningham and Vigen 199). John’s racial and educational divergence from the rest of the convicts brings him closer to the spectators, who may relate easier with the character and thus understand his condition, in order to underline that anyone can be found in his position.

Nevertheless, his eloquent expression is implied to have caused him difficulties in the past. While writing a response letter to Sam, who requested an interview on discussing his case, he mentions an incident which created difficulties in continuing the prison newspaper that he edits, pointing out that, “[t]here have been repercussions since the BBC airing. [Their] newspaper, as a consequence of this, is struggling to survive” (Graham 18). Although the playwright does not further elaborate on this incident, John’s urge to raise public awareness on the issue of the death penalty, and his case in particular, were not appreciated by the prison authorities. Unlike the criminal justice system in the U.S.A, which “does a great deal to facilitate the process of death sentencing, [e]ither by not effectively remedying some of the worst biases and misconceptions that have been created outside the courtroom or by actively intervening in

ways that are likely to exacerbate them” (Haney 93),¹³ Graham perplexes spectators by pointing to the opposite direction. In other words, by portraying a white educated death row convict, boundaries between the character and the spectators’ expectations are blurred. In this way, Graham encourages spectators to see John as human rather than a mere criminal, since his status as an educated person allows them to identify with him.

Indeed, Graham’s decision to challenge firmly rooted notions of who can be sentenced to death merits special focus. In the course of *Coyote on a Fence*, the spectators learn about John’s former occupation through a conversation John and Bobby have while in their adjacent separate cells:

BOBBY. What’d ya go to college for?

JOHN. Psychology.

BOBBY. You a doctor?

JOHN. Didn’t finish.

BOBBY. But that’s a doctor, right?

JOHN. (Smiling to himself). I was a drug and alcohol counselor.

BOBBY. Work inna’ hospital?

JOHN. No. Here. (32)

The revelation of John’s employment as a drug counselor in the same prison where he is now incarcerated shows that the least expected people may end up in jail. John’s former occupation as a psychologist is both intriguing and ironic, confronting spectators with the realities of death

¹³ As Haney further observes, “the Court effectively has shielded the death-sentencing process from most of the broad-based social scientific analyses that have uncovered many of its potential constitutional flaws. Instead of a social fact oriented and empirically based discussion of the realities of the system of death sentencing, the Court substituted an idealized but inaccurate account of how capital punishment actually operates in the Unites States” (24).

row, where common citizens can be punished by death. Thus, the playwright invites spectators to reconsider the power exercised by the State through his portrayal of a criminal whom the spectators could easier identify with.

John's reference to the nature of his crime further leads spectators to this direction. Even though he is at first unwilling to share much information with Bobby, he later succumbs to his pressure to talk about it:

BOBBY. Come on, please... what'd ya do? (John thinks for a moment.)

JOHN. Drug deal, guy got killed.

BOBBY. How? (A beat.)

JOHN. Beaten...kicked.

BOBBY. (Gently.) Did you do it?

JOHN. I was there—

BOBBY. Did-you-do-it?

JOHN. I was there, that's all! Bought an ounce of coke and the guy stepped on it

(...)

BOBBY. You and who else?

JOHN. Some punk—

BOBBY. Who?

JOHN. What's the difference? Other guy got a lawyer, cut a deal first. I'm here and he's out already. (Graham 50)

John's reluctance to talk about the events which led to his being sentenced to death seems to derive from his distrust of the legal system. Even though he was involved, more or less actively, in the killing of a person, his reference to the structure of the judicial mechanism to reduce

sentences when an individual cooperates with the authorities is problematic in the sense of serving justice. Indeed, it is not uncommon in the American criminal system for a person to have their sentence reduced when offering assistance and testifying against another accused individual.¹⁴ The concept of justice then becomes relevant with formal institutions excluding individuals from law when its enforcers believe it is appropriate.¹⁵ Graham's character hence challenges the fairness of the legal system,¹⁶ particularly when an individual is sentenced to death while another one is set free even if they are accused of the same crime.

