

DESTRUCTION AND DETACHMENT OF THE WESTERN EGO IN THE MORESBY
COUPLE IN THE SHELTERING SKY BY PAUL BOWLES

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2019

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Literary essay as partial fulfillment of the degree Licenciado en Lenguas Extranjeras

Inglés-Francés

Directed by: TIMOTHY ANDERSON KEPPEL

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INTRODUCTION

The Sheltering Sky, one of the most acclaimed books of the expatriate writer Paul Bowles, tells the story of a young American couple and their friend as they arrive at the port of Tanger, Morocco. The beginning of the book presents the reader to an annoyed Kit as she surveys the lackluster views of the city, and her husband, Port, a young man who tries to assure both Kit and Turner, their friend, that the landscape will become more attractive as they move deeper into the wilderness.

The personalities, as well as decisions made by the characters during the development of the story, reveals to the readers the concept of the Western ego that the author wants to emphasize, as each of the characters display a different angle of dissatisfaction with or acceptance of the Western world. Similarly, the relationships and interactions between the characters play their own linked role in their psychological and attitudinal changes, such as Kit's inability to bear with the company of Turner or the place Port has taken them, a Port is only interested in running as far away as possible from the Western world, and Turner harbors a secret desire for Kit.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the idea of abandoning the Western ego and embracing awayness is something that the main characters, especially Port, display through their actions. This is principally shown through Port's decisions to constantly push deeper into the Sahara region, and his desire to run away from the decadence of the Western culture as a whole, is demonstrated by his choice of the wilderness over a more refined, intellectual destination such as Europe during the late thirties. This thesis will analyze the psychological changes of the characters as they are

devoured by the wilderness and the vastness of the desert, and how the travelers' decision to embrace the wilderness ultimately leads them to be freed of their ego, but also condemns them to realize that they are left alone in a new culture that does not want them or accept them.

Port's abandonment of his Western ego results from his distaste with the current Western society, the stain left by war, and the false ideals and masks of intellectualism. An unpublished writer, Port embraces the idea that in order to write, one must detach oneself from all that is banal. Kit, who embodies the Western culture, tags along with Port on his unusual adventures because she cherishes him and wants to save their marriage, but she quickly finds herself abandoned and surrounded by a strange and violent world.

The trip begins with the three arriving in North Africa. Port is a traveler and this place provides the escape from the mechanized era he has longed for. Arriving at the port of Tanger with Kit and their friend, Turner, he soon regrets his decision, but is unwilling to admit this since it was his idea to go to Africa in the first place. As they advance deeper into the wilderness, the characters find themselves consumed by their rejection of the Western ego, while at the same time they suffer from the rejection by this new civilization they are so eager to embrace.

The relationship between the characters, Kit's love for Port and their discontentment with the presence of Turner, will be studied from a psychoanalytical perspective, as the novel is filled with the inner monologues of the characters and their impressions of their companions. It will focus on how their interactions lead them to slowly reshape, lose, or abandon their idea of Western ego and how their travels deep into the wilderness affect them.

The Moresby couple, Kit and Port, are the main characters of the novel, with Turner being more of an embodiment of the Western world Port is trying to flee. Both of them represent a

different angle on the loss of the Western ego and the harshness of abandoning the only culture to which they belong. The essay will explore their motivations for rejecting conventional American values. For Port, this involves an avoidance of emotional responsibilities and a fascination for the unknown, as represented by the desert and the sky. Kit, on the other hand, attempts to deny the disintegration and destruction of her Western ego, fearing consumption of her own sense of self.

The novel's three chapters are connected to the evolution of the characters as they move further away from the Western culture they despise while at the same time gradually losing their own selves. This thesis will explore the tragic consequences this entails.

Its methods will derive from New Criticism and Psychoanalytic Criticism. Both approaches focus on the the construction and development of the core theme, examining the psyche of the characters and their interactions with one another and with the environment.

PAUL BOWLES' BIOGRAPHY

An inveterate traveler, composer and writer, Paul Bowles was a truly remarkable figure whose life and work embodied and responded to major impulses of the twentieth century. His life would be of considerable interest even had he not produced numerous musical scores, four novels, more than sixty short stories, many travel pieces, an unrevealing autobiography and dozens of translations of stories by Moroccan storytellers. His autobiography, *Without Stopping*, published in 1972, reads like a who's who of twentieth-century arts and letters. Among those whose lives intersected with Bowles' are Aaron Coplan, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Kurt Schwitters, Claude McKay, W.H. Auden, Tennessee Williams, Trueman Capote, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Patricia Highsmith. During the thirties, forties and fifties, Bowles journeyed—always by ship or overland—relentlessly, almost frantically, to and from New York, into the heart of North Africa's deserts, into the depths of the tropical forests of Latin America, and around the globe to the small island of Taprobane off the coast of Sri Lanka, an island he bought and owned for a number of years. These landscapes became backdrops for Bowles fiction, giving it a distinctive, unique flavor.

Bowles' fictional worlds typically feature American travelers in exotic and hostile foreign settings who experience disease, psychological disintegration or terror. Man is adrift in an endless existential quest to piece together meaning in an increasingly chaotic, ugly, barbaric, horrifying world.

Bowles' music, on the other hand, is more cheerful and benign. In his collection of essays *Setting the Tone*, the composer Ned Rorem (who first met Bowles in Mexico in the forties),

contrasts Bowles' literary and musical styles, observing that while Bowles' fiction is "dark and cruel, clearly meant to horrify in an impersonal sort of way," his music is "nostalgic and witty, evoking the times and places of its conception."

An only child, Paul Frederic Bowles was born in Jamaica, Queens, on December 30, 1910, to Rena and Claude Bowles. Bowles fondly remembers his mother reading Poe to him in the early years, while he chiefly remembered his father, a dentist, as a strict disciplinarian. In his autobiography, Bowles recounts hearing his grandmother tell him that his father tried to kill him when he was a baby, by leaving him virtually naked in a basket by an open window in the dead of winter. True or not, these impressions and feelings certainly had a profound effect on the artist as a young man and can be felt on occasion in his writing.

Bowles began publishing Surrealist poetry in the Parisian magazine transition at the age of 16. After briefly attending the University of Virginia, he traveled to Paris, where his interests turned to music. In 1929 he returned to New York and began studying musical composition under Aaron Copland. Bowles became a sought-after composer, writing music for more than 30 theatrical productions and films. During this time, he also became a member of the loose society of literary expatriates in Europe and North Africa and started writing short stories.

In 1937 Bowles met Jane Auer, whom he married the following year. He was then twenty-seven; she was twenty. The ensuing marriage was, by all accounts, unconventional. Each, while maintaining close ties to the other, developed intimate relationships with friends of their own sex. Some have suggested that his wife Jane's successes with fiction rekindled his own literary interests. He also found that writing was more practical than his work as a composer, which often demanded his presence in New York while pieces were being rehearsed. No matter

what the reasons, by the end of the forties, Bowles was devoting more and more time to his literary career and gaining acclaim for his accomplishments.

In 1947 he and his wife, writer Jane Bowles, settled in Tangier, Morocco, a city that became his most potent source of inspiration. There, he wrote his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949; film, 1990), a harsh tale of death, rape, and sexual obsession. It became a best-seller and made Bowles a leading figure in the city's expatriate artistic community.

By the end of the fifties, Bowles had been discovered by a number of figures associated with the American Beat movement, who made pilgrimages to his apartment in Tangier. Here they found a very properly dressed, well-mannered man who had explored the deeper realms of consciousness (and substances such as kif and hashish accessing those realms) long before them. As Norman Mailer proclaimed in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), "Bowles opened the world of hip. He let inside the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square, the call of the orgy, the end of civilization".

Bowles's later novels include *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider's House* (1955), and *Up Above the World* (1966). His *Collected Stories, 1939–1976* (1979) and his subsequent short-story collections, which include *Midnight Mass* (1981) and *Call at Corazón* (1988), also depict human depravity amid exotic settings. Bowles recorded Moroccan folk music for the U.S. Library of Congress, wrote travel essays, translated works from several European and Middle Eastern languages into English, and recorded and translated oral tales from Maghribi Arabic into English. *Without Stopping* (1972) and *Two Years Beside the Strait: Tangier Journal 1987–1989* (1990; U.S. title, *Days*) are autobiographical.

While his work tapered off noticeably in the eighties and nineties, as his own health deteriorated, critical appreciation of both his music and fiction grew. In september 1995, Bowles returned to New York for the first time in twenty-six years, to be on hand for a festival of his music performed by the Eos Ensemble. A handful of CDs featuring Bowles music have recently been produced, as well as a documentary film, *Night Waltz* (1997), focusing on his music, a number of other film documentaries on Bowles have appeared in recent years.

