

Coverly Wapshot's Absurdity in John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*

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Abstract

This study discusses the absurdity of Coverly Wapshot, the main character, in John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Theoretical ideas regarding absurdity proposed by philosophers such as Albert Camus and John Sutherland are employed. The objectives of the study are to demonstrate the absurdity of Coverly and to reveal the causes that drove him to perform the absurd actions. The study found that his absurdity was seen through his parents' absurd stories. The chain of events, ranging from the family arguments to separation and running away from home, affected the absurd. In New York, the sudden cause of the absurdity is the anxiety caused by the lack of money, including becoming lonely and losing a job. The study argues that absurdity can be found when ill-prepared humans are trapped in the world that is modernized.

Keywords: John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Coverly Wapshot, absurdity, suburb

Introduction

Born in Quincy, Massachusetts, John Cheever (1912-82) was a famous American author. Cheever was well-known for seven collections of short stories. He was awarded the 1978 National Book Critics Circle Award, the 1979 Pulitzer Prize, and the 1981 National Book Awards for Fiction for one of his collections *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978). He also wrote five novels: *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), *Bullet Park* (1969), *Falconer* (1977), and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982). Cheever received the National Book Awards for Fiction in 1958 for his first novel *The Wapshot Chronicle* and the William Dean Howells Medal in 1965 for his second *The Wapshot Scandal*. Renowned as a brilliant short story writer and novelist, his place in world literature has been recognized from the middle of the 20th century. In *Cheever: A Life*, Bailey (2009) reports the following:

In his journal he'd referred to this occasion as his "Exodus" and reminded himself that literature was "the salvation of the damned"—the lesson of his own life, surely, and the gist of what he said that day at Carnegie Hall. "A page of good prose," he declared, "remains invincible." (p. 3)

Mostly, Cheever sets up the settings in the suburban America where he lives his life and where life and morals of a middle class are shaped. In the suburbs, the suburbia is formed and changed into a different or "new and modern" form. In "Preface" of *The Stories of John Cheever*, He explains that "[t]he constants that I look for in this sometimes dated paraphernalia are a love of light and a determination to trace some moral chain of being" (Cheever, 2000). Suburban residential growth and life as well as its attitudes influence Cheever's works. According to Dell (2005), "Cheever never really lost a reputation of being a typical writer of (and for) the white upper middle class whose habitat, in his short stories, is

either the city of New York or the suburbs of New York state” (p. 57). Moreover, Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018) notice that “[t]he main themes of Cheever’s works are about the chaotic social and economic conditions and middle-class suburbia in a modern capitalist city which is normally run by private businesses” (p. 76). In addition, loneliness, a common feature often formed in suburbs, is sensed in his works. Bailey (2009) admires the way Cheever does the narration for Leander Wapshot, the main character of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, as follows:

“Many skeletons in family closet,” Leander Wapshot wrote in his diary. “Dark secrets, mostly carnal.” Even at the height of his success, Cheever never quite lost the fear that he’d “end up cold, alone, dishonored, forgotten by [his] children, an old man approaching death without a companion (p. 7).

Of Cheever’s works, *The Wapshot Chronicle* presents life of people affected by the dynamic changes of society around the middle of the 20th century. In “The Foreword,” Moody (2002) compares selected chaos situations in the novel with what happens on Shakespeare’s stage of *Exit pursued by bear*. It reads:

A shipwreck, a suicide attempt, a homosexual assignation, a love story; all of these appear in the foreground of this novel and recede with the abruptness of that curious stage direction from Shakespeare: *Exit pursued by bear*. It’s as though *The Wapshot Chronicle* were as much dream as reality, as much improvisation as premeditation (p.11).

Bailey (2009) also reports the following:

The main reason he became a storyteller, he said, was “to give some fitness and shape to the unhappiness that overtook [his] family and to contain [his] own acute-ness of feeling.” Later, with his own children, he often made a game of his favorite coping mechanism—picking out strangers in public and imagining their wall-paper, what they ate for breakfast, and so on (pp. 44-45).