Bobby Reyburn: A Mentally Unstable Convict from an Underprivileged Environment

Graham explores another malfunctioning aspect of the capital punishment; that of condemning mentally challenged individuals. The second character presented as a death row convict, Bobby Reyburn, is a young man whose problematic condition becomes evident from the beginning. In one of his interactions with John, Bobby mentions that he was "in Lock-Up-Land" (14), alluding to a psychiatric hospital. Bobby further mentions that "[he] hear[s] things... [He] hear[s] things in heaven and hell" (17), exposing his congenital mental incapacity early on in the play. The concept of mental instability should have been stressed in his trial influencing the outcome of his sentence since mentally challenged individuals' cases are often excluded from the death penalty. However, in Bobby's case, the application of the law raises questions about the

¹⁴ Yvette A. Beeman highlights that "[i]n a criminal case the prosecutor will often make a plea agreement with an accomplice of the defendant. Under these traditionally sanctioned agreements the accomplice receives a reduced sentence in return for full and truthful testimony during the defendant's trial. In recent years, some prosecutors have further conditioned the accomplice's reduction in sentence upon the defendant's indictment or conviction or the prosecutor's satisfaction with the accomplice's testimony" (800).

¹⁵ Unlike classical configurations about justice as virtue and the spirit of law, justice in the United States is highly attached to local politics, which "occurs in America to an extent altogether unknown in other countries where judges and prosecutors are more usually tenured civil servants not directly accountable to voters" (Garland, "The Peculiar Forms" 443). Hence, public sentiment can directly influence their decisions.

¹⁶ As John Rawls observes about the concept of justice, ideally "a society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme, for it meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair. In this sense its members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed" (12).

protection of human rights. Indeed, a survey conducted during the 90s showed that there were more mentally ill individuals in prison than in mental institutions,¹⁷ and even though these individuals should not be sentenced to death there are many found in this position.¹⁸ Bob's naivety and childish perception of the world further unravels in one of the limited conversations he has with John while on their side-by-side cells:

BOBBY. Know any science, John?

JOHN. Little.

BOBBY. Is the sky the same all over the place? I mean, like, you could be in one country and it's one color— then ya move and it changes? Like it might be one color blue here but a piece down the road it's different color blue?

JOHN. Wouldn't know. (Graham 48)

Their conversations, which take place without any physical or eye contact in an attempt to further underline their deprivation of direct human connection and the harsh conditions they are subjected to, are fundamental into bringing the two characters closer to each other. John is transformed into a father figure with Bobby turning into an inquisitive child who wants to learn about the world around him. In this way, his interactions with John reveal aspects of his unfamiliarity with the world he lives in.

Through Bobby's profile, Graham castigates the American judicial system, which still lacks a nationally implemented law on the abolition of the death penalty for the mentally ill and

¹⁷As Thomas G. Blomberg and Karol Lucken point out, "according to the National Coalition for the Mentally Ill in the Criminal Justice System there are approximately 33 percent more mentally ill individuals in jails than in hospitals" (200).

¹⁸ Christopher Slobogin underlines that the state and federal laws "not only violate the spirit of the Constitution by failing to take proper account of a person's mental illness, they allow misperceptions and prejudices about that condition to *increase* the possibility that a death sentence will be imposed" (672).

allows each State to provide its own interpretation of the law on this matter. According to Stephen B. Bright, “[c]apital cases are often influenced by the passions and prejudices of the moment, which distort the decision-making process. As a result, there are many intellectually disabled and mentally ill people on death rows throughout the country” (110). This failure to acknowledge and exclude from the death penalty those individuals considered incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions vehemently signals the vast contradictions in the American legal and, by extension, sociopolitical milieu. On the one hand, in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that “the execution of any individual with mental retardation violated the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment” (Ellis 2), while, at the same time, they “observed that the issue of whether a punishment was excessive could be illuminated by the way in which State legislatures had addressed it. But the ultimate judgment of assessing a punishment, as well as the nation’s attitudes toward it, rest[ed] with the Court itself” (Ellis 2). In other words, the judicial system in the United States seems to blur the lines which define human rights and authorizes punishment shaping inconsistencies about the issue of the death penalty.