Paul Bowles died of heart failure in the Italian Hospital of Tangier on November 18, 1999. His ashes were interred near the graves of his parents and grandparents in Lakemont, New York on November 1, 2000. Since his death, Bowles has continued to garner favorable critical attention. In the new century, his life and work will take on even greater significance, as the public finds themselves immersed in what seems to be an extended and irreconcilable conflict with the Islamic Middle East. Bowles lived more or less continuously in Morocco during the last half of the century. No other American writer of any note has spent so long immersed in Arab/Islamic culture, and his experiences and insights are woven into the tapestry of his fiction. Bowles journeyed into the heart of darkness, saw the horror of it all, returned, and gave it exquisite aesthetic form.

ANTECEDENTS

Most of the influences Bowles received in both his writing and musical composition come from his relationship with Gertrude Stein, Morocco and its people. Stein was the one who suggested Bowles to visit Tangier, where he lived most of his life until he died. There Bowles found a great interest in the local fiction which he went to translate from Maghrebi and classical Arabic. Similarly, Bowles found much of his existentialist influence, even without considering himself a writer of this current, in the works of Sartre and Camus, some of whom he not only read but also translated.

As for his literary influences, Bowles argued that everything influences us. Referring to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe that his mother used to read him before going to bed. Like Poe's, Paul's characters are solitary and melancholy, obsessive, irrational, morbid, tormented, and recklessly self-destructive. Both writers combine the real and the fantastic, portray extreme psychological states, and build up to a climax of nightmarish agony. Their bleak and menacing fictions, in which darkness and evil are active forces in life, develop the recurrent theme of a victim unwillingly led, forced, or trapped into a remote, dangerous, and often fatal situation¹. Although Poe and Bowles belong to different moments of literature, Bowles has reaffirmed the great influence Poe elicited on him, which can be confirmed in the thematic affinities present in the writings of both. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Poe's only novel, and *The Sheltering Sky* by Bowles, share several similarities, including their central focus of the development and purposes of a trip. Focusing on human nature in the face of geographical

¹ taken from:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0050.205:g=mqrg;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1>

changes, the narratives of both works share similar motifs: a journey that leads the protagonists to find knowledge that turns out to be self-destructive, and that the knowledge sought and the journey to be achieved are a fundamental part of the attraction to the unknown, as Pounds (1986) argues in his analysis on Poe and Bowles' similarities. Both characters, he contends, yearn "for the annihilation the journey potentially entails, in the older sense in which it means "wilderness", an area without civilized humanity" (p. 4).

In the same way, Bowles attributed an enormous influence to what is read in youth, namely Arthur Machen and Walter de la Mare, The school of Mystical Whimsy. And when he found Thomas Mann, he fell in love with *The Magic Mountain*. At only sixteen, it proved to be a great influence, perhaps the book that most influenced him before going to Europe. Likewise, Bowles was constantly moving from place to place, arguing on occasions that his reason for continuous traveling was his desire to get as far away as possible from the place where he was born, far away geographically and spiritually. Bowles was a man who felt at peace and happier away from his homeland, further arguing that "Life is very short and the world is there to see and one should know as much about it as possible. One belongs to the world, not just one part of it."² This type of influence is mainly denoted in his novels, *The Sheltering Sky* and *Let It Come Down* the central arguments of which feature American characters traveling to the distant lands of Africa in Morocco, a foreign place far away from their homeland, both times unable to return.

Bowles' stories were tales of frightening and dazzling adventures against the deserty background of the Arab part of the African continent, a part of the world rarely explored by writers, even by those who knew it first hand such as Camus or Gide. Bowles knows this region

² Taken from: <http://www.paulbowles.org/danielhalpern.html>

much better than the other two writers, being a person who lived his life entering and leaving that environment. Traveling, and particularly the desert, excited him but never unbalanced him, as opposed to his characters. Bowles was a character reluctant to remain in the coastal cities which repeatedly led him to look for distant, tortuous places which entailed laborious and dangerous situations.

The theme of existentialism – isolation, absurdity and radical despair – in *The Sheltering Sky* is clearly explored through the behaviors of the Moresbys (Spindler, 1989, p. 39). Travel is for Port a quest for selfhood, making him realize that beneath civilization lies another self, more natural and sensual. And while this liberation from taboos and inhibitions would allow a construction of a new self that would involve the repudiation of culture, decency and morality, which happens to the Moresbys turns to tragedy.

Another immense influence for Bowles was his interest in the French existentialism of the early twentieth century and its contemporaneous works of both Sartre and Camus. As typical existential topics are to be found in Bowles work, such as preoccupations with the alienation of the individual in a godless, meaningless world and the problem of identity and nihilism (Spindler, 1989, p.40).

There are certain similarities between the ideas that characterize the absurd and Bowles' work. In a world that has given up on positive lights and illusions, man feels like an alien, a stranger. And this has led to exile without remedy. Such characteristics can be seen in Port's behavior towards the western world, a world that bores him and to which he feels he does not belong. The idea of the western world rejects Port as much as he rejects it. Besides the simple idea of the modern man leaving society and being overwhelmed and swallow up by the

wilderness represents the primitive hostility of the world, the anguish, boredom and terror that characterize Camus' absurd as he echoes in Sartre's *Nausea* (as cited in Splinder, 1989, p.40):

A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is 'dense', sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we have clothed them . . . The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia.

However, the existentialism of both Sartre and Camus differs in several features from Bowles' work. For instance, Bowles refuses to apply any ethical considerations to the actions of Port and Kit. As opposed to the ideas of *l'engagement and Angoisse*, the actions of the Moresby never happen to suffer any social consequences. Port is especially assertive in allowing people to know this, as is seen in his lack of preoccupation and interest in answering in an apologetically way when asked about his way of living. Additionally, Bowles lacks any romantic feature in his work, according to Splinder (1989): "There is none of that residual romanticism, the faith of retained values of pride and dignity in struggle despite its futility" (p 40).

Another existentialist who comes closer to Bowles' spirit is the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1935), who not only argues in *Suffering and Existence* the view that "nothingness is the only reality and irremediable despair the only attitude" but also has a vast production on the subject of the modern man losing himself in routines. Jaspers is especially similar to Bowles in his concern about the subservience of modern society towards technological developments, as he argues that "as we become more and more dependent upon modern scientific inventions, we

become more and more dependent upon the civilization that produces them” (Killinger, 1961, p. 308). In *The Sheltering Sky*, it is this growing dependence of the western world which Port is trying to get away from, as he refuses to assume a role of “tiny cog to keep civilization functioning.” This idea of working for the general idea of functioning society invalidates the possibility of freedom as men focus on immediate productive goals and there is no time left to contemplate life as a whole (“Man in the Modern Age,” tr. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Doubleday, 1957). When the average functional capacity has become the standard of achievement, the individual is regarded with indifference (Jaspers, op. cit., p. 51). It is that elimination of the importance of the individuality that Port wants to get away from, that idea of man with a single purpose of general utility, a world where people lack their own desire to be themselves, creating a mediocre society without destiny or human attributes that characterize them. Like Jaspers, Paul Bowles offers in his work a solution to this elimination of human essence in a proposal to face being with nothingness, allowing man to have another exit other than becoming a slave of his functions. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port is faced with nothing during his last days of illness where he is lying in that room of the French military post lives and experiences this “nothing” first hand, where he returns to himself with the purpose of power consider his finitude and personal integrity. “They constitute moments of choice, when a man decides to become an existing individual or to go back to the anonymity of the masses. Again it is a choice between dreadful freedom and freedom from dread”. (Killinger, 1961, p.308)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following analysis of the novel *The Sheltering Sky* by American expatriate author Paul Bowles is mainly covered by two critical approaches: Psychological Analysis and New Criticism.

New Criticism

American criticism was dominated by the branch of formalism that dominated from 40's to 60's in the United States. In an attempt to demonstrate the existence of formal unity, critics focus on every part of a work – words, images, elements – showing how each contributes to a central unifying theme. Since every detail of the work is linked to a theme or idea, those are generally treated as symbolic, as figurative or allegorical, representations of that central, unifying idea.

When every part of the unit is related to the whole and the whole is reflected in each part, this is called organic unity. The external, preconceived structure of rules that do not arise from the individuality of the work but from the type of genre is called mechanical unity. New critical analysis, 'or explication of the text', is especially effective in the critical reading of poetry.

The New Critics' focus on the theme or meaning as well as form means that for them the literature is referential: it points to something outside itself, things in the real, external world or in human experience—a tree, a sound wave, love. The New Critics, in general, do not question the reality of the phenomenal world or the ability of language to represent it. (Bain, C., Beaty, J., & Hunter, J. 1991, P. 1394-1395).

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis. This approach will be one of the analytical focuses of this work due to the interest in evidencing the importance of the internal elements of the novel, as the characters go through different stages of developments and changes, which are clearly marked by the wild environment that surrounds them and their interactions they have with the locals, in addition to other symbols placed by the author which lead to interpretation of the characters.

