

Night Journey 65: *The Death of a Lost American*

The title originates from Thomas Wolfe's colorful characterization of *The Great Colony of Lost Americans*, depicted in his book *You Can't Go Home Again*. Wolfe describes this "lost colony" as follows:

They belonged to that great lost tribe of people who are more numerous in America than in any other country in the world. They belonged to that unnumbered horde who think that somehow, by some magic and miraculous scheme or rule or formula, 'something can be done for them.' They belonged to that huge colony of the damned who buy thousands of books that are printed for their kind, telling them how to run a tea-shop, how to develop a pleasing personality, how to acquire 'a liberal education,' swiftly and easily and with no anguish of the soul, by fifteen minutes' reading every day; how to perform the act of sexual intercourse in such a way that your wife will love you for it; how to have children or to keep from having children; how to write short-stories, novels, plays, and verses which are profitably saleable; how to keep from having body-odor, constipation, bad breath, or tartar on the teeth; how to have good manners, know the proper fork to use for every course, and always do the proper thing—ho, in short, to be beautiful, distinguished, smart, chic, forceful, and sophisticated—finally, how to have a brilliant personality and achieve success.

Similar to Wolfe's description of *The Great Colony of Lost Americans*, this painting suggests that Americans are bombarded daily through education and mass media with illusions of betterment that define standards by which to measure success and happiness. These standards exist as part of a process of institutionalization that cultivates behavioral actions and beliefs that are considered most beneficial to society by imbuing individuals with a defined model of American values and patriotism.

In the early years of television and radio, the white middle class was presented as the ideal family model of American virtues and values. Excluded from this paradigm were the working class, the poor, people of color, the LGBT community, and those with mental and physical disabilities. Through education and the media, Americans were presented with a model of courage and strength allied with a patriotism that was presented as always being good and just. This mythical model has become a shield we use to blind ourselves from recognizing a nationalism that has evolved without moral justice and has become the evil it had set out to destroy. American scholastic institutions have established a values system and a model for measuring intelligence that unjustly undervalues and marginalizes too many people. It can therefore be said that education serves national needs rather than the learning needs of individuals.

National and societal indoctrination is a process of behavioral modification achieved through controlling institutions that mold the hearts and minds of individuals into a collective that can be branded as possessing "American Values." Categorized groups of people, such as the fabled

Silent Majority, have been susceptible to political manipulations that notoriously embraced American Values that included blindness and indifference. Their silence was considered consent to the unjust practices of social inequality and imperialistic foreign policies. What is lacking in a societal-based success and value matrix is the recognition of individuality, which is the foundation of intelligent choice for self-determination, free from the blindness induced by nationalism.

The symbolic visual images employed in the painting work to express its intent. The institution of family is among the most prized of American values. The American family was typified by the stereotypical portrayal of the white, middleclass, suburban home-owning family with two or more heterosexual children in need of firm and loving parental guidance. The expectations were for the viewers to identify with the paradisiacal TV family existence and aspire to emulate their American middleclass values. Needless to say, most do not or cannot live up to the idyllic existence of scripted television.

Embedded within the painted field of stars are the television icons Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, of the family sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. They were among the many TV families that modeled the American family values of their era, with a success that derives from being a middle-class property owner raising a traditional American family. Americans were taught to desire appliances of convenience and to develop an addiction to entertainment, which fed the contentment that birthed a compliant, blind, and silent population reliant upon government to protect the standard of living of the “haves” from that of the “have-nots.”

This painting is a rejection of societal and national indoctrinations. To quote Thomas Wolfe again, “The great enemy of life may not be death, but life itself.” To escape the emptiness of programmed expectations, the painting’s protagonist is destroying his institutionally molded and formed plastic heart in order to find his own heart - his own way of life - and live free from expectations, alien from his own being.