The playwright, furthermore, sheds light on Bobby’s life conditions to mark his social exclusion and traumatic personal experiences. Sam informs John about Bobby’s past, illustrating that “[t]he mother was a transient. Did a little time herself: prostitution, public drunkenness, assault [...] Drunk all through the pregnancy. Got beat up pretty bad when she was seven months. Between the booze and the beating they’re pretty sure the fetus suffered a little... damage” (Graham 32). Graham comments on the problematic circumstances surrounding Bobby before he was even born. He provides the spectators with details about Bobby’s unstable mother reminding them of the precarious domestic conditions that may dominate an individual’s life and, by extension, influence positively or negatively their evolution as members of society. As

Ashley Montagu underlines, “the personal attitudes and relationships of an individual to others are formed primarily on the pattern of his or her relationships with parents in early infancy and childhood, and that destructive aggression is, in most cases, a response to the experience or rejection, frustration or aggression in infancy and childhood” (318). Bobby’s rejection by his mother was evident during most of his life, as the reporter reveals to John that the mother “had him put in the juvenile detention center for running away. He was twelve” (Graham 35). To further stress Bobby’s traumatic childhood experiences, Graham highlights that on his first night in the juvenile center he was gang raped by the whole dorm (35). These elements exemplify the harsh reality of underprivileged individuals, such as Bobby, while castigating at the same time the system’s selective implementation of the law. Recognizing the conditions surrounding Bobby’s past as a mitigating factor would imply that the judicial system acknowledges society’s role in guiding an individual’s life. As William E. Connolly underscores, such a consideration “would insinuate culture, with its global divisions along the lines of class, race, and gender and its more finely grained variations in the life of each particular individual, into the very practices of action, judgment, and punishment” (194). *Coyote on a Fence* directs the spectators’ attention to the character’s marginalization through the system’s rejection to identify Bobby as a citizen with equal rights. Thus, Graham takes an incisive look into a society that breeds violence and destroys individuals to criticize the formulation of such a legal system which punishes the individuals shaped by that very society.

Graham challenges not only the lack of a national penal consensus on mental illness, but also the perfunctory procedures followed to sentence individuals to death, by sharing information concerning Bobby’s trial process. The playwright emphasizes that the trial “was real short” (33) and “there was no medical testimony” (34), commenting on the reluctance of the legal system to

properly examine the character's case. In this regard, Bobby symbolizes all those individuals who are marked as redundant and socially disposable by the State, which transforms into the sole responsible authority to verify "which bodies are to be protected and which are to be protected against" (Evans and Giroux 137). In other words, state violence, in the form of the death penalty, provides the frame for categorizing vulnerable citizens as expendable and the lack of a definite and indisputable legislation on this issue reflects the State, authorities and judicial institutions' failure to unanimously deal with this matter. Evans and Giroux are further correct when they underline that "[t]he state no longer protects its own disadvantaged citizens; they are already seen as having no value within the global economic/ political framework" (152).

Coyote on a Fence succeeds in capturing this reality not only through Bobby's revelations about the trial procedures, but also through his descriptions of the unsanitary conditions in the psychiatric institute he was positioned before being transferred to the death row wing; an experience presented in one of his dialogues with John:

BOBBY. We are lucky ta get toilet paper. [...] Not used ta all this room, neither.

This is nice, yes sir...real nice.

JOHN. (Chuckling to himself.) Nice?

BOBBY. Heck, you never been down Lock- Up- Land I bet. Not enough room ta swing a dead cat. (Graham 14-15)

Bobby's reference to the unhealthy conditions of the psychiatric institution marks the State's neglect of one of the most vulnerable groups of citizens, that of the mentally ill, bringing to the surface the implicit violence those individuals have to tolerate, since fundamental human rights¹⁹

¹⁹ According to the United Nations' first principle for the treatment of prisoners, "[a]ll prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings" ("Basic Principles").

are encroached upon by the State. In this way, the State has the ultimate power of distinguishing between “sanctioned violence, and unsanctioned violence” (Benjamin 279), depriving convicts of civilized conditions.