Psychological Criticism

Psychological criticism is the analysis of the relationship between modern psychology and literature and literary criticism. This approach is based on the idea of the existence of a human consciousness (those impulses, desires, and feelings about which a person is unaware but which influence his emotions and behavior). The psychological approach is used by critics to examine the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events, instead of merely speculating about a writer's own motivations – conscious or unconscious – in a literary work, as biographers do.

One interesting facet of this approach is that it validates the importance of literature, as it is built on a literary key for the decoding. Freud himself wrote, "The dream-thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our

thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech" (26).

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as "symbolism" (the repressed object represented in disguise), "condensation" (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and "displacement" (anxiety located onto another image by means of association).

Despite the importance of the author here, Psychological Criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with "what the author intended." But what the author never intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind³.

Thus, the purpose of using Psychological Criticism on the following essay is to analyze aspects of the novel which serve to interpret the author's intentions by analyzing his own psyche, focusing mainly on the importance the author gives to the detachment of the western society and the influence wilderness has upon the psychological changes in his characters.

³ Taken from: <https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/psycho.crit.html>

DESTRUCTION AND DETACHMENT OF THE WESTERN EGO IN THE MORESBY COUPLE IN THE SHELTERING SKY

The Sheltering Sky is the most successful book by the American expatriate existentialist writer Paul Bowles. Described by Tennessee Williams as a travelers book, the novel traces the journey of the Moresby couple and their friend Turner through Northern Africa.

The novel is set in a post World War Two world in which humanity has begun to question the meaning of existence due to the harsh effects of the war. Like the French existentialists of the twentieth century, the author allows the characters to “question their existence and forces them to undergo a painful ripping-away of their civilized ego in a universe stripped of meaning that offers no hope of redemption or insight into any higher meaning to life”. (Summerville, 2011).

In *The Sheltering Sky*, to escape from the predetermined existence of a Western civilized person is referred to as *Awayness*, as the characters try to stay in constant movement in their search to find a new meaning in their lives apart from the one with which they have grown comfortable. It is through traveling and moving deeper into the Algerian desert that the characters attempt to go beyond the anxiety and despair of mere existence through the dignity in the travel itself. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how this constant traveling impacts the existential struggles of the main characters in different ways.

Port's avoidance of emotional responsibilities and his fascination with the unknown mark his character and his motivations as much as his travels. He seeks to overcome his sense of estrangement from American values through the achievement of human purpose he sees in

traveling. Kit, on the other hand, represents the Western prototype that clings to any minimal familiar feeling that presents itself, such as traveling with her husband as an excuse to deny her own existential void by believing that improving their marriage will make her more worthy of Western status. She is aware of this necessity for a Western home feeling but refuses to admit it. As Port and Kit wander aimlessly from sensation to sensation, unconsciously seeking a wholeness in life they feel they have lost, the desert becomes a symbol of their spiritual emptiness as well as the greater void.

According to Summerville (2011), Bowles explained that his intent in the novel was to show “what the desert can do to us, to reveal the inner desert of spirit.” Both characters are forced to undergo a ripping-away of the Western ego in an environment that offers no hope of any meaning of life. While Bowles admits that the destruction of ego is important to find meaning and the ability to live, it is possible to observe how the characters are reluctant to let go of this ego as they move between different sensations, looking for the meaning of life. Port runs away from his emotional responsibilities and justifies this with his travels deeper into Africa, constantly moving away from the existential doubts that surround him. Kit realizes the meaninglessness of her own being as she follows Port in an attempt to find a social identity that justifies her own existence. *Awayness* allows the characters to follow their own ways of understanding or resisting their existential void.

In *The Sheltering Sky* movement and landscape play an immense role in the development of the characters. The relationship of the Moresby marriage has always been one of traveling and moving away from the Western civilization. North Africa represents this estrangement and it represents this detachment from their Western chains, a new meaning for their empty lives.

According to Fusell in Mewshaw (2005), “Without travel there’s inevitably “a loss of amplitude,” a decay of imagination and intellectual possibility corresponding to the literal loss of physical freedom.” Their interactions, mental monologues and conversations with other characters, Western or local, will be illustrating the change of psyche which the characters go through.

Book One: Tea in the Sahara

The trip begins in Tangier, a port city in the north of Africa which had been barely stained by wars. There, Europe had left its mark, and its residents and culture had already accepted it, when the three young Americans arrive. Port considers himself not a tourist but a traveler, with the distinction that a tourist longs to return home after a brief period of experiencing the wilderness, while the traveler has nowhere to return to. Port “was somewhere, he had come back through vast regions from nowhere; there was the certitude of an infinite sadness at the core of his consciousness, but the sadness was reassuring, because it alone was familiar” (*The Sheltering Sky*, p. 6).

For Port, Western society causes great despair. The constant threat of war and the displacement of art guide the story deeper into the Algerian desert. The world lacks meaning and becoming a traveler is the only way to avoid being swallowed up by the void of emptiness.

Port lives in a constant search for a society different from his own. Since his early years as a student, he has never stayed in one place, always looking for a place far away, always questioning his own culture and comparing it with others (TSS Chapter 2, pg 7). Even before his

marriage to Kit, he had traveled to the Near East and to Central and South America. Africa was one of the places he had been before, during his years as a student. Like most of the intelligentsia of the twentieth century, he lived in Paris but quickly felt uneasy and allured by the wilderness.

This interest for the unknown, for these “places that have withstand the malady of the war” is one of the main features of Port’s character. One of his first impressions of Tangier makes reference to the Western world they have left behind, and his lack of interest in it, while accepting that even though the current place is not appealing, at least it does not lack spirit and it is not directed to an endless void: “If you mean this colorless mess here that calls itself a town, yes. But I’d still a damned sight rather be here than back in the United States” (TSS pg. 7). While the port of Tangier fills him with disappointment, he quickly interprets this as a necessity to move inland as soon as possible.

Kit’s purpose during her trip with Port is to improve their relationship as a couple. Their marriage usually has consisted of Port deciding on their next destination and Kit dutifully following him, as if their marriage and relationship could only exist in these types of interactions. Kit is constantly looking for a way to justify herself in terms of Western culture, to maintain her status, and her coming to the north of Africa is no different. She keeps following Port to each destination even if it seems absurd, just to reassure herself that their relationship is working and that they are an adventurous couple. She does not see herself as a traveller. For her, each trip represents one of Port’s whims that ultimately will lead them to back their own home in New York as she snaps saying, “Oh, not here!” she continues. “You seem to forget we’ll be back in New York someday.” “I know, I know,” responds Port. “It’s hard to believe, but I suppose we will.”

Constant movement is a way of life for Port. The desert and its vastness interest him more than any gray city stained by war. Port's yearning to discover the unknown leads him to a walk that both relaxes him and piques his sense of loneliness as he faces the reality of other cultures' hostility towards foreigners. He realizes that for them, his only value is his money; for them, he is merely a tourist. However, the locals' economic interests towards him is a reflection of the suffering has endured. In their eyes, Port represents their salvation, a way of ending their suffering. For Port, it is not possible to understand said suffering. He soon realizes that their situation is not the same as his, and the suffering of each culture and people can only be understood by those experiencing the same situation. Thus, Port is still limited by his Western ego.

However the uniqueness and the abundance of the local culture and customs fill Port with peace. The way the chairs and table block the road, preventing the cars from passing, denying the intrusion of the Western world into their culture, their indifference to the bugs lying on the floor: all these represents this exotic culture Port longs for. "He was aware that ordinarily he would have experienced a thrill of disgust on contact with such a phenomenon, but unreasonably tonight he felt instead a childish triumph" (TSS, pg 11).

Besides, the great number of languages spoken there reveal the richness of the place, a crossroad of cultures and ideals. Before him, there were other people like him, expatriates, who had left their mark. However, even there, in the northern part of wild Africa there were still things that reminded him of the old world he was trying to leave behind.

Slowly Port becomes allured by the bitterness that surrounds the outer parts of the city as he moves away from the sea. He continues deeper into this iteration of the unknown,

increasingly incapable of making the decision to return. This proximity to forbidden, Port finds thrilling. His thoughts of Kit being stuck in the hotel waiting for him remind him how much he enjoys this freedom. He feels elated at being away from the safety of his homeland, yet always in control, knowing that there is always the chance to freely go back.

The Arab's arrangement with Port to meet with the young dancer illustrates the Westerner's inability to control his fascination for the unknown despite the fact that he is essentially invisible and unwanted. The trip to the meeting place makes clear that the Westerner is a weird entity. In a place with no foreigners, where the locals live in their unstained culture, a weird presence is ignored and foreigners are ignored unless there is an interest to pursue. As soon as they attract their interest with displays of exoticness, there is no longer any need to act friendly. After all, their only concern is taking money from tourists.