The Wapshot Chronicle portrays three main characters: Leander Wapshot and his two sons: Moses and Coverly Wapshot whose lives fall apart completely. Leander is left behind with loneliness in St. Botolphs, an old fishing village. He commits suicide through swimming into the sea. The two young brothers leave their homeland together to eternally separate in modernized cities. Raney (2001) reports the pairs of brothers in Cheever's works as follows:

Some of the brother pairs he creates are primarily sympathetic, others almost primordially antagonistic, but taken together they develop two of Cheever's main themes: a pervasive alienation from modern mass culture and, paradoxically, a deep distrust of nostalgia. This is the double axis along which some of Cheever's most compelling characters try to come to terms with themselves. (p. 1)

Studying the novel in terms of a family novel, Dell (2005) finds the following:

The Wapshot family is divided by a gap between the old and the new way of life. Leander and Honora stand for the old ways, while Sarah Wapshot and other mother figures represent aspects of the hostile future. Moses and Coverly experience the

changes of modern post-war society in full force and are therefore the new and, as it appears, lost generation of Wapshots. (p. 64)

Life which gets worse in American society, formed as a chaotic metropolis, through the characters of the two brothers, is also reported. According to Dell (2005), “[t]he important message of the Chronicle seems to be that the American society has changed for the worse and that this change is visible in the example of Moses and Coverly Wapshot” (p. 64).

Absurdity

A variety of works explore *The Wapshot Chronicle* extensively; nonetheless, this study observes a distinctive motif *absurdity* of Coverly, the younger son. Absurdity is the state of being absurd. It is seen when a situation appears completely stupid or unreasonable or ridiculous. The phrase *the absurd* is also used to signify this sense. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1991) views absurdity through the state of separation. According to Camus, “[t]he divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is probably the feeling of absurdity” (p. 6). He ties the absurd with the human need and the world. The absurd, as Camus also explains, “is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p. 28). In *A Little History of Literature*, Sutherland (2013) mentions Franz Kafka, a famous German novelist and short story writer, who presents the idea of absurdity in his works such as *The Metamorphosis*, as follows:

The human condition, for Kafka, is well beyond tragic or depressed. It is ‘absurd’. He believed that the whole human race was the product of one of ‘God’s bad days’. There is no ‘meaning’ to make sense of our lives. (p. 214)

Absurdity is also defined as “the condition that humans are separate from something with which they closely connect. They believe that circumstances are meaningless. It also means humans’ state of becoming stupid, irrational, and hopeless” (Phothisuwan & Aimchoo, 2018, p. 76). Under these definitions, this study defines the term *absurdity* as the states of meaninglessness, unreasonableness, or ridiculousness or all of them arising from the senses of separation, loneliness, depression, or anxiety.

Absurdity is mainly reported in Cheever’s works. In “The Death of Justina,” Raney (2001) reports that “[h]is story “The Death of Justina,” from the same year, is a savagely comic indictment of the advertising industry and modern bureaucratic absurdities” (p. 2). In “Goodbye, My Brother,” Mathews (2004) finds the following:

The absurdity of his subscription to this tradition is underscored by the observation that Lawrence contradicts his own reason for not playing (the game is a waste of time) by sitting and observing it. The game thus takes on a spiritual symbolism that signifies, for Lawrence, the decadent values of his family. (p. 6)

The Wapshot Chronicle presents absurdity without exception. Beacham (2005) narrates it that “Cheever turned a disparaging eye on the “forceful absurdities of life” and began to assess the damage of a heightened sense of loss, perplexity, and disillusionment. In essence, the Wapshot Chronicle serves as a warning for the future” (p. 1). Like Beacham, Dell combines the absurdities and hardships with modern life. According to Dell (2005), “Once arrived in the Big City, the brothers are faced with the absurdities and hardships of modern life” (p. 90). Moreover, Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018) study the term through Leander, the old man, and report the following:

Another event presenting Leander's absurdity is when the Topaze is renovated to be a gift shop after it could not be sold. Through these situations, the characteristics of absurdity are depicted, and all are based on the separation of Leander, together with his job as a captain, and the boat Topaze. Such separation causes Leander to perform not only stupidity, ridiculousness, and hopelessness but also the meaninglessness of life. (p. 87)

Significance of the Study

These reports draw attention to this research. According to Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018), absurdity leads Leander to commit suicide. Unlike the father, although his performances seem absurd, Coverly does not take his own life, and he does not die. Foley (2014) posits that "[t]he absurd is a method and not a doctrine, but its recognition remains a first necessary step in the development of properly human values" (p. 425). In "Abstract" of a study, Curzon-Hobson (2013) argues that "[i]f we accept that strangeness has a positive place in education, Camus is insightful in allowing us to examine its pedagogical foundations and the wider conditions necessary to give rise to the experience of strangeness" (p. 461). That is why it is interesting to observe the states of Coverly's absurdity and the causes driving him to perform the absurd actions. In addition, this study leads readers to become well aware that the absurd has always existed; people should understand it.