The playwright’s construction of Bobby’s tormented past pinpoints this condition, with society as the abettor of the individual’s life choices. In such a system, the individual lacks opportunities for a future with possibilities, finding themselves at a stalemate. Graham’s protagonist expresses his frustration after the journalist reveals to him Bobby’s troubled past wondering “[h]ow do they come to their decisions? [He] know[s] men who’ve gotten life on the insanity defense and they weren’t– [he] [doesn’t] begrudge them their success but–... (*Confused/frustrated*). What the fuck! Bobby totally disassociates. He honestly believes what he did was... right. He shouldn’t be on the row!” (34). John does not question Bobby’s mental instability; instead he insists that Bobby’s condemnation should be re-examined as it is unfair. By commenting on the character’s honest belief that his action was correct, John illuminates the role of ideology into shaping individual’s values. His comment highlights the injustices of the system questioning the ideas upon which punishment is based and the discriminatory policies followed. Instead of ensuring that the implementation of punishment, particularly the death penalty, is, at least, practiced with precaution, the system overproduces death sentences.²⁰

The role of family in shaping an individual’s character is further evident in Bobby’s descriptions of his relations with his uncle Hew. Bobby’s racial crime of killing thirty-seven black people in a church is revealed early on in the play. However, the roots of his ideology

²⁰ As James S. Liebman suggests about the great numbers of death sentences, “this is so because judges, and the governors who appoint them, run for office based on the high number of death sentences juries impose in trials over which the judges preside, and may be defeated for reelection because trials over which the judges preside result in acquittals or life sentences. These same considerations explain why trial judges in states that authorize them to do so (1) impose death sentences so frequently (more often than juries) and (2) replace life sentences juries impose with death sentences so much more often than the reverse” (2112-2114).

come into surface towards the end of the play when the playwright unfolds Bobby's childhood memory of a coyote "stuck up on the barbed wire" (52) and his uncle's response to this sight. Bobby felt upset as a child when faced with this scene, even though it was a common practice to hang them on wires. This aimed at reducing the numbers of attacks a ranger's animals dealt with. The powerful image of the dead animal stigmatized the protagonist's childhood memory. Albert Bandura clearly points out about instilling specific behaviors that "[a]fter modeled activities have been transformed into images and readily utilizable verbal symbols, these memory codes serve as guides for performance" (26).²¹ In Bobby's memory the dead coyote remains a grotesque but powerful image which Graham creates to visualize the role of family into shaping personal beliefs. While narrating this incident to John, Bobby admits that his initial reaction to this spectacle was to feel upset because "[y]a know how kids don't wanta see any animal get hurt" (Graham 52). Bobby's emotional vulnerability is taken advantage of by his uncle to transmit his racist ideology. Bobby explains that his uncle:

told [him] 'bout coyotes bein' evil and predators and how it's okay ta kill' em and there's nothin' to be ashamed of. That's why he stuck it up onna' fence there. Let the world know –death to predators. Then he told [him] all about the Jews. How Hitler knew they were predators and about the cabal and everything. How they was usin' the niggers and mud people to turn [them] all into animals so they can enslave [them]. (Graham 52)

The symbolically charged image of the coyote on the wire provides his uncle with an opportunity to instruct him into his racist mentality regarding white supremacy and the Nazi doctrine. The

²¹ Indeed, performance through modeling behavior has been at the center of researchers' attention signaling the fundamental role of learning through modeling.

coyote/non-Aryans analogy as predators that are evil and need to be exterminated constructs Bobby's beliefs. Based on this idea, he solidifies the concept of killing blacks to protect himself, thus justifying his criminal behavior.