Taken to a dark place, full of tents and confusion, he is led to meet the dancer, a young girl, "slim, wild-looking . . . with a white turban like headdress that pulled her hair tightly backward, accentuating the indigo designs tattooed on her forehead" (TSS pg. 16). Language and cultural barriers are Port's main concern. He finds himself unable to engage in a proper interaction with this embodiment of the unknown, and it annoys him. Denying his own culture does not have as a consequence the ability to join immediately another.

The tale of the desert sisters reflects Port's desires. In the tale, three sisters fall in love with the foreigner as they sleep together in the desert. More than the idea of being loved by the foreigner, they fall in love with the idea of the vastness they get to experience in the desert. Like Port, the three sisters lack interest in their current lifestyle and long to travel to the highest dune in the desert. The story ends with the three sisters achieving their purpose, leaving their culture

behind in the search of the unknown but there, in the limitless void of the unknown, they have nothing to protect them; there is no one to rely on. There is only a tragic ending when one rejects one's roots.

“Then they lay down and slept. And then”— Smail paused and looked at Port. “Many days later another caravan was passing and a man saw something on top of the highest dune there. And when they went up to see, they found Outka, Mimouna and Aicha; they were still there, lying the same way as when they had gone to sleep. And all three of the glasses” he held up his own little tea glass, “were full of sand. That was how they had their tea in the Sahara.”

After Port realizes that further intimacy with the dancer girl would require more time than what he has left in Tanger, he decides to leave. Suddenly the young girl reaches for his wallet and he pushes her away, and noises start to come from the other tents, forcing him to escape. More than escaping from the people chasing him, he feels that his escape is from the aggressiveness and selflessness of the unknown towards a foreigner who refuses to accept that to get inside their world there is a price.

Problems in the Moresby couple are an issue with different levels of importance for both characters. Kit is a hardcore believer in omens, always finding herself over analyzing situations and mannerisms to determine the best course of action, and this trip and Port's absence during the night are no exception. However, as much as she has always been a cautious woman, and even though she knows that Port is up to something, she is also aware of her dependence on him. She is always expecting of him to notice her dedication and interest while in spite of her awareness of how unlikely that is to happen; “Against her will she forced herself to admit that she still belonged to Port, even though he did not come to claim her, and that she lived in a world

illuminated by the distant light of possible miracle: he might yet return to her” (TSS, pg 18). This realization makes her miserable. She always waits for Port, she follows him. Her dependence on him makes her furious, but she is but smart enough to refuse to make any effort to change this because she strongly believes that it would not have any effect on him, and her not trying was a better omen than failing.

Turner presents a threat to Port and Kit’s relationship. For Kit, he represents a tool to get Port to pay attention to her, but she does not allow herself to regard Turner as a legitimate option since she would always be comparing him to her husband. Besides, she has feelings of distaste and apathy toward Turner and his personality simply bores her. Finally, any effort for her to improve her interest in Turner would mean that again she would be working for the sake of Port. Though deep inside she has already made up her mind to build a relationship with Turner in order to bring Port to her, she is repelled by resorting to deceit. For Kit, Turner embodies the kind of outgoing and straightforward personality that clashes with her behaviour of resisting one’s desires and simply analyzing situations.

Port and Kit first meet the Lyle couple at dinner night the day after Port’s encounter with the young dancer. They are a young man and his mother, two English citizens traveling and working in Africa. Port and Kit watch them from afar as they interact, extremely interested in their peculiar way of expressing themselves. They are “fascinated as always by the sight of a human being brought down to the importance of an automaton or a caricature. By whatever circumstances and in whatever manner reduced, whether ludicrous or horrible, such persons delighted him” (TSS pg. 21)

After dinner, Port goes for a walk around their hotel. His opinion of the hotel is that it resembles an idea of the Western world. The colonial-style building contrasts sharply with the festive and friendly aura he has witnessed in the town and its pseudo-Westerners only adds to its inability to transmit any sign of happiness. It is impossible to feel in Africa in such environment.

Lyle is a man who likes to tell stories about his trips and the jobs he has held while traveling. The vast knowledge of traveling and Africa are part of what makes Port so interested in him. However, he notices how Lyle has a way of expressing himself in a manner that makes his topics seem perfectly chosen for each occasion: “as if the subject of conversation had been chosen as one proper to the occasion, one which could be extended for as long as time as necessary” (TSS pg. 23).

The short conversation between Port and Lyle and their shared interest to travel deeper into Africa results in a proposal for the Moresby group to ride with them to Boussif, the next town on the road. Kit, who is reluctant to be with them due to the devious intentions she is quick to suspect, travels by train with Turner. This disagreement presents an opportunity for Kit to use Turner to cause jealousy in Port and the attention he pays to her. But at the same time it gives Turner the opportunity to get closer to Kit. His personality is one that imposes his charm and dominance through his masculinity and sympathy to gain the trust of everyone, except for Port and Kit.

Turner knows that the Moresbys are conscious of his guise and unlikely to be entranced by it. However, he is attracted to anything above his intellectual grasp, and this is what the Moresbys represent for him. Kit's decision to travel alone with him makes him reconsider her motivation. Kit and Turner's train journey offers two aspects to consider. On the one hand, Kit's fear, due to the bad feeling Lyle produces, and Port's decision to move away more and more

from the civilized. During the trip, Turner's protective behaviour supported by alcohol eases Kit's fear and works in Turner's favor.

Half drunk and in search of a bathroom, Kit ends up in the last wagon of the train, the one reserved for the Arabs and Berbers. In this short trip, she leaves everything she knows behind and experiences first hand the passing curiosity that the Western world causes the Africans, followed by a complete disinterest towards her. Her body begins to shake and the alcohol increases her panic, leaving her frozen. Determined to leave that hostile place, she forces her way to the door only to face a silhouette: "The tall man wore cast-off European clothes, and burlap bag over his head like a haïk. But where his nose should have been was a dark triangular abyss, and the strange flat lips were white [...]. The man seemed neither to see her nor to feel the rain, he merely stood there" (TSS pg. 81). The illusion and silhouette caused by the alcohol that Kit has consumed is a omen of their trip: the Western man is immutable before the illness, difficulties and apathy of this environment, all due to his obsession with the wilderness so close. Kit's vulnerability presents another opportunity for Turner to comfort her. Kit not used to taking orders, as Port is not one to command her, and is incapable of resisting Turner's consolation, aware that Port would not behave that way toward her.

Although Port is aware of the possible ill intentions that Lyle and his mother might have towards him, the idea of believing in omens is more of a Kit trait and thus his interest in traveling and being in contact with the infinite nature do not diminish. On the contrary, the trip to Boussif presents Port with a diversity of moments of reflection that would be impossible in any other context due to the corruption and filth emanating from the Western world.

In his reflection, it is possible to appreciate Port's ideology based on individualism and detachment from all social structures in order to justify one's existence. For Port, it is impossible to accept the errors of humanity as his own: "I don't have to justify my existence by any such primitive means. The fact that I can breathe is my justification. If humanity does not consider that a justification, it can do what it likes to me. I'm not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here! I'm here! I'm in the world! But my world's not humanity's world. It's the world as I see it." (TSS pg. 94).

Their trip to the wilderness outside of Boussif also helps to better understand two aspects of the Moresby's. First, Port and Kit are aware of how difficult it is to respond adequately to the emotional needs of the other. Kit wants to love Port much more and close to him again. But she is not able to understand the emptiness that currently fills Port's heart. And Port is aware that his emptiness and silence are terrifying to Kit. But deep down he hopes that she too will find that fascination with infinity and loneliness. And while she is willing to become what he wants for the sake of her love, fear is always present, ready to take charge. Although both are aware of the fear and isolation that hurt their love, both are equally incapable to overcome it.

Enchanted by the landscape, Port continues his reflection before a terrified Kit, who is aware of the solitude that begins to absorb her husband. For Port, the sky is like a barrier, always protecting humanity from whatever is behind: nothing, complete darkness. Seeing that this idea terrifies Kit, Port decides to accept that perhaps both are scared of that unknown vastness, and perhaps that is why they are unable to move forward, always clinging to what is familiar, disinterested in the unknown: "You know what?" he says. "I think we're both afraid of the same thing. And for the same reason. We've never managed, either of us, to get all the way into life.

We're hanging on to the outside for all we're worth, convinced we're going to fall off at the next bump. Isn't that true?" (TSS pg. 101). One can not be complete, or justify one's own existence, living in the comfort of what is already known. In order to really develop as beings it is fundamental to let go of that love and attachment one has towards what is considered home, to get rid of the chains that represent the tranquility of a full life, with nothing new to know and understand.