Scope of the Study

Before proceeding further, the study collected the data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is *The Wapshot Chronicle*, the 1st Perennial Classics version published in 2003 by HarperCollins. The portrayals of the Wapshot family and Coverly, including other characters, were considered. The dialogues between Coverly and other characters and the descriptions of events involving him from the beginning until the end were focused. Studies, reviews, and books relevant to the term *absurdity* and the two

objectives were viewed as useful secondary sources. The theoretical ideas of absurdity proposed by the world philosophers such as Albert Camus and John Sutherland were employed. The details involving absurdity in Cheever's works were gathered. Then, the narration of the events involving Coverly and his portrayals and other characters were extracted for in-depth study. There were 14 extractions involving 4 characters: Coverly, Leander, and Sarah Wapshot, and a doctor mainly discussed through a qualitative method. Some arguments were proposed, followed by the discussion, the conclusion, and the recommendation for further studies.

Findings

The study found the absurdity of Coverly. It can be traced through the anxiety displayed when Coverly goes to a psychologist to have a test for emotional make-up. The test is required by a carpet factory in the city of New York where the young Wapshot wants to work. In the interview, the doctor asks him about anxiety. The questions are as follows: "Do you know what is meant by anxiety? Do you have any feelings of anxiety? Is there anything in your family, in your background that would incline you to anxiety?" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). These are the first few questions of the test. In general, they are raised to know some background information of an interviewee. The first few questions should be easy to answer. On the other hand, the questions can be used by interviewers to make interviewees become relaxed and comfortable. In this case, the first three questions make it clear that the psychologist relates all answers to Coverly's view and experiences of anxiety. As anxiety is a sense of being very worried about something, it means more than general information. As a result, the questions reflect the issues which are not easy to answer. In terms of the test, anxiety is a criterion the carpet factory uses to select workers. This means that getting this job or losing it depends on the questions and the answers as well as the state of anxiety of Coverly.

Apart from the questions, the way of asking them appears problematic. The doctor asks about the meaning of the word *anxiety* to make sure that Coverly understands what it is. If the young Wapshot understands it, the doctor can be certain of the information he needs. However, when asking the questions, the doctor does not ask Coverly one by one. In other words, he does not give any pauses for the young man to answer the first and then the second, and so on. As a result, he does not know if his interviewee understands the meaning of anxiety. Also, the doctor does not know whether the man possesses it, either. Most of all, when he asks the third one using the phrases *your family* and *your background*, the words *family* and *background* do not refer to Coverly. They refer to other Wapshots including their circumstances instead. That is, while he does not stop to listen to the young man's answers, the doctor puts forth something which is far beyond the scope of Coverly's self.

Among the three questions, the last one mostly affects the young Wapshot to display absurdity. The question is that "Is there anything in your family, in your background that would incline you to anxiety?" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). The word *incline* means that Coverly can mention the factors such as the members of the Wapshots and the conditions in the family which influence him to have anxiety. In particular, the phrase *incline you to anxiety* means that it is only the anxiety of Coverly the doctor needs to know, but not of the others. However, as "your family" is raised in the question, the young Wapshot twists the word *family* and makes it become a key point to answer the question. He uses just the word *family* to explain the states of anxiety which belong to the members of his family except him.

His father's anxiety is described first. Coverly answers that "My father's very anxious about fire. He's awfully afraid of burning to death" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). The young man presents his father's anxiety rather than his. Although giving the doctor an answer, he does not answer this question directly. Also, Wapshot does not answer the first two questions either. If the three questions are carefully considered together, Coverly must tell the

psychologist his anxiety, but not his father's. As anxiety is used for measuring how the psychological awareness of an applicant is, he must tell the doctor something about his anxiety. If he feels anxious, his anxieties may be about the fears of unfamiliar conditions such as being rejected for this job, settling in the city as a newcomer, working in new circumstances, making new friends, and so on. Getting homesick and showing some weaknesses are also the points of anxiety. On the contrary, if he does not feel anxious, he can tell him the true feelings. Whatever it is, the answer must show the state of his own anxiety. In addition, the questions beginning with the words *do* and *is* can be inferred that the anxieties, about which the doctor asks, happen when he lives and works in New York. This is to say, the anxieties that happened in the past or in his old village are not included. Although the anxiety has its roots from the past, he can explain how the previous experience affects his feelings now. Therefore, the answer is not to the point. It is unreasonable to answer because the answer is not what the doctor needs to know. Furthermore, the answer is not worth telling the doctor because it does not match both the third question and the first few. It can be said that his answer presents both unreasonableness and meaninglessness. According to the definition defied by this study, the answer signifies the young Wapshot's absurdity.