Death Sentencing in Action and Characters' Emotions

Coyote on a Fence further sheds light on the character's last day before being executed. Bobby's sentencing to death date seems to cultivate no fear on him. On the contrary, he behaves in a joyful way, pointing out to John that "[he] will go to a better place" (Graham 49). His acceptance of his upcoming death stems from a mixture of spirituality²² and ignorance remaining indifferent to fighting for clemency²³ as many inmates do when their date of execution is set. The playwright focuses on Bobby's interaction with John instead of focusing on his death in order to create a deeper understanding of his psychological condition. The main characters' last discussion brings to the surface Bobby's motives for his actions revealing a desire for belonging to a group. As Graham illustrates Bobby's initiation in a racist organization, "[he] look[s] back and ol' Hew, he's smilin'. He's so proud'a [Bobby]. And [he] walk[s] down the aisle there... And, John, they all reached out. Shakin' [his] hand, pattin' [him] on the back...huggin' [him] Ol' Hew beamin' back there and all this... love" (53). The playwright's description externalizes the joy that Bobby feels when others recognized him as a member of their group. The previous references to the protagonist's traumatic experiences, and, as an extension, his rejection by his peers further justify his sense of excitement and dedication to the group's cause. In this way, Bobby's character exposes the universal idea that humans are social beings and need to feel part

²² His uncle Hew instilled him with the idea of God but in a twisted way, as he justified racial hatred and reward for racial crimes.

²³ "Clemency is the process by which a governor, president, or administrative board may reduce a defendant's sentence or grant a pardon. Clemencies have been granted in death-penalty cases for a variety of reasons" ("Clemency").

of a group in order to fully function as individuals, signaling that the protagonist's sociality is "created through collective acceptance" (Tuomela 124). In other words, acceptance conceals Bobby's commitment to the group values and beliefs which guide his actions.

In his last appearance, Bobby mentions to John that he gained love from his uncle and that "[he's] a lucky man" (53), while "he smiles dreamily as the lights fade on him" (Graham 53). Graham does not focus on his actual execution but rather points to his absence through the use of "the cold pin spot [which] hits Bobby's cell" (53). The abrupt disappearance of Bobby and his implied execution is juxtaposed against his last cheerful appearance charging the atmosphere in a negative way with Graham rejecting the projection of the ritual of execution as a means of "highlight[ing] the difference between the 'animalistic' behavior of the criminal and the 'humane' (and humanizing) response of the state" (Smith 14).

The aforementioned image of the dead coyote on the wire fence functions as a metaphor for Bobby's impending execution. The character's childhood memory becomes an ominous image which foreshadows Bobby's ending. Like the coyote, he has to die so as to set an example for the rest of society. Yet, his ending differs from that of the coyote in that his body is hidden from plain sight.²⁴ While John is typing, the reporter, Sam, reads a copy of *The Death Row Advocate* and announces that "[t]he State murdered Robert Alvin Reyburn last night. He was twenty-eight years old. At the request of some of [their] subscribers [he] will mention that Bobby was accused—and found guilty, obviously—of a heinous crime" (Graham 54). The informative character of Bobby's death indicates the death penalty's invisibility while its definite effects on Bobby remain hidden from the spectators. The lack of a scene which would highlight

²⁴ As Michel Foucault emphasizes, "[p]unishment then will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitably, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime" (9).

the character's sentencing augments Graham's comment on the general perception of the death penalty implementation as an everyday experience which is yet silenced. Graham further presents a thread of religious references which Sam and John successively express:

SAM. 'St. Francis once said, 'Where there is charity and wisdom...'

JOHN. '...there is neither fear nor ignorance...'

SAM. '...Where there is patience and humility...'

JOHN. '...there is neither anger nor vexation...'

SAM. '...Where there is piece and meditation...'