Other than the ideological clashes they have become aware of, another factor threatens their relationship: Turner. Kit is sure that Port unconsciously knows of her betrayal with Turner but, in his current state, does not allow himself to acknowledge it. For Port, Turner represents a possible obstacle to recovering Kit's love. However, he is aware that at that moment and in his current psychological state, any attempt to resolve his doubt might result in his losing Kit completely. And while his relationship with Kit is important to Port, if he is determined to confront infinity and attain a feeling of completeness, his relationship is one more thing he will eventually have to let go of.

Port's encounter with Kit in rural Boussif, as well as his car trip with the Lyles reinforce his idea that in order to reflect it is necessary to be in movement, on the road. Moving on to the next town only reinforces this idea. His arrival in Aïn Krofka is of great interest to Port since represents the last frontier that no tourist has touched before. The idea of the absence of tourists in the depths of Africa make him happy; little by little he is escaping that society that so disgusts him. "The idea that at each successive moment he was deeper into the Sahara than he had been the moment before, that he was leaving behind all things, this constant consideration kept him in a state of pleasurable agitation (TSS pg. 109).

At Aïn Krofka, Kit and Turner notice that not only is the village archaic, but it is also full of flies. Flies which the natives have learned to live with. Quickly both decide to not spend much time in that place. For Port, however, the important thing is the landscape and the immensity in front of him; other things, such as the flies, are of little importance. "What are all these flies?" Port asks. Kit looks at Turner and laughs. "I was wondering how long it would be before you discovered them." (TSS pg. 114)

Turner's extremely Western attitude, as Kit calls it, makes it easier for Port to get rid of him. He convinces him to return to Boussif with the Lyles while Kit and Port waited for the next bus back. Port hopes that this will improve his relationship with Kit, who is not happy with Port's method but is aware of the obstacle that this lifts for them. However, the negative omens reappear, signaling that terrible things that are soon to happen, not because of her betrayal with Turner but because of something much worse.

Two ensuing situations develop the idea of the aggressiveness of the wild towards the Western world: The invitation to tea with the merchant and Port's walk with the hotel owner to a local brothel. On one hand, the unnecessary flattery of the merchant denotes an idealism of interest for the unknown. However, it can also be seen as the dependence on the land of origin people usually call home. "Yet you say Aïn Krofka is sad" says Port. "Sad?" repeats M. Chaoui with astonishment. "Aïn Korfa is never sad. It is peaceful and full of joy. If one offered me twenty million francs and a palace, I would not leave my native land" (TSS pg. 131).

On the other hand, aggressiveness can be understood in the restrictions on women's freedom, as demonstrated by the merchant's displeasure towards Kit for her interference in his talk with Port: "And so she sat drinking the tea, feeling that what she saw and heard around her

was not really happening, or if it were, she was not really there herself” (TSS pg. 131). Further, the disinterest of the Arabs at the brothel towards Port, making him feel like they were only interested in his money. Due to the increasingly indifferent and hostile reactions towards him, Port feels a discomfort that he can not fully understand. However, he believing that this discomfort is linked to the flurry of experiences one has in life with no time to stop and analyze each one, he remains determined to seek answers in the gratifying fullness that lies behind the seductive void.

In order to understand *The Sheltering Sky*, it is relevant to consider the time when it was written. After being rejected by several big publishers, it was finally accepted by James Laughlin, whose interest of art over best sellers was rare. *The Sheltering Sky* proposes a disavowal of and disinterestedness in the audience and the Western ego which lauds careerism and has no interest in the artistic development which allows the writer to grow in a more complete way by detaching himself of everything, including life itself. While authors like Tennessee Williams argue that Bowles’s work represents the detachment of everything for art itself, even though Port has yet to publish. Bowles addresses this paradox by saying: “As long as he he was living his life, he could not write about it. Where one left off, the other began, and the existence of circumstances which demanded even the vaguest participation on his part was sufficient to place writing outside the realm of possibility” (Brier, 2006).

It is not possible to talk about the work of Bowles without touching on the rejection of the American ego. The novel describes the innocent relationship of Westerners with the world through a young couple traveling abroad, whose purpose is to flee from the mechanized world and find in the unknown a new, less banal wholeness. However, these efforts are delayed when

they encounter the African culture, which is disruptive to Western eyes, as the language barrier and the treatment from the locals culture leave him in a culture he cannot call his own, leading to total exile.

In the same way, Kit experiences this anguish when she realizes that by abandoning the totality of her Western identity, she faces the void of nothingness. Just as the sky protects them from nothingness, so do language and certain aspects of their original culture, like, for example, their passports. It is this inability to stop seeing the world without making the comparisons with Western society, that reveals one of the main obstacles present in the novel: the breakdown of the meaning of being before a shattered identity (Edwards, 2005).

Cultural encounters place travelers outside of society, outside their values and laws. It pits foreigners as potential victims of tribal customs. This is reflected in the fate of Kit after the death of Port, to become the slave of a Muslim merchant who imprisons her and makes her his sexual slave. Finally, these cultural encounters that distance the characters and readers from all moral prejudices, end up distancing and disintegrating the main characters psychologically, who, forced out of the fragile protection that the Western ego represents, the shell which they refer as society, end up reacting in a manner that is self-destructive.

The theme of the destruction of the ego is central for the development of the novel, in which the protagonists end up as victims to the primitive forces that surround them. In this sense the early influence of Poe is evident in the work and the themes of Bowles, specifically in *The Sheltering Sky*. Both writers present a character that is overwhelmed by the difficulties of the new culture, until they end up facing loneliness and isolation. Bowles's protagonist, like Poe's navigates complex landscapes acquiring knowledge that is ultimately harmful to the self. This

type of travel, with the purpose of being able to discover a deeper state of consciousness, demands a separation from the ego. That is why Port experiences a state of total disassociation. According to Pounds, "The deeper Port moves into the desert, the further he has moved into himself, the more clearly he is the victim of a hostile consciousness and of the destruction at the end of his quest" (Pounds, 1986). In Port's case, the desert represents the unknown, a strange culture that rejects foreigners, as the Westerner who tries to escape the bonds of the civilized world with the purpose of understanding what is beyond the sheltering sky. Port's is a very rationally ordered quest framed in terms of an absolute of knowledge (Pounds, 1986). The goal he seeks is one from which there is no return. Likewise Kit, who in her search for detachment from her ego, ends up totally isolated in a "primitive" Muslim culture to which she can not adapt. In her failure, she is turned into an object of pleasure, since this is the role that this primitive society assigns her. It is a failure that awaits all those who abandon their identity and fail to adapt or understand a foreign culture: they are forced to suffer.

In fact, Kit is even forced to leave her own identity as a woman, as she is forced to disguise herself as a man to stay safe in the place to which the Arab merchant takes her. In the same way, Kit leaves aside the monogamous customs of the West and ends up accepting in an automatic way that what is common to women there: to serve to satisfy Belqassim. Kit is then stripped of her own being and resigned to an animalistic-instinctual activity, which leaves no room for internal consciousness (Movaghati, 2016).

Book Two: The Earth's Sharp Edge

The Moresby group meets their fate as soon as they arrive at the city of Bou Noura, a small city, the main feature of which is its French military post, infamous for accusations of French officers killing a native. There, Port reports his passport missing and accuses the inn's owner of stealing it. The Lieutenant, in an effort to avoid hurting his image even more with the natives, assures Port that it is unlikely for a local to steal something such as a passport, as it carries close to no value for them there in the middle of nowhere. In fact, if a local were to steal something, it would be something they find either attractive or of practical use and if his passport were stolen it would be sold as contraband, given its American origin and thus it would be possible to find. Port leaves the post assuring the lieutenant he will lift the accusation and receiving a promise that he will get his passport back. The loss of his passport impresses upon Port that he is stranded in the wilderness as he says, "Since I discovered that my passport was gone, I've felt only half alive" (164). The incapacity of proving one existence in the middle of the void results in causing a strange feeling of depression in Port. But after receiving reassurances from the lieutenant, Port returns to the inn to make up with the owner and tell Kit about his response. He finds Kit, disturbed by being surrounded by nothingness, craving something that would remind her of home as she makes clear when she says, "I felt I'd simply die if I didn't see something civilized soon" (166). Kit is still up to this point attached to her western origins and has yet to accept or rather face the traumatic events that will rip her longing of home, America. Finding Kit in such desperate state of longing for the Western world makes Port put on a mocking mood that helps to reduce the stress of his current problems. It means that

even in the middle of the wilderness the Westerner still attempts to build a fort of Western culture. He tells Kit he is now sure that Eric Lyle was the one who stole his passport but soon enough it will be recovered. Despite Port's worsening illness, he continues to consider valuable the idea of moving further into the desert to just let it get better naturally.