The absurdity of Coverly is seen through his father's absurd story. While Coverly's anxiety is not told, the father's unusual features are demonstrated instead. The features are seen just in the first few sentences after the doctor has paused to let him speak. The young man tells the doctor that "My father's very anxious about fire. He's awfully afraid of burning to death" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). The connection between the words *fire* and *death* in his answer reflects something beyond anxiety. In terms of the meaning, anxiety is the feeling of being very worried about something. Applicants can tell it because it is not a matter of life and death. In terms of the test, anxiety is the criterion used to differentiate applicants to be accepted or rejected for the jobs. However, this anxiety involves death and fire, the cause.

Death generally brings about great sadness. As a worker-to-be, it is a good time for Coverly to start planning a new career and life. As a result, he should not talk about death, including its cause. Later, when the young Wapshot describes his father, the description reflects the father's stupid actions. It reads:

Sometimes he doesn't work on rainy days—he spends most of the day going around the house sniffing. He thinks he smells smoke and sometimes it seems to me that he spends nearly a whole day going from room to room sniffing. (Cheever, 2003, p. 141)

The description of Leander, the father, who seeks fire on rainy days, indicates the senses of absurdity: meaninglessness, unreasonableness, and ridiculousness. Everyone knows that rain makes fire impossible. If a thing catches fire, rain extinguishes the flames. Rainy days are periods of time when it rains so much that no one expects uncontrolled flames. As a result, the search for fire on those days signifies no purpose as well as no reason.

Furthermore, going around the house is normally the act of children playing together. When the children perform it, they look cute and are allowed to do. Nonetheless, they are always prohibited to play anything relating to fire even if the fire is not real. Unlike children, searching high and low for fire on the days, the old man looks not only strange but ridiculous.

When the old Wapshot senses fire on rainy days and connects it to death, it can be also said that he suffers from mental disorders. Fire is not really there, but he thinks it is. This can be inferred that Leander suffers a hallucination. Also, the actions are stupid and ridiculous, so they reflect madness or insanity. Furthermore, the man believes that such fire leads him to death. The belief can be classified as a delusion—a false belief. In this case, the delusion is the belief that something catches fire, and he is going to die because of that fire. Death never happens because there is no fire although he believes in its existence. Keeping

on going around the house to look for fire on rainy days, the old man has suffered under hallucination, insanity, and delusion. As the father of two sons, Leander must do something that is useful and meaningful to be viewed as a respectable father. He must work or relax or even read a book instead of doing these meaningless actions. While the actions differentiate him from expected fathers, they indicate that Leander loses the capacity of controlling himself.

Although absurdity, hallucination, madness, and even delusion play a part in becoming his father's anxiety, Coverly must not tell this story to anyone. There are many reasons to keep it secret. The story looks ridiculous. As a son, he must be responsible to keep it hidden to save face. The young Wapshot must realize that the actions, if known, bring disgrace on the Wapshot family. The words *on rainy days* mean that whenever it rains a lot, the father searches for fire. That is, the search for fire appears as a permanent action. Through the story, the father is declared insane by the son. Similarly, the son declares himself insane. It can be said that not only his father but also the young Wapshot looks stupid and mentally ill through these acts. The description does not have any meaning. Also, there is no reason to explain why he tells it and what benefit he gains from it. The description reflects not only unreasonableness and meaninglessness but also the ridiculousness of the two Wapshots—the old and the young. Therefore, while the father's absurdity is shown through the son's words, the absurdity of the son is encapsulated within it.

Besides his father, the doctor asks Coverly about the anxiety of Sarah, his mother. The question is that "Does your mother share this anxiety?" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). The doctor asks this question, yet he still does not know what Coverly's anxiety is. The phrase *this anxiety* in the question refers to the father's anxiety. According to the young Wapshot, the father presents absurdity, hallucination, insanity, and delusion under the sphere of anxiety. In the mother's case, asking about her share in the anxiety, the doctor still knows

nothing about Coverly's anxiety. On the one hand, this can be interpreted that the doctor is lured away from the young Wapshot's anxiety. This also implies that the doctor forgets the objectives of the psychology test the young man is required to take. The doctor should find the test results involving the man's anxiety, but he does not. On the other hand, this question can be interpreted that the doctor intentionally gives Coverly a chance to turn the question into the answer that makes himself and his family look absurd. It is because the doctor can sense some peculiar features of the Wapshots through Coverly's previous responses. To know more, he manipulates the young Wapshot to reveal other weird things through the mother's acts. As a result, the doctor can fail Coverly. For this interpretation, the doctor makes full use of all answers to form the test result to be more persuasive and believable.

