

Chapter Analysis: “Ridgeway”

The chapter “Ridgeway” from the novel “The Underground Railroad”, written by Colson Whitehead and published in 2017, deals with the childhood and early career of the infamous slave catcher Arnold Ridgeway and illustrates his opinions concerning slavery and the “*American Imperative*”.

First, the author introduces Ridgeway’s father, who is a blacksmith and often tells his son of the Great Spirit, which had given him meaning in his life and in his career as a blacksmith. Ridgeway however, who had searched for his own purpose in life for a long time, does not want to become something trivial like a mere blacksmith or other merchant and thus joins a group of patrollers. He is led by the brutal and violent Chandler, who soon becomes Ridgeway’s first real model and teaches him how to devastate a black man’s life, slave and freeman alike. Ridgeway travels through America northwards, is disgusted by the liberal and free cities and states like Washington D.C., New York and New Jersey and chooses to become a slave catcher in order to maintain and secure the American system of slavery. He thinks it is his destiny and to bring slaves back to their plantation and is therefore determined to use violence against any abolitionist and slave, e.g. he burns down an abolitionist’s home and rapes his first caught female slave. He thus soon develops a feared reputation and is keen to keep it by finding Cora, the fled child of the only women ever able to escape from him.

It is very striking how much space Whitehead gives to the origin story of the story’s main antagonist. He clearly tries to illustrate a round character that is albeit not likeable definitely comprehensible and acts like a proper human being. As the reader is first introduced to Ridgeway’s father he directly begins to question how the son of a seemingly liberal and decent blacksmith, who even has a “half-breed” (p.87, l. 7) friend, became the dreaded slave catcher. By using this introduction for the chapter the author therefore directly raises the interest of the reader and additionally is able to present the concept of the “Great Spirit” in a rather positive way. Here, the “Great Spirit” is the thing that gives Ridgeway Senior purpose in his life and enables him to have true passion for his job. He sees forging as his divine vocation, although he “scorned religious talk” (p.87, l. 11), as it is his chance to contribute to the American society and make sure the system keeps working. In this way the Great Spirit is firstly portrayed as something that keeps him living happily and content. Therefore, the “Great Spirit” can be interpreted as a metaphor for the American Dream, the striving for a well-working society, individual wealth and economic success while keeping freedom for every man (or rather every white man). This connection is further implied by Ridgeway Senior’s phrase “working the spirit” that resembles the still common phrase “living the (American) dream”.

Moreover, Ridgeway Senior contributes to the society by simultaneously supporting slavery indirectly, which is stressed by the accumulation “nails, plows (...), guns. Chains.” (p.87, l. 21) that especially underlines the word *chains* as a symbol for slavery. Later, in a dialogue between Ridgeway and his father that aspect is even more obvious as the narrator points out “the two men were part of the same system” (p. 91, ll. 19-20). Here, the author also addresses the topic, that slavery was not just a social and racial conflict, instead it was an economic institution which the entire American economy and therefore American society and success was based on. Even people having black friends and a liberal mind-set like Ridgeway Senior were part of the thread connecting everything in America: slavery. All in all Ridgeway Senior is here described as a true, typical model-American, who works hard and even sees his work, melting and hammering, as his own religion and only meaning in life. It is striking how Whitehead describes his in reality dirty work as fascinating and beautiful, e.g. the narrator portrays Ridgeway Senior “dancing around his anvil” (p. 88, l.4) and in the chapter’s very first sentence illustrates how the molten iron and its “pliability and restless writhing” (p. 87, l.4) “bewitched” (l.3) him. Using that words and images the reader gets an impression how much passion Ridgeway Senior had for his work. Besides the author evokes a very positive opinion on Ridgeway Senior’s work and the

“Great Spirit” in the reader in order to later invert that opinion in the following paragraphs. The reader is supposed to first admire Ridgeway Senior and the Great Spirit to later begin to question those and at the same time question the American system and the still existent American Dream. The usage of these images of the iron also has another function: They can be interpreted as a metaphor to understand and explain Ridgeway Senior himself. Just like his iron is constantly changing and writhing because of the heat in the forge he as a blacksmith is restlessly working to meet the society’s expectations and gain wealth and renown. That highlights that he and his extreme need to work are to some extent results of the American capitalist system and raises the question whether that kind of life is really desirable.

