The Shattering of Innocence

Born and raised in Bogalusa during the 1940’s, Yusef Komunyakaa transforms his influential experiences into poetry. The collection, Magic City, reflects on experiences ranging from adolescence to adulthood. Although many of the poems describe Komunyakaa’s childhood with vivid imagery and gripping verses, the prose paints an unforgettable image of the segregated and racial south. Through many of his poems, Komunyakaa informs his readers that the innocence of childhood is lost at a young age in the broken community. By juxtaposing child-like innocence and the theme of death, Yusef Komunyakaa narrates the journey of adolescence into adulthood in his poem ‘The Smokehouse’.

A smokehouse, originally a place of death, is transformed into a playground, a tree house, or an Indian teepee in the eyes of a child. Beginning the poem, The Smokehouse, by placing the reader in a sensory filled setting of the smokehouse, Komunyakaa plops the reader into the middle of a childhood game of Indian.

I played Indian
In a headdress of redbird feathers
& brass buttons
Off my mothers winter coat. (4-7)

Children do not fully comprehend death, nor does the young protagonist understand the relation of the smokehouse to death. In his pauperized headdress, the innocent protagonist dances around the smokehouse thinking nothing of the slaughtered pigs surrounding him.
Only through experience and heartbreak do children truly lose their child-like vision and innocence. After the Indian game, Komunyakaa pens: “The dead weight / of the place hung around me” (10-11), this statement can be interpreted in two ways. The first, a physical, the young protagonist becomes aware of the carcasses hanging from the ceiling around him. Rather, the second is a metaphorical interpretation; the child becomes aware of his corrupt and scarring surroundings, which slowly begin to chip away at his child-like innocence. In Komunyakaa’s other poems we see evidence of the young being exposed to mature situations at a young age. For example, in his poem ‘Nude Tango’ Komunyakaa gently tugs the reader into a flashback of a sexual assault, he writes:

As he sprung across the years  
& pulled me into the woods:  
If you say anything,  
I’ll kill your mama. (16-22)

Although it is unlikely the protagonist is struggling to understand and cope with a sexual assault. Another example is found in Komunyakaa’s poem ‘Yellow Dog Café’ where the protagonist and his cousin are having sexual relations as young children. In this confusing surrounding the children are attempting to find their way in the world. Although the protagonist in ‘The Yellow Dog Café’, ‘Nude Tango’, and ‘The Smokehouse’ are not the same child, the comparison shows the world the protagonist of ‘The Smokehouse’ is surrounded by. These scarring moments begin to chip away at the child-like innocence and shuttle the human essence into adulthood.

With the events of the corrupt town wearing away the young protagonists innocence, he is slowly able to comprehend his surroundings. In ‘The Smokehouse’ Komunyakaa writes:

The hog had been sectioned,  
A map scored into skin;  
Opened like love,  
From snout to tail.  
The goodness  
No longer true to each bone. (12-18)
In accordance with the beginning of the poem, when the protagonist was naively playing Indian in the smokehouse, he never processed or acknowledged the fact that there were dead pigs around him; but now the protagonist comprehends what is around him. This part of the poem represents the child’s loss of innocence due to the realization and understanding of death. The young protagonist not only realizes a physical death, but a metaphorical death. Komunyakaa pens: “The goodness / No longer true to each bone.” (17-18), suggesting that the once naïve protagonist has become aware of the corruption in his society. Reflecting on the corrupted society, the young protagonist observes how the people around him are no longer true and have grown dishonest and cruel. This awareness of his bleak surroundings causes the death of his child-like spirit and ushers his innocence into maturation.

Again referring back to the iconic imagery of the young protagonist innocently playing Indian in his imaginary, sheltered world we approach a contrasting verse; Komunyakaa states:

I was a wizard
In that hazy world,
& I knew I could cut
Slivers of meat till my heart
Grew more human and flawed. (19-23)

During the closing lines of the poem Komunyakaa reminisces on the childhood innocence by stating that he is a wizard, but yet he weighs this sentiment with the realization that as the wizard of his own story he is also responsible for his actions and those reactions. In fact, as the last few lines state: “& I knew I could cut/ Slivers of meat till my heart/ Grew more human and flawed.” (19-23), the matured protagonist realizes that he will now be responsible for his own actions and the reactions they provoke. That in this messy world he is going to be the witness, the victim, and the cause of pain and only through this pain can a person’s heart mature.
Works Cited