The answer is not about Sarah's anxiety, though. While the key points of the father are fire and death, weirdness and violence are key features of the mother. Coverly replies that "My mother loves fires. But she's anxious about something else. She's afraid of crowds. I mean she's afraid of being trapped" (Cheever, 2003, p. 141). Unlike Leander, Sarah loves fire. When loving fire shows a sharp contrast with hating or fearing fire, Sarah is described quite differently. It can be said that just in the first sentence of the answer, the young man completely differentiates his mother from his father. The binary opposition between the love and the hatred of fire reflects strong disagreement between the couple. This implies that the father and the mother cannot get along well, being antagonistic towards each other. Then, Coverly describes his mother to look weird through the fear of crowds. In general, people live together to form a community. When the community holds ceremonies and festivals, people join the events with pleasure and with the hope to meet and talk to others as well as making new friends. Often, a large group of people gather to watch musical bands, colorful costumes, and decorated vehicles in the events—all are done with joy. However, the mother, by herself, cannot fit in her own community. Trapped in crowds, Sarah turns the wonderful moments of

the community into unwanted events deserving escape. Therefore, through the son's words, the mother is demonstrated not only to be different from his father but from the whole community.

After the son has differentiated the mother from the father as well as from common people, he tells the doctor that his mother, in fact, incriminates her husband. It reads:

Oh, yes. She told me lots of times. She told me I shouldn't trust him because he wanted to kill me. She said he had this abortionist come out to the house and that if it hadn't been for her courage I'd be dead. She told me that story lots of times.

(Cheever, 2003, p. 142)

The statement *I shouldn't trust him* means that the young Wapshot should not trust his father. It can be inferred that Sarah does not protect the trust between her son and her husband. Even more, it can be said that she destroys the trust because she drives Coverly to lose his respect for his father. On the other hand, this is the evidence proving that Sarah herself cannot hold on to a good relationship between her and her husband. In common, wives and husbands respect each other to form good families. As mothers, wives' sole responsibility is to persuade children to respect and trust their fathers. Though mothers have some difficulties with fathers, the trust between the parents and children remains protected. In this case, Sarah does not act as a typical wife as well as a typical mother. It can be said that, showing a complete lack of respect for her husband to her son, Sarah not only loses all respect for her husband but wants to break down the relationship of the whole family.

According to the description, the main reason to lose the trust is that Leander wants to kill Coverly. Sarah tells her son that Leander forces her to abort him. Abortion is a highly critical issue. It is publicly known that the campaigns against the abortion continue over the

world. Though abortion is not a capital crime, by common consent, no one is allowed by law to kill an unborn child. In this case, the word *abortionist* indicates that this abortion is illegal. It is forced by Leander, so he is accused of intending to murder Coverly. Unlike Leander, Sarah characterizes herself as a savior saving her son's life. Also, she affirms that she is only the one who wants him to be born. The difference in the roles in the abortion confirms that Sarah has a bad relationship with her husband, and, moreover, it reflects that she hates him. In addition, in terms of a psychological aspect, abortion is a matter of great sensitivity. When it is performed, one of the reasons is that a child is not wanted. As a result, while Leander is accused of intended murder, Coverly is identified as an unwanted child—all are done by his mother.

Ultimately, the repetition of the abortion is employed by both the mother and the son. The repetition is the way Sarah uses to imprint the murder into the young man's memory. However, the sense of an unwanted child possibly offends her son's feelings if he pays attention to it. Sarah's repetition can be inferred that she has never become aware of its effect on the son. It can be said that the hatred for her husband blinds her to the sense of protecting her son's sensitivity. At the time, the hatred encourages her to repeat the abortion to respond her own need. Like his mother, Coverly also repeats the story of the abortion. The statement *She told me that story lots of times* is said twice. The young man repeats it to make the doctor believe in what he says. Meanwhile, he expresses it to show that his mother repeatedly states the abortion rather than keep it secret. For more interpretation, the repetition of Sarah expressed by Coverly implies that he does not pay attention to what his mother says. As a result, she has to repeat it. Therefore, according to Coverly, Sarah fails in her attempt to destroy the trust between her son and her husband. In addition, it is notable that the man intentionally tells this story to the doctor. Showing the doctor that he is grown-up under these

critical circumstances, the young man not only differentiates his mother from his father as well as from common people, but also from him.