JOHN. '...there is neither anxiety nor doubt. Bobby Reyburn knew no charity or wisdom or piece in his life.' (He signs sadly) 'And the only person who ever loved him taught him how to hate'. (54)

The reference to these virtues which Bobby lacks clearly points out John's conviction of Bobby's naivety and misguidance in life. In this last reference to Bobby, John highlights the individual's need for specific conditions to have a balanced life, while marking the crucial role of those who are close to them to impart knowledge and values which, unlike Bobby's uncle, will aid them in navigating in life instead of dooming them.

This reference to Bobby signals the last appearance of John on stage, as after that the spectators are informed about his execution by the guard. Shawna, while sitting on a bar, mentions that "...some'a these guys—good riddance but John Brennan wasn't gonna' kill nobody else" (55). Her comment about John externalizes her interest for him in the sense that she had developed a personal connection with John and further exposes her persuasion that he did not deserve to be punished with the death penalty. In a similar tone to John's comment about Bobby, Graham questions the efficacy of the death penalty. Shawna's monologue at the end of

the play further constitutes a site of departure for Graham's social criticism, revealing the psychological repercussions for the individuals who become voyeurs of the death penalty. As the playwright highlights about Shawna:

[y]ou people ya stare, lean forward. [Shawna] just look[s] at the glass there- like [she's] watchin' but... [she's] not. Ya stand where [she] do[es] ya can pretend ta be lookin' but the way the light is... it's like a mirror. [She] do[es]n't see them [she] see[s] [her]- [her] reflection. That's what [she's] lookin' at. (55)

The symbolically charged light turns into a mirror which reflects Shawna's idol in order to expose her sense of guilt while witnessing the criminal's death. Her unwillingness to watch individuals die, even if it is a State procedure, contradicts her former statements of indifference. The character distances herself from the moment of the execution in an action which suggests that "being elsewhere defines the presentness of the modern human condition" (Evans and Giroux 65). This aids her in her attempt to alienate herself from the possible psychological effects of the death penalty on her. Nevertheless, the impact of her participation in this procedure, despite remaining passive, crushes the character. The price that Shawna has to pay is a guilt-ridden conscience, which amplifies her inability to sleep, and this is the reason why Graham marks in the final scene that "[she] wish[es] [she] could sleep" (55). Graham's insomniac character further wakes up from her lethargic condition signaling that once a person has experienced the reality of the death penalty, its consequences cannot be effaced. In other words, the implementation of the death penalty inflicts heavy psychological injuries upon the individual.²⁵

²⁵ According to Walter C. Long and Oliver Robertson "the unacknowledged stress experienced by guards on death rows and execution teams risks dangerous mental health consequences for them and those around them" (3).

Shawna's reflection on the mirror, moreover, signals the playwright's aim to present the theater as a mirror of society forcing the spectators to assess images of themselves and their social values. Society is ready to sacrifice its members while utilizing the death penalty to cultivate and reinforce cultural beliefs such as the instillation of the death penalty as a necessary weapon to prevent crime. As David Garland suggests, "[c]apital punishment may have also cultural uses of more general kind, carrying weight in the delicate balance of social forces and value conflicts that ultimately shape the dominant culture" ("The Cultural Uses" 477). This means that the citizens' perception of the death penalty greatly intermingles with their broader social values and cultural identities.

Graham's *Coyote on a Fence* demonstrates the devastating effects of the capitalist system prioritizing spectacle and the implementation of the death penalty on the individual. The protagonists of the play are trapped into a system which either manipulates them, as in the case of Shawna, into performing their roles in the application of the death penalty, or disposes them, as in the case of Bobby, without taking into consideration their particularities and, most importantly, universal human rights. As Garland illustrates, punishment, "serves as a key with which to unlock a larger cultural text such as the nature of social solidarity or the disciplinary character of Western reason" (*Punishment* 12). In this way, the playwright's commentary on the death penalty enables spectators to grasp the penetrating force that this punishment exerts on numerous fields of society and, especially, on the degradation of collective identity. In that respect, Graham comments on the ills of the death penalty and prompts for action to be taken against the very conditions of injustice, inequality, and oppression that scar both the individual and the collective.

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