

## The Nameless Hero's Struggle for Survival in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*

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**Abstract:** In his classic *Winter in the Blood*, the Native American author James Welch (1940-2003) introduces his nameless hero as a lost person. His connection with his tribal roots and his past is known. His daily life is no more than flashes of broken memories about his dead brother and father. This disconnection with the past causes him to wander without an aim in his life. This lost hero struggles to survive by trying to have ties with the present through going to town, drinking, and having women; a way to avoid the identity headache. Yet, he is not able to construct his present as long as he has no past to rely on. In other words, it is impossible to create something out of nothing. After a lot of efforts, things change: the hero becomes part of what takes place in his environment, and finds himself involved in what is around him. This paper deals with how the nameless protagonist struggles in order to find his identity, which is important for any person to create the present and the future. In addition, it will address the changes that promise a new life for the hero at the end of the novel.

**Keywords:** identity, James Welch, *Winter in the Blood*, Native American

In the classic *Winter in the Blood*, the nameless protagonist struggles to survive, after the winter deaths of his father and brother. The narrator's struggle reaches a resolution when his now elderly, speechless grandmother, who earlier gives him fragments of his history, dies, and he later learns of his American Indian grandfather and his Blackfeet family history, creating a new kind of contemporary Blackfeet subjectivity (Hogue 2018, 187)

The Native American author James Welch wrote his great novel *Winter in the Blood* (1974) where he managed to present part of the suffering lived on reservations in the United States for he was a Native American "whose parents were Blackfeet and A'Aninin; he grew up on their reservations" (O'Connor 2014). His nameless hero-narrator of this novel is presented to the readers as a lost person who has no aim in

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the life. He has lost connection with his tribal roots and his past as well. His past is no more than flashes of broken memories about his brother and father. This disconnection with the past causes him to wander between reservation and city without an aim in his life. He tries to have ties with the present by going to town, drinking, and enjoying himself. Yet, he is not able to construct his present as long as he has no past to rely on. In brief, “the novel features a self-destructive narrator undergoing an identity crisis” (see *Winter in the Blood*).

Towards the last third of the novel, things change: the hero gets himself involved in what is around him. My paper deals with how the nameless protagonist struggles in order to find his identity, which is important for any person to create a present and future. In addition, I will argue for the changes that promise a new life for the hero at the end of the novel.

James Welch starts his novel *Winter in the Blood* with the following passage:

In the tall weeds of the borrow pit, I took a look and watched the sorrel mare, her colt beside her ... It was called the Earthboy place, although no one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years.

This passage foreshadows many things. It refers to the relation between the mare and her colt, a relation the narrator of the novel has lost with his mother and consequently he loses the link between his generation and the old generation (represented by his grandparents). The generation between the narrator and his grandparents, i.e. that of the narrator's mother, seems unaware of the past. The narrator's father may be the link if the father is alive but he is dead. There is no one to fill the gap between the two old and young generations. Hence arises the problem; due to the loss of connection, the nameless narrator does not know his past and identity.

First Raise, the narrator's father, was “a wanderer” according to Teresa, the narrator's mother. After First Raise's death, she finds Lame Bull to marry. At the beginning, it seems that what she is worried is she; or at least this is the way her son introduces her. Thus, he expects nothing from his mother on the reservation. “My mother ignored me...” (Welch 1974, 3), the narrator says. Later, this attitude changes when he sees his mother as a victim who drinks with the priest “who refused to set foot on the reservation” (Ibid., 5).

He feels sorry for her and tries to protect her. Thus he tears up the priest's letter to her. This change of feeling toward his mother comes

as a result of his realization that she is a victim of her society: "Teresa, you made a terrible mistake. Your husband, your friends, your son, all worthless..." (Ibid., 169).

Teresa becomes the tool of the narrator's regeneration in his dream where she gives birth to a bird (Ibid., 52). This part of the dream "foreshadows the rebirth of the narrator later in the novel" (Ibid., 117).

But before realizing that his mother is a victim, the nameless narrator faces many difficulties, such as hating home and having no plan of his life. He wanders, like his father, between the town and the reservation in order to find an escape from his tedious life, but instead he comes to have enough of the town and the reservation: "I had had enough of Harve, enough of town; of walking home... I had had enough of the people..." (Ibid., 125). Nothing enables him to change his life. What will change his life is to know his past and true identity. Unfortunately, what links him with the past is no more than broken flashbacks of the story of his brother's death. These flashes are not enough to let him create his present and future.

From the beginning of James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, the nameless narrator becomes "a servant to his memory" after his brother's death that is painful to remember at once. It is not only his memory but also his identity he lost. He does not know who he is; he has no past. This leads to suffering.