Losing her status of an ethical wife as well as a typical mother, Sarah is degraded to the position of a blood-longing. It is seen when Coverly tells the doctor that “Well my mother took me home and she told me to get undressed and she took my great-grandfather’s buggy whip—that was Benjamin—and she just laid my back open. There was blood all over the wall” (Cheever, 2003, p. 143). Buggy whips are used by humans to hit animals, especially horses, to force them to move or to punish them. The whips are used when the animals do not know where to go or what to do. Whipping some animals such as horses, cattle, and water buffalos is accepted because they are born to do heavy physical work for humans who domesticate and have authority over them. Being whipped shapes them to be desirable beasts. Also, their skin is thick. It protects them from having a lot of pains from being whipped. Unlike the beasts, humans are capable of thoughts. They can understand where to go or what to do or follow. Most of all, they communicate through languages. If humans don’t know whatever they should know, teaching and learning are the ways. In terms of the body, being whipped is more than humans can bear because they have thinner skin. As a human, Coverly does not deserve to be whipped. As a son, he should be treated with mercy by his mother. In this scene, the whip looks the most serious when Sarah tells her son to *get undressed*. Her order implies that the expected result is terrible injuries to him. When Coverly describes *the blood all over the wall*, the description indicates that Sarah reaches her purpose. That is, she needs to hit the young Wapshot to see him bleed. It can be said that she enjoys seeing blood while not becoming aware of a suitable way of treating her son. Meanwhile, Coverly is reduced to accepting the punishment like a beast. One thing that differentiates him from a beast is that he gets bleeding because his skin is not thick.

What has Coverly done to cause this whip? The young man tells the doctor the following:

I was with Pete Meacham—and I decided to climb up on the roof of the bathhouse where we could see the women getting undressed. It was a dirty thing to do but we hadn't even hardly got started when the caretaker caught us. (Cheever, 2003, p. 143)

Although it seems dirty, peeping at women getting undressed is common among boys, especially the boys in fiction. In a famous Thai novel, *A Child of the Northeast* written by Boontawee (2005) and translated into English by Susan Fulop Kepner, the protagonist Koon, the eight-year-old boy, is demonstrated to peep at a beautiful woman naked. Koon does it with his close friend, a boy named Jundi. The two boys see the naked girl and are not caught. This means that they can enjoy the peep and are free to go home. No one gets bad effect from this secret look; getting caught is not expected. Most importantly, the scene does not look dirty and is not regarded as serious. Readers view Koon and Jundi as naughty boys playing and learning exciting things boys always do and feel pleased with the scene. Like Koon, Coverly is portrayed as a naughty boy accompanied by a friend to do the same thing. However, he does not see any naked woman and is caught by the caretaker before that. The appearance of the caretaker signifies that the peep is a bad deed. Judged again by his mother, the young Wapshot turns out to be the boy who behaves so badly and deserves to be whipped like a beast. As a result, he bleeds until there is *blood all over the wall*. Compared to the scene in *A Child of the Northeast*, the results of peeping at women naked between Coverly and Koon appear significantly different.

As a result of these interpretations, Coverly's absurdity is also shown through his mother's absurd stories. The fear of crowds, the abortion, and the whip story are very strange

and unusual. Although the stories do not make people laugh, they are ridiculous and absurd. They are meaningless because they are not worth talking about. Furthermore, the stories seem stupid because they are hard to believe. Meanwhile, it is absurd to hear the son talking about his mother's weirdness and ridiculousness under the sphere of brutality. It is also absurd to know that the son tells these stories to a stranger. While there is no reason to explain why the mother's absurd stories are told, there is no sign to serve the son's purposes other than disgracing the mother. Still, the young Wapshot does not tell anything involving his anxiety. Rather than the anxiety, Coverly's response to the questions is beyond the main objective of the test. As his anxiety is used as the criterion to accept or reject him, the young man must tell the doctor about it. In terms of the test, the stories appear meaningless because they are not about the man's anxiety. It can be said that the absurdity of Coverly is revealed through his mother's absurd actions.

No one knows if Coverly tells the truth or lies to the doctor. Nevertheless, the task attempted of this study is to find more evidence to prove that this young Wapshot tells the doctor the stories through his absurdity.

Before having the psychological test, the young man has passed various tests. One of them is a common intelligence-quotient test. As the narrator explains, he "was given a common intelligence-quotient test. There were simple arithmetical problems, blocks to count and vocabulary tests, and he completed this without any difficulty" (Cheever, 2003, p. 139). The words *without any difficulty* mean that the test is easy for him. It can be inferred that Coverly is good with numbers and words at a level. Also, the name *a common intelligence-quotient test* signifies that if he passes it, he is capable of thoughts. On the other hand, the two words *common* and *simple* indicate that this test is not complex. The simplicity means that the test is designed to be the first step to recruit less skilled workers whose jobs involve working without dealing with complex works. Whatever it is, the young man still feels free to have

other tests. Later, various pictures are shown as part of the next test requiring a certain intellectual level, as follows:

He was shown a dozen or so cards with drawings or blots on them—a few of them colored—and asked by a stranger what the pictures reminded him of. This seemed easy, for since he had lived all his life between the river and the sea. (Cheever, 2003, p. 139)