Port's decisions are still law for Kit, as she quickly agrees to follow him wherever he's headed. She is not interested in the places but rather in the reaction Port will have to them. She refers to them as places that would make him happier, rather than healthier. Later, after Kit has finally finished packing her belongings, both share drinks and reflect about how time changes the way they perceive life, how youth empowers the idea of knowledge as she says in her little chat with Port: "I used to think that life was a thing that kept gaining impetus, that it would get richer and deeper each year" (170). She holds an idea of growing non-stop, making everyone hunger to become wiser, and how this changes as one grows older, leaving only the uneasiness of facing the possibility that one's life will come to an end without any meaningful progress. Kit isn't surprised to find that Port usually holds a more tragic view of every situation, yet she bears it with the hope that it will have a positive impact on their relationship. "And now you know it's not like that. Right?" Port replies to her in a contemptuous manner. "It's more like smoking a cigarette" (170). As he implies that life is only enjoyable at the beginning and the more it consumes the less it is possible for people to stay lively about it, in fact getting richer and deeper only barely matches with Port's ideals, as for Port growing out smarter just have brought him to a void of existential lack of purpose.

Port's interest in moving deeper into the wilderness guides him to look for more information regarding El Ga'a, but what he finds is a complete ignorance or unwillingness to talk

about the town. It is impossible to find more information other than it was big and everything was more expensive. But rather than becoming depressed because of this, the idea of not being able to find any information about a place is more fitted to Port's interest, as if finally he will be closer to the point of complete ignorance of such basic information that is opposite of the fast way of acquiring information so common in the western world: "Only then did he understand that he really wanted to know nothing about El Ga'a" (175). This type of realization is under Port's eyes, as this is the type of development and lack of information he feels the current modern world is being lacking, the entrancing of the unknown and the incapability to no longer feel the dangers before the unknown.

However, completeness is far from achieved as Port is informed that his passport has appeared and it is in the hands of a friend of his, named Turner. The reappearance of this individual creates two problems for Port's plans: first, the stain his presence represents for the current landscape he is in, and second his awareness of the way this man threatens his relationship with Kit. Ignoring the symptoms of an illness that is more obvious to him every second, Port is quick to decide to get out of the town as soon as possible to travel to El Ga'a. As quickly as the same night Port is able to get seats. El Ga'a represents this last bastion of the stain left behind by the Western world, as well as a distant location where transport is scarce. Port's decision to travel to the town does not surprise Kit, and with little disagreement she consents to leave the town with Port despite the clear harm that it does to Turner. However, her guilt coupled with her resolution to improve her relationship with Port leads her to take the bus to El Ga'a. Under the pretense of having a sick wife, Port manages to get two tickets for the same night and

as Kit plays along with the farce, they realize as soon as they get inside the bus that they are being ignored, as if in there, they are not westerners, but rather invisible.

As soon as they are underway, Port's sickness becomes clearer to Kit and the realization of moving away further from civilization heightens the panic she has been suppressing up to now. However, on the outside she merely attributes it to Port's way of always being uninterested about everything as a trait of his personality as Kit implies "Typical of him, to be dead to the world, when I'm wide awake and bored" (186), as if he is just waiting for the next location to seem interested briefly and then quickly start ignoring it again.

The arrival at El Ga'a focuses mainly on two aspects that change in the psyche of Kit. First, Port's illness triggers her caring personality and makes her forget her disagreements with him but mainly because Kit is starting to be aware of how distant they are from any type of help, "There was nothing to do but refuse to get sick," she says, "once one was this far away from the world" (188). And second, she being enticed in the same way Port has been by the wilderness that she is witnessing in this new place, not only the landscape but also the people she sees and interacts with. The lack of presence of the western world and the beauty of the beasts and people is a picture she finds amusing in an era of development and technology. "It is rather wonderful," she thinks, "to be riding past such people in the atomic age" (191). The landscape turns soft and happy for Kit that has started to embrace the beauty of the raw and clean world.

The encounter with a world that suits Port's ideal of being clear of any occidental influence is so refreshing that even Port, despite his illness, refers to it as being the first place "without any visible sign of European influence," and for him it results in an unexpected quality

of being complete, “which dissipated the feeling of chaos” (194). As if sickness was a wall keeping him away from his initial purpose.

Once again Kit is required to make a decision. The city of El Ga’a closes the doors to her and her sick husband and, feeling desperate because of the reluctance of the place to give them a hand, she decides to move even further away, leaving behind the last bastion of western society, in hopes of allowing Port to get better by simply resting and moving far away from this hostile environment that refuses to see them as equals.

Port is entirely aware of his illness and the circumstances that have led him to finally reach that place he was looking for in the wilderness of the Algerian desert, and how being there makes irrelevant every difficulty and event during the trip, including his health. In a state of reflection due to the rest required by his disease, Port reflects on the criticism his ideals and way of life have faced. Before, his life was simple and without obstacles; nevertheless, the idea of self-imposed obstacles was something that Port considered ineffective to have a full and simple life. He desired to reach that spiritual completeness that would be presented to him in Africa. Port also has his own idea of existence as a complete being and the need of the western world to label him was terrifying. In Kit's various attempts to avoid scenarios in which Port had to explain his ideology to others, she had been quick to tell the others that Port was a writer, an idea that was not entirely uninteresting to him. However, that went against his idea of having a complete existence without labels, since this delimitation of the character and capabilities hindered the task of the writer. For Port, it is completely impossible to write without dedicating himself totally to it since “as long as he was living his life, he could not write about it” (207). As the impurity of life and living as something apart from a writer will prevent his work from being good him from

being able to enjoy it. Similarly, although he sees himself as a writer, he worries that no one will discover him or come to admire his work:

The arrival at the Sbâ military post brings to Kit the realization of the harshness that the wild represents for them. Just after their arrival, she meets the captain and notices both his mistrust and dry treatment towards them. Kit tries to ignore these behaviors due to Port's illness and tries her best to convince the captain to help her, only to get a cutting negative answer and an imposing order to keep the patient in quarantine and simply rest, because according to the captain's suspicions, what Port suffers from is typhoid and the only solution in that place away from modernity was to wait and rest. In the same way, the captain recommends that Kit rest and feed herself since she was also exposed to an environment of illness.

The changing perspective of the narrative, in which Kit takes centrality as narrator and main character, helps the reader experience the change that the person suffers when being completely alone before an aggressive and wild situation. Given this situation, the attitude of Kit undergoes various changes, including a concern that could be misinterpreted as maternal in the face of the need to take care of Port, which leads to changes in the way she asks Port about his needs and his resistance to her help, to which she responds, that it is only natural for her to be worried. "It's just automatic, I suppose, when people are sick," she tells him, laughing uncomfortably. "I'm sorry" (211). She is sadly aware that, despite her efforts and caring attitude, if she were to be in a similar situation, Port would not be as worried as her, as he would allow himself to be swallowed by the beauty of the wilderness:

This is also the attitude of the captain towards the Moresbys. Particularly towards Kit, in whom he openly distrusts, the presence of two young American adults in the middle of the desert

is something unlikely and it is even worse that one of them is seriously ill. However, the treatment of the captain, although strict, is careful, and despite Kit's suspicion towards his attitude it is impossible to deny that the captain is concerned about Port's health, even in his constant refusal to let Kit out of the village of Sbâ. He assures her that avoiding contact with the natives is better, as this would help to protect them from such soulless beasts. However, Kit sees his refusals as evidence that in the middle of nowhere it is impossible to trust even what is known and familiar.

After settling herself and Port in the room of the military post, Kit becomes hyper aware of the desert. The place is full of dust and the winds roar through the windows of the room. In the moments when she is not taking care of her husband, Kit recovers some of her characteristic lucidity. "Here I am, in the middle of the horror" (214), says Kit, as she returns to her thoughts of omens, but assuring herself that the worse has happened.

On the contrary, Port's realization about the certainty of his death drags him into a state of hallucinations and pseudo reflection linked to his incapability of returning to the living world. This attitude towards death takes a toll on Kit's mental state as she quickly disobeys the captain's orders and sneaks out the fort to look for milk or anything that will improve Port's state. However, this decision is inspired by the fear caused by the situation and Kit's need to run away from this room full of uneasiness. In the town, she meets a Jewish vendor named Daoud Zozeph, who explains that the reason the city is empty due to their religious customs. Kit feels calm talking to the vendor and decides to open herself up to him about her omens and how they have lead her closer to a state of madness. For the vendor, contrary to her beliefs, omens are there to warn us of something but fundamentally they are harmless.

Although Port is conscious in the midst of his hallucinations about the short time he has left, he tells Kit that his new birth is finally within his reach. Kit understands that Port's desires to leave her there in the middle of the desert would mean condemning her to remain trapped in an unknown, disinterested, and aggressive environment. The idea of having to survive alone in that environment terrifies her. This is the topic of the cultural encounters that constantly shows up in Bowles literature. Splinder (1989) describes it as "The lure of the primitive and the threat to the civilized self that the alien place presents, as Marlow, in *The Heart of Darkness* articulates: "Out there, there were no external checks; there was only 'utter solitude without a policeman, '" Bowles' stories usually present the deracination that leads to demoralization and disintegration of ego and ideology, which people take for granted in familiar surroundings" (pg. 37).