The narrator suffers a kind of severe alienation and separation: "Coming home to a mother and an old lady... and the girl... not one meant anything to me; and for no reason. I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years" (Ibid., 2). It seems that his emotions died after his brother's death. Thus, the nameless narrator feels "a distance as deep as it was empty, and people accepted and treated each other with distance ... But the distance ... came from within me" (Ibid.). He is distant from himself because he does not know who he is. He has to search for his identity.

The narrator's identity is on the reservation. He has to face it and discover his past there. At the beginning, "coming home was not easy anymore. It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture..." (Ibid.) Later in the novel: "The home wasn't the ideal place... but it was the best choice" (Ibid., 120). Finally, "it was good to be home" (Ibid., 133). The change of the hero's attitude towards home is clear; at the beginning home was "a torture", now it is "good to be home." He belongs to his home on the reservation, so this home should be good.

At home, lives the narrator's grandmother who represents a main part of his past. He remembers only her story and broken flashbacks of the story of his brother's death. But his grandmother's story is not enough, though it is important. Standing Bear married her. She became a widow in her twenties. She faced the hardships of life on the reservation she is living on now. But the narrator realizes the importance of his grandmother as a symbol of the past. Though she cannot tell or do anything, yet "She revealed a life we never knew, this woman was our own kin" (Ibid., 34). In the past she met "a half-white drifter named Doagie" and lived with him. The narrator finds out that "they [his grandmother and Doagie] never married" (Ibid., 38). This discovery pushes him to ask "whether Doagie was her [Teresa's] *real* father or not" (Ibid.). The old lady did not tell him who Teresa's father is.

The one who knows the answer to the above question is an old man who turns out to be the narrator's grandfather. He is called Yellow Calf. He represents the past that is old and neglected. Everyone believes he is dead. He is living alone. He is socially dead. The narrator says, "My father called you Yellow Calf ... Teresa says you are dead" (Ibid., 64). The death of the narrator's grandmother creates a chance for him to learn about his identity. When he visits Yellow Calf to tell him about the old lady's death, he learns from yellow Calf that he was the old lady's hunter in those old severe days. In spring, "we hunted—the deer were weak and easy to kill" (Ibid., 156), Yellow Calf says. The nameless hero concludes that Yellow Calf was her hunter and that Doagie "wasn't Teresa's father; it was you, Yellow Calf, the hunter!" (Ibid., 159). They lived for "twenty years of an affair so solemn and secretive" (Ibid., 161). Here the hero finds out not only his identity but also a relative.

After discovering his parentage, the narrator goes to dig a grave for his grandmother's body. At the graveyard, he sees his father's and brother's graves. Then, he recalls the story of his brother's death. A calf broke from the herd. The brothers chased it. A car hit Mose [the narrator's brother], and the narrator tumbled from Bird's back and injured his knee. Thus, "the movie exploded whitely in [his] brain" (Ibid., 142). This accident causes spiritual and physical damages to the narrator. His memory fails; he cannot remember the story as a whole, though its flashbacks are recurrent. Many operations have been done for his knee but in vain. The reason his memory fails is the scene itself; it is horrible and painful: "... as I knelt beside the body ... the blood

which dribbled from his nostrils, his mouth, the man ... tried to wrestle me away from my brother's broken body" (Ibid., 147). Finally, he remembers the story that connects him with the past. It is this story that kept him "a servant to a memory of death" (Ibid., 38).

But before the narrator gets rid of the above-mentioned case, i.e. being a servant to his memory, he refuses all kinds of slavery. For example, when Lame Bull, his mother's husband, hires someone called Long Knife whose hands are cut, Lame Bull tries to keep this man working without having a rest, the narrator shouts, "He isn't a slave, you know" (Ibid., 28). After freeing himself from being a slave of his identity and a servant of his memory, the narrator can face the outer world. His grandfather, Yellow Calf, has told him about his identity and he has remembered the story of his brother's death. But how does he change and what are the promising actions he does?

At the burial of his grandmother, the narrator starts to respect her. He understands the importance of her pouch to her by throwing that pouch into her grave. This is a change of the narrator's attitude towards understanding others. However, the above event happens after the narrator has been able to come to terms with himself. On his way to Yellow Calf, the narrator forgives Bird, the horse, and then himself for the part they [the narrator and Bird] played in Mose's death, because "what use?" (Ibid., 146) after all. Forgiveness is a change in the narrator's understanding of the situation. "What use" of blaming the self? Thus, he gets rid of the burden he was carrying in the past. Forgiving himself gives him self-confidence to confront the outer world. And this is what happens when the narrator confronts Ferdinand and his wife, Teresa's neighbors.