This test does not make Coverly count things, select words, and solve simple math problems, but it makes him view pictures and illustrate them. The description indicates that the illustrations depend on his own experiences. As a newcomer here, the experiences refer to the events in St. Botolphs. Life in the village leads the young Wapshot to think about things in nature like *the river* and *the sea* including the surroundings. As a result, the natural circumstances are employed to illustrate the drawings to pass the test. However, a few of the pictures colored indicate that different illustrations between them and the pictures without colors are needed. Moreover, as the test does not require just the answer 'yes' or 'no' or 'a correct answer chosen,' the clause *what the pictures reminded him of* indicates that there are different illustrations between the young man and other applicants. Although the illustrations are not counted as right or wrong, this test looks much more complex than the *common intelligence-quotient test*. It is because the applicants who are tested come from different places. This causes different applicants to react to the pictures in various responses. The word *easy* shows that the young Wapshot views the test as a simple one. This may lead him to illustrate the drawings without carefulness. Nothing guarantees that other applicants view it as easy as he views. It is possible that others may see the test as a serious matter requiring considerable intellectual effort to answer.

Having taken those tests, Coverly is required to take a different test on the next day. It is the test with a series of pictures or drawings, as follows:

They presented a problem to Coverly, for when he glanced at the first few they seemed to remind him only of very morbid and unsavory things. He wondered at first if this was a furtive strain of morbidity in himself and if he would damage his chances at job in the carpet works by speaking frankly. He wondered for only a second. Honesty was the best policy. All the pictures dealt with noisome frustrations and when he was finished he felt irritable and unhappy. (Cheever, 2003, p. 140)

Unlike the previous tests, this test forces Coverly into difficulties. The words *very morbid and unsavory things* imply that the test, including the pictures of it, is so unpleasant to the man. Just viewing the first few, the young Wapshot finds the pictures quite overwhelming. The phrase *a furtive strain of morbidity in himself* indicates that he is forced into some more difficulties to tell the series of events that leads him to feel annoyed. If he tells the truth, the awful actions and the unpleasant things involving him in St. Botolphs are revealed. At this moment, he is in the city of New York in the hope of getting a job. In general, starting a new job and settling in a new environment can mean having a new life. As a result, no one wants to narrate or even mention the unpleasant things in the past. Moreover, the clause *if he would damage his chances at job in the carpet works by speaking frankly* means that if he tells his real stories, his application is possibly rejected. In addition, the expression *He wondered* said twice means that Coverly not only feels surprised with the pictures but is stunned. Within seconds, these pictures make the man unable to react. The description does not show visibly that what the pictures are. However, with the words *morbid* and *morbidity*, it demonstrates negative senses arising from the pictures. For a few seconds,

he must decide how to answer which, then, results in saving or losing the job position. Eventually, the statement *Honesty was the best policy* indicates that the answer he gives is genuine. That is, he accepts that after he has answered, he misses the opportunity to have a job. From that moment onwards, the young Wapshot knows that he has already lost the job.

After having the test of illustrating the unpleasant pictures, the young Wapshot demonstrates his anxiety. It is seen in a writing test. As the narrator explains, Coverly “was worried about money—he had nearly run through his twenty-five dollars—he completed most of the sentences with references to money” (Cheever, 2003, p. 140). The phrase *was worried about money* means that while having the writing test, he thinks about money more than anything else. The sentence *he had nearly run through his twenty-five dollars* shows clearly that the young man has just spent almost all his money taken from home. Eventually, the sentence *he completed most of the sentences with references to money* confirms that the only thing he thinks about at that time is money. At the village, the young man, including the whole family, gets financial support from his aunt Honora Wapshot. When living there, what he always does is to build his world around activities with his brother and other young men. Coverly has never worked, and money is not the thing he is worried about. Like him, many young men in St. Botolphs do not think about money first. The conditions imply that living or, in fact, earning a living is new for him. Alone in the city, the young Wapshot is worried about money for the first time in his life. At the time, it is not just finding and having a job, but it is making a living. Even worse, before taking this writing test, Coverly has already known that he is going to miss the opportunity to have this job. The feelings of the loss of money and job loss are mingled and affect him to become much worried about money as he has never sensed like this before. As anxiety is a sense of being very worried about something, the description of Coverly in this extract reflects his anxiety. According to this

study, absurdity can arise from the senses of separation, loneliness, depression, or anxiety. Therefore, one cause driving the young Wapshot to perform the absurd actions is his anxiety.