Finally Port collapses due to the high fever and pain, leaving Kit hopeless and suffering. He deeply regrets having done little to appreciate and improve their relationship as a couple. Kit is also aware of the imminent loss of her husband, but more than his physical, what really hurts her is the realization of the years lost with him.

Later, Turner learns from the lieutenant that the Moresbys are currently in Sbâ but that the transport to that place is difficult and in his condition Port would be unable to move nor would he need his passport. Port, on the other hand, continues to experience hallucinations due to the high fevers, many related to the abandonment of this plane and the inability to return. Kit is forced to witness Port's worsening condition while unable to take action.

The captain is proof of the aggressiveness coming from the familiar that can be found in the middle of nowhere. In addition, what the estrangement produced by travel reveals is the

essential isolation of the individual. It strips the self of those comforting illusions of community fostered by familiar surroundings and penetrates what Sartre terms '*mauvaise foi*' – bad faith or self-deception. Bowles has said: "Everyone is isolated from everyone else (Splinder, 1989, p. 38). Doubting the status of Kit and Port as spouses, he demands to see their passports. Kit informs him that Port's passport has been lost but the complaint has already been filed with the deputy in charge, but the captain remains unsatisfied. The immensity and apparent stillness of the desert correspond to the lack of movement in Kit's life, however, it is the immensity she finds in heaven that prevents her from losing herself: "She glanced and grimaced. The whole, monstrous star-filled sky was turning sideways before her eyes. It looked as still as death, yet it moved" (236). This makes her realize her state of total stagnation.

The sounds and cries from pain of Port attract the attention of the captain and the servants to the room, and not finding Kit, the captain decides that his suspicions about the relationship between Kit and Port are warranted. Ordering that all doors be closed and the guard to be increased, his distrust and malaise towards Kit reach their maximum state when he finds the back door wide open. All this happens while Port listens to the sounds of his own moans, certain that he is getting closer to achieving a complete existence. Every thought lacks freedom while it is linked to life itself and the only way to be able to access all the ideas that are available to infinity is to get rid of life itself; "It seemed to him that here was an untried variety of thinking, in which there was no necessity for a relationship with life" (237). The lack of strength and pain that Port suffers in his abdomen is also reflected in his dreams as he feels constantly pinned to the earth "the pain was all the existence at that moment. All the energy he could exert would not budge him from the spot where he lay impaled, his bleeding entrails open to the sky" (242). Port

realizes during his hallucinations that his goal of coming back to the room where he is, is now close to impossible. Instead, he is heading further away from that reality and closer to embracing the void but clearly incapable of reaching the freedom of embracing the nothingness. Similar to the Myth of Sisyphus, Port finds himself condemned to constantly come close to returning to the room, only to have to return to the void. Again and again he faces “the rickety iron staircase he was obliged to take, knowing that above, they were waiting with the boulder poised, ready to hurl it when he came near enough” (243).

Turner’s arrival to Sbâ happens as Kit is admiring the desert and notices a car approaching. She embraces him as a savior from her feeling of abandonment from reality. Turner's story about his difficulties remind Kit of her origins. But she can only cry and be comforted by Turner, while being unable to repress the pain caused by the current state of Port. However, for Kit “Turner offers the delight of not having to be responsible—not to have to decide anything of what was to happen!” (241). Kit insists that the current events were the results of the omens she chose to ignore. However, Turner is quick to realize that the idea of Kit bearing all the guilt would only lead to the decline of her health and insists that she cannot help Port improve his health and thus she should remain by his side.

Port’s death shocks Kit to the point of leaving her in a state in which she ignores everything outside the room, as if Port’s death had managed to reset her whole existence by pausing it. But the outside world does not care about the loss of Port. In the middle of nowhere life goes on and everyone is left to live and die by themselves. However, for Kit, accepting Port’s death is a more complex task since both of them had agreed on the fact that one can be anything but dead, as if death was a state to be reached only by those who achieve a connection with the

infinite. According to Killinger, this is similarly to the existentialist proposal that the only thing that will reveal the place of an individual to humans is when they are confronted with the possibility of ceasing to exist (1961, p. 303). This idea had always scared Kit and, as a way to suppress it, she dismisses Port's idea as depressing. "She was incapable now of thinking about death and since death was there beside her, she thought of nothing at all" (248). Although Port's death is a trauma in Kit psyche, she is a woman who is quick to recover and to make the next decision. She lies to Turner and escapes the room after leaving Port's dead body locked in it. With everything prepared in a small case (her money and belongings), she asks one of the children from the military post to take her case to the merchant store and tells him to keep it for her. After giving Port a last farewell, Kit escapes from the building through the window and goes to the merchant store.

There, in order to escape the existential trauma that Port's death represents, she lies to Daoud, asking him to allow her to stay for the night as she thinks to herself that, "she cannot meet her husband." It is as if death is something she does not want to accept. The merchant allows her to stay; then, when everyone is asleep, allured by the wild air of the desert, Kit follows the sound of drums from a local festival. Being away from the city fortifies Kit and allows her to ignore everything around her, but she cannot be allowed to be reckless as her inner voice is always whispering to her "look out , go carefully"(258). Whenever Kit is about to be happy, she hangs on instead of letting go. However, captivated by the water of the oasis she discovers, she undresses and bathes by herself, surrounded by the moon and the sky.

Kit is capable of understanding how liberating her current state is because "she had found it again, the joy of being. She said to herself that she would hang on to it no matter what the

effort entailed” (259). The idea of no longer having to fight to keep the idea of a marriage and not having to deal with Port’s decisions is liberating enough; also, by ignoring the omens she despises so much, she is finally able to rest and achieve happiness. The idea of being able to decide and being by herself is a first. She sees life more clearly and feels safer than ever before:

Losing Kit and Port to the hands of the desert has a different effect on the life of the third traveler, Turner. For him since Port’s death and Kit’s disappearance “he has hated the desert” (263). At first, the idea of looking for Kit becomes his obsession. He creates a routine of meeting with the lieutenant every day to get the same news, but as little as he expects to hear something about his friend, he is aware that he is doing this in order to avoid admitting that he is stuck there alone in the middle of the desert. He believes that “in an obscure fashion . . . it had deprived him of his friends” (263).

The lieutenant is aware of Turner’s grief and expresses to Turner that under his eyes, the desert and its immensity are so huge that it makes every belief or ideal weaken as “one realizes that most clearly here; all your philosophic systems crumble,” (263) to the point where they become so small, they become irrelevant and offset the idea of stillness that desert represents. In a way, it is possible to link lieutenant’s reasoning to both Port’s and Kit’s condition. The intellectual couple finds themselves lost in different ways in the middle of the desert, the idea of Port of running away from the atomic society he is not willing to adapt to leads him to his death, ironically due to the lack of possible medical treatment. As Splinder (1989) argues, this behavior comes as showing a strong disaffection with America, a rejection of its industrialized, rationalized civilization which mirrors perfectly most of Bowles’ generation and their revolt against its repressions and expectations (p.36). Whereas Kit runs away leaving behind her beliefs

of embracing the western culture she grew up in, either because she allows herself to be allured by the wild while in the middle of it, or simply because Port going missing from her life means she can finally experience life in a way that is not linked to his decisions and her struggle to make them look fitted in the western world they come from.

Turner finds himself with various types of guilt, from the idea of letting Port getting a catholic burial, the idea of facing the families and friends, and finally the fact that he was just chained to the search of Kit as a way of keeping alive the ideal of the Moresby couple as much as possible, after all they were a couple who impressed him the most and in a way he feels the guilt of the whole situation as being the only one to turn and run back to the western world and away from the wilderness as soon as it got too unbearable. Turner's existence then turns in a routinely circle in the middle of the wilderness, sleeping in the same inn, meeting the lieutenant for the bad news, strolling through the city. Slowly Turner would start feeling that the desert had stopped being his enemy and rather had become his companion until they managed to find Kit.