Ferdinand and his wife call on pretending to offer their condolences. In fact, they want to know whether the narrator has brought his girl home or not. The narrator's self-confidence helps him to invent a story of his own that he brought his girl back. Then, he challenges them to see her, but the disappointed wife interferes, "We're late enough" (Ibid., 165). Ferdinand's and his wife's departure does not give the narrator a chance to ask them to help him get the cow out of the mud. Anyhow, the wild-eyed cow is the cause of Mose's death and the rebirth of the narrator at the end. Straight after discovering his past, the narrator finds the cow sinking in the mud. He gets a rope and throws for the horns, but in vain. Then, he is in the mud "wading out to the cow" (Ibid., 167). It is more than just to help the cow out of the mud. The narrator comes in contact with the land he belongs to. He wants

Bird to help, but it is no more a cow-horse. However, getting out of the mud, the narrator gets a new life. In other words, he emerges from the earth, the mother, as earlier Amos, the bird, emerged from Teresa in the dream. The narrator says, "I crouched and spent the next few minutes planning my new life" (Ibid., 169). Instead of being lost and wandering between the reservation and the town, the narrator changes; he starts to plan his new life. I believe his attempt to help the cow is a change regardless of the result.

Some argue that there is no change; Alan R. Velie (1982, 102) says, "... the cow is dead ... Nothing has changed". I do not agree with him. The narrator tries to help; he makes a commitment to help. The result is something else. In addition, what do the critics, who see no change, say about the narrator's comment on planning "a new life"? This new life is a rebirth of the narrator, and the rebirth is a change. More evidence that the narrator has really been reborn is the fact that, at the end of the novel, he plans to marry his girl Agnes. He was supposed to have married her at the beginning, but now he intends to correct his mistake. At the beginning, the narrator considers her as "a fish for dinner, nothing more" (Welch 1974, 22). Then his feeling changes: "Seeing she ... sparked a warmth in me that surprised me. ... I had felt nothing for her when we were living together" (Ibid., 102). This warmth foreshadows warmth in the blood of the narrator. At the end of the novel, the narrator thinks of offering to marry her. This is a change of the narrator's character. Instead of being lost, the narrator starts to think of what he is going to do.

On the other hand, Velie argues:

... but if we read what he [the narrator] thinks to himself about Agnes at the funeral ("Next time I'd do it right. Buy her a couple of crèmes de menthe, maybe offer to marry her on the spot", it is obvious-because of the need for drinks, and the "maybe"- that his resolution to "do it right" is idle daydreaming (Velie 1982, 102-103).

Velie here seems to ignore the narrator's own words: "Seeing her [Agnes] ... sparked warmth in me ..." regardless of the intention to offer to marry her, is the warmth in the narrator not a change? I believe it is a change because at the beginning the narrator considers the girl as "a fish for dinner, nothing more" (Welch 1974, 22). Contrary to Velie, the need for drinks does not mean that the narrator has not changed for he can buy drinks even without making an offer of marriage. In addition, the "maybe" indicates that marriage cannot be completed

unless the girl accepts the offer. What I see in the “maybe” is a kind of respecting her decision concerning the marriage.

Indeed, *Winter in the Blood* “explores one native man's experience, the way he moves toward his identity in a small town in Montana and is at the same time pushed back by its challenges” as Tommy Orange (2018) wrote.

In conclusion, the nameless narrator experiences a hard life. He suffers alienation and separation from everything around. He knows his identity after being lost for more than twenty years. At last, everything is settled: he remembers how his brother died, and his grandfather told him his true identity. After that, the narrator becomes able to face up to his life. His first change is within himself. He forgives himself and his horse for the part they played in his brother's death. This forgiveness gives him self-confidence.

On the one hand, his feelings towards other characters change. First, his feelings towards his father strengthen; he appreciates what his father did when his father took him to his grandfather in the past. As a result of this appreciation, he wears his father's suit at his grandmother's funeral. Second, his feelings towards his mother change; at the beginning he seems indifferent for he believes that she ignores him. Later, he sees her as a victim and tries to protect her. Third, his self-confidence and ability to encounter the outer world are depicted in his invention of a story of his own: he claims that he brought his girl home. In addition, he gets involved in what is around him. He makes a commitment to help the cow that was once his enemy because it caused his brother's death. On the other hand, he wants to correct his mistake by offering to marry the girl he once brought home.

In brief, his discovery of his true identity and recovery of the memory of his brother's horrible death help him to change. Consequently, the spring is coming and the winter is leaving even after lasting a long time.

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