Although Arnold Ridgeway loved his father for the passion he had, it was clear for him that he would follow a different destiny. However, he also didn’t want to become a mere merchant, as he thought that “if you weren’t a little dirty, you weren’t much of a man” (p.88, l.21-22). Instead, he wanted to find his own purpose in life while contributing and even maintaining the Great Spirit and economic system America was built upon. Ridgeway thus became a patroller, because he thought that would enable him to find meaning in his life. Hence, the steady talk of his father concerning the “Great Spirit” lead to Ridgeway feeling pressure to do something purposeful in his life, and finally lead to him becoming violent: First as a patroller, later as slave catcher. He indeed was a very confused teenager, which his bulk body “gave no indication of”, because he was lost in his life and in society in his early years due to the lack of proper perspective his father never gave him. He only knew he wanted to contribute in some way to the Great Spirit his father spoke of or the “American Imperative” he later defined, but had no idea how he could do it. That conflict inside the character, which was caused primarily by his environment, makes him as a person very human and shows his uncertainty in his early life. Therefore, it is no wonder Ridgeway chose Chandler, the head of the patrollers, as his first real model: Chandler shaped the rules in the American society and executed them consequently. In Ridgeway’s mind Chandler protected the American society and his version of the American spirit by oppressing the black community with violence and hatred. Additionally Chandler gave Ridgeway certainty and stability he never felt beforehand to do something meaningful. Language wise the author influences the reader to consider the violence and brutality the patrollers committed to be daily life by using several anaphors and parallelism when describing their actions (e.g. p.89, l. 21: “They stopped any nigger (...). They stopped niggers (...).”). That also underlines Ridgeway considers these actions necessary and normal, as the racist mind-set already strengthened during his entire life with slavery present and also considered normal in society. While working as a patroller he quickly realizes how it deeply satisfies him to catch and search for slaves. Stressed by figurative speech and personifications like “his blood sang and glowed” it is underlined how passionate he became with his newly found job. Just like his father found his destiny and “god” (p.87, l. 15) in forging iron, he found those in slave catching and violence. In this aspect he is therefore very similar to his father, although he defined the “Great Spirit” quite differently: For him, it was the American Imperative to conquer land and oppress the “niggers and red man” (p.95, l. 24). He thought that the white race was destined to rule over any other and that if you possess something, like a slave, it is supposed to be yours when you’re able to keep it (Cf. p. 95 ll. 25f). Thus, he as a slave catcher was just someone protecting this “American Imperative”, because he makes sure every slave, every *possession* stays with the slaver, the owner. He therefore not only protects the rules and the well-working of society indirectly like his father, he instead directly reinforces the system, which is what makes him proud. The author employs a metaphor to highlight that difference between father and son: “[Ridgeway Jr. was] not the hammer. Not the anvil. He was the heat.” (p.96, l. 8). Unlike his father he not only worked off demands of slavers and farmers, he directly contributed to the system and made sure it would not end and the black would never be able to rebel. He accordingly heated up the system. For him, slaves are no human beings, but mere economic resource and source for personal gain in renown and wealth. Again, the author

includes the theme of possession and reminds the reader that the original American capitalist ideas were formed and developed during slavery and that the country they live in is built upon and is still affected by slavery. Equally, he underlines how racist thinking is still justified with the supposedly fate of the superior race to rule over any other. Just like Ridgeway thought, communicated and acted, many people in America and around the globe undoubtedly do still today.

As Ridgeway always based his thinking on the “American Imperative”, he also considers any white abolitionist as a traitor to the American society and the destiny of the race. When he’s in New York he is disgusted due to the lack of strictness and proper rules. In the city, which is known for liberty and a strong abolitionist movement, he even calls immigrants from Europe “garbage”, though he has hope that they will eventually be able to properly assimilate in the in his point of view perfect American society in the South. By illustrating his opinion in detail the author is also able to portray some extreme trends of American patriotism: The white American society did not only think they were superior to the black people or the indigenous tribes, but also to other people, e.g. from Europe. That indeed was and still is also part of the American Dream. Using New York - which obviously is still existing, famous and often admired - as a symbol for a liberal society the author is able to effectively show the lack of reason in Ridgeway’s racist argumentation.

Additionally, his pure hatred for slaves and abolitionists is highlighted as the narration is mostly following Ridgeway’s point of view. The reader learns about his extreme feelings and thoughts through the omniscient narrator, which enables the author to characterize Ridgeway profoundly, e.g. when it is pointed out Ridgeway was reminded for years of the “sweet smoke” of the abolitionist’s house he burned down when standing next to a bonfire (Cf. p.97, ll. 18-21). Here, the alliteration and oxymoron *sweet smoke* connects the contradictory words and further stresses Ridgeway’s absurd love for violence and brutality. The usage of the omniscient narrator following Ridgeway also underlines the difference between the South and the North. Ridgeway as a typical man from the South just doesn’t fit into the Northern society and ways of living. All in all, by commonly using themes of death and violence in this chapter and also by describing the horrifying actions of Ridgeway in detail, like raping or burning houses, the author inverts the at the beginning positively depicted “Great Spirit” and highlights the cruelties of the American history and its ideals.

At the very end of the chapter the narrator underlines how slaves began to fear Ridgeway and his cruelty. As he built up his enormous reputation, he wants to protect it by catching Cora, the daughter of the only woman that successfully escaped from him. The great reputation of Ridgeway is stressed by a parallelism, that underlines the fear of the slaves (“The slave mothers said, Mind yourself or Ridgeway will come for you” (p.97, l.25)) and the trust of the white slavers (“The slave masters said, Send for Ridgeway” (p.97, l.26)). It is at that point, at the very end of the chapter, the story of Ridgeway is entwined to the main plot and the reader begins to understand the reason for the detailed description of the character.

The origin story was overall important to introduce the reader to the plot’s main antagonist and his way of thinking and also to present important concepts like the “American Imperative” to the reader. For the following narrative it was important to create an individual that is - albeit brutal and gruesome - definitely human and at least to some extent the result of the society in the South and his father’s education. To achieve that Whitehead used an omniscient narrator, which mostly tells the chapter’s story from Ridgeway’s perspective, and a structure that raises questions and inverts expectations. It’s a fascinating portrayal of a true racist, who found his meaning in life in violence and brutality.