Book Three: The Sky

After Port's death and Kit's run away from the military imprisonment she was under by the French captain, she finds herself wandering in the desert where she meets and gets picked by Belqassim. A young Arab man who is currently traveling through the desert alongside a sage and his caravan who pick up Kit and take her with them. At this point Kit has accepted her new existence, one which binds her to this current state of self-exile from the Western world and makes her believe that she deserves it, thinking that any possible contact will become a reminder

of the existence of her late husband. Her new decision to accompany Belqassim gives her an idea of new found empowerment which concedes her “the certainty [of] an unexpected sense of power”(281). Kit finally would be capable to decide on her own, leading her own purpose by her own choices. Instead of “feeling the omens, she now would make them, be then herself” (281). Even if Kit is unable to communicate with her two new companions, she takes a stance of equality as if the three were equals. However this results in being an idealization of the situation in Kit’s eyes since soon after she would find herself being forced to sleep both with Belqassim and the old sage in a carpet laid on the floor during daylight and all through the endless duration of their travel. Despite Kit’s initial refusal and struggles to sleep with them she ends up submitting and starts to simply enjoy and appreciate the feeling of company and familiarity she feels in Belqassim arms, since being alone in a vast unrecognizable world would make her believe that “this friendly carnal presence was there with her” (285). Kit’s travel also features her newborn fascination for the landscape, her appreciation for the immensity of the desert and how overwhelming every aspect of the desert can be as she pays “extra attention to the greatness of the sky and evenness of every dune that made the desert,” (282). but the sand is not the only thing that remains still in the desert, something similar happens to Kit’s psyche, ideals and will that seem to get stuck due to the lack or rather her incapability to communicate since running away from the military post as “it was so long since she had canalized her thoughts by speaking aloud” (289) and she had grown accustomed to act on her instincts.

But the redefinition of Kit’s existence is not something related only to her psychological state but also, in a destructive way, it reduces Kit’s corporeal value to that of a concubine. In fact, during one of her days with Belqassim she gets hurt by thorns that are too close to the

carpet, which upsets the Arab man as he regards Kit as a trophy that he wants to keep clean and wants to avoid being stained by anything, as if the idea of femininity is the feature that allows Kit to stay with the caravan. According to Martino (2006), the use and abuse of the female body is inextricably tied to madness in this novel. Her sexual relations with North African men is her attempt at an integration into a culture, a final detachment of her own self (p. 99). Moreover, Belqassim forces Kit to sleep with him without regard to the presence of other members of the caravan, which causes Kit to notice how meaningless her whole existence is for everyone in the desert, not because she is no longer viewed as a woman by everyone but because she has become an object which belongs to her master. Her status as an object of pleasure seems to be perpetuated by Belqassim's decision to hide her existence and identity when they finally arrive at his house, forcing her to dress up as a man and remain locked in a small room where her master comes to visit her for the sole purpose of having sex. This decision conclusively reveals the loss of Kit's identity, thus erasing any left remains of her former self, as noted by Martino: "Her femininity, whiteness, is consumed by the nomadic force which prior to this had only lurked in the periphery of her consciousness (p. 99). During the trip, not only does Kit lose her capacity to reason as before, but she also loses her value as a human.

Another iteration of Kit's loss of her own being or ego can be seen in the way communication disappears during her time with Belqassim. She is unable and unwilling to learn the language and thus reverts to a reactionary state in which she only answers to implicit messages coming from her new husband, invalidating and eliminating any desire she has to communicate. Alongside the isolation she is forced to live and she has come to accept to some point, Kit is forced into the role of an exotic object of pleasure always available for her owner.

Although the relationship between Kit and Belqassim is accepted by both parties in some sort of wicked way, the same deal is not accepted by the other wives in the house. The curiosity of a young man locked in their house is something that catches their attention immensely, which leads to the use of small spy sent to check on the guest. Through the unveiling of the deception, Kit faces the loss of her status as an untouchable trophy, and immediately her presence inside the house becomes a threat, a new type in this case, as the privileges (of Kit) constitute a menace to the other wives. Her whiteness . . . represents civilization, authority, and above all, mobility which situated her higher than any of the other wives (Martino, 2005, p. 99).

However, it causes her to reconsider her current situation and allows her to realize that despite her best efforts, in the middle of the desert she remains nothing: if she cannot think then she cannot suffer. Unwanted and unwelcome after the deception is uncovered by the three other wives, Belqassim, in a show of authority, decides to punish all of her wives. This results in Kit's becoming the main wife of his harem. She has gone from being the privileged white suburban housewife to the "African Queen" (Martino, 2005, p. 100), which causes deep anguish for the other wives. In fact, this intent to make her fit in this new world causes great despair in Kit's psyche as she is unable to bear her new unwanted role because it represents the hostile invasion of the west in this primitive world. Moreover, it makes Kit a target for the other women in the house, who in a way she supports, when they form a silent alliance to get rid of her. Kit is forced to live now as the most valuable object in the place in the eyes of everyone. She longs for the nights when her husband will return to reactive this warm feeling of being owned. Every evening when he appears, "Kit [would] sprang up, bounded across the room and threw herself upon him hysterically" (306). These brief encounters become the only reason for Kit's existence because

the moment Belqassim is gone she returns to an state of fear and complete disconnection. The black woman in her room is her only company and thoughts of the other wives and their disgust for her return to her mind. The absence of Belqassim, who does not return for several nights, leads her to believe that she must run away, and to feel that her idea of Belqassim is an illusion and that any man would be capable of giving her the same type of delight. Kit's resolution to escape is possibly the same motivation that led Port to his demise: the possibility of reaching a state of completeness by ceasing one's own existence. And while Port was always interested in such a resolution, Kit is terrified of it and struggles to avoid being swallowed by the void.

The positive outcome of Kit's purpose is strongly influenced by the rest of the wives, after she manages to show them she is willing to stand as an equal with them. In fact, the ideal sorority that forms after Kit's offering of their old jewels that Belqassim has taken away and the way Kit shares a token of femininity with them in the form of a lipstick, makes the wives understand that they are in the same situation. She asks them to support her in this new proposal that would result in something positive for both parties, which seemingly ends with said outcome as "they all understood immediately and solemnly nodded their heads" (311). The wives and Kit are joined by a feeling of understanding and opposition toward their husband's decisions, which leads to their support of Kit's escape.

Sadly however, in spite of the other women's efforts to help her return to the old world she belongs to, Kit finds herself unable to succeed as she is stranded in the middle of two dimensionless voids, the desert and the sky, in a confrontation which Jasper calls a confrontation of man with his own non-being, an "encounter with nothingness" (Killinger, p. 308).

Kit's development in *The Sheltering Sky* can be seen as even more tragic than Port's. By the end of the novel Kit manages to get away from the wild by being torn from it. Even during her last encounter with this wild world, she sleeps with the black man who she just meets because of the protection she feels he represents. Her decision to rely on men to make decisions for her shows how she has become an empty shell of a human. Ideally the story of Kit could have ended in the same way Port's, with death and rest from their existential struggles in Africa, or so Kit desires. But even though she fights to remain "awake, the nascent light invading her eyes, still no corresponding aliveness awoke within her; she had no feeling of being anywhere, of being anyone" (315). In the same way that Port started his trip to Africa, Kit makes her departure: as a citizen of nowhere, with only an idea of completeness that seems rather unreachable. Kit's tragic tale ends with her running away from a world she can no longer call home.

CONCLUSION

The expatriate author's novel deals with the idea of an American tired of the civilized western society and thus the pursuit of an escapement from it in the quest for a more meaningful existence that he hopes to be found in aggressive environments with those foreigners who intend to penetrate them physically and emotionally. *The Sheltering Sky* is a travel book, which focuses mainly on the psychological changes Port Moresby goes through as a result of his relentless desire to explore the unknown and constant pursuit of finding a different meaning to a life in which he can grow comfortable.

Similarly, Bowles focuses on the psychological changes that Kit Moresby undergoes. In contrast to her husband, she represents the western ideal of always looking for a place to call home. The Moresby couple is not only faced with the geographical difficulties within the arid and harsh desert environment; on the contrary, it is their interest in exploring this unknown culture which ends up leading both characters to a situation in which there is nothing that can protect them or veil them in a homelike feeling of safety but that in the same way rejects them.

Through the characters of Kit and Port Moresby, Bowles frames his dissatisfaction with a civilized society of the 20th century and the constant ghost of the World War, in addition to exploring locations and cultures that are aggressive, wild, and even hostile to the western ignorance of the diverse silhouettes of the unknown world. Port is the representation of this discontent, while Kit represents the desire to join a society without knowing why. Finally, the figure of Turner, the other travel companion, represents the figure of Western society that faces experiences with a tourist's attitude and with no other purpose.

All of the changes the Moresbys endure are related to the effects the desert has on their psyche. Their stubborn attitude and condescending behaviour embark them on a journey in which they are completely detached from their western identity or ego. The message Bowles intends to convey is one of despair that surges before any search for a new identity in foreign environment. The idea of looking for a way to let go of the Western ego in order to acquire another and adapt to it is the only ideal of Port's mind while the author emphasizes that losing one's identity, it is only natural to either experience firsthand the unveiled knowledge and an existential eternity without limits or be consumed by the madness of not fitting anywhere. That is, the visualization of absolute knowledge without reins vs. an existence without a before or an after.

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