Living in New York appears very different from living in the village of St. Botolphs, however. There are various things needed when living in the city. Like other modernized cities, food in New York cannot be taken from natural resources. Raw or cooked, food is taken from stores. In St. Botolphs, it can be taken from the sea and the beach the villagers hunt on as well as the river by which they camp. Housing also presents problems. In the city, accommodation is offered for citizens who can buy or rent. That is, neither place nor meals are free in the city. Because of nothing is free, money itself becomes the most significant. According to Helliwell (2015), "Money was in fact ranked as the number one factor to job satisfaction in most of the countries" (p. 33). From then on, the young man must earn a living in New York City. As he comes into the city without being well prepared, he has no certain qualifications like a college degree, team-playing, and work experience. Although there are some opportunities for people with high school education to find jobs in the areas, they are not well-paid jobs. At this moment, alone in the city with little money left, the study observes that the young Wapshot feels very anxious. The study affirms that not only the lack of money but he, himself, who is ill-prepared, is the root of the anxiety.

The factors driving Coverly's absurdity are complex. The absurd comprises the past and the present situations that interact with each other. Despite the anxiety, the factors can be traced from the chain of the events. The study observed that the absurd made firm initial steps through the events in St. Botolphs. According to Coverly, his parents look weird and do not love each other. As a result, the arguments arising from Leander and Sarah are the causes. The stories of the abortion and the punishment by the whip make it clear that the mother is not only strange but cruel. This possibly leads the young man to think that she does not love him as well. Telling the doctor about these stories implies that the unpleasant actions have

been deeply imprinted on his mind. Additionally, separating from Moses, the only brother, the young Wapshot feels so lonely and insecure. This causes him to run away from home, following his brother into a city, although he is ill-prepared. Then, life in the city affects him, too. As cities are larger than villages, most of the cities are thriving, vibrant, and prosperous. Cities, like New York, fascinate people from various walks of life. It is common for young people to leave home to find a job in the city, find someone to marry, and settle there. However, the people who can get good and well-paid jobs must have certain qualifications and be ready to deal with difficult situations. Coverly is the opposite. In New York City, he is apart from his brother. Being in a city alone and having little money, including the loss of the job, affect the man to present anxiety. Therefore, the study considers that a weak family relationship and separation happening in St. Botolphs cause his absurdity. The lack of company and money happening in New York leads him to feel very anxious. Job loss is another factor which that causes him to show anxiety which, then, gives birth to the absurd actions. It can be said that when the subjective and active conditions are ripe, the young Wapshot presents the absurdity.

Discussion

The study discusses that, in general, suburbs are the places where suburbanites go their own way. Suburban life deprives them of living with their families and keeps them away from going back to their homeland. The study agrees with Raney (2001) that the two young Wapshots are portrayed through a state of alienation. According to this study, it is seen through Coverly when he transforms himself from a local young man into a new citizen of the modern city. Being rejected from the job or unemployed may provoke a sense of alienation from that city. Moreover, the strangers and the unfamiliar things in the tests force the young Wapshot to perform absurdity. The study also agrees with Dell (2005), who states about the lost generation of the Wapshots. The failure to reunite their family reflects through

the bad relationship of the parents and is seen clearly through Coverly's running away from home, only to be separate from his brother again in the city. According to the findings, the study views the situations in modern cities such as separation and loneliness as well as money and job loss as the roots and masters of the failure. This is consistent with Moody (2002) who views various, sudden, and unexpected situations as the abruptness affecting the Wapshots. In addition, the study views Coverly as a young man who leaves home and is trapped within a city which fulfilled with the ideologies of progress and development. He is blinded by the ideologies so much that he thinks only about himself, but not about the old Wapshots left behind. This is also consistent with the statement stated by Bailey (2009) that Leander Wapshot is forgotten by his children and that the old man approaches death without a companion.

The study also discusses that Coverly displays absurdity through his parents' absurd actions. Anxiety is the main cause of the absurd while the family arguments, inadequate preparedness, and the lack of money are the factors causing the anxiety. Like Raney (2001) and Mathews (2004) who analyze Cheever's short stories, the findings support the idea that Cheever's main characters portray something absurd. As Mathews (2004) views the decadent values of the family as the involvement, the findings lead this study to agree on it. In case of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, the study strongly supports previous studies like Beacham (2005), Dell (2005), and Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018) that there are forceful absurdities of modern life bringing about loss, perplexities, and hardships the main characters hardly expect. In terms of philosophical contexts, the absurdity of the young Wapshot is consistent with Camus (1991) who sees the divorce between man and his life as well as the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world as the causes of absurdity. The elements are inextricably connected with the absurd performed by Coverly when he is separated from his brother and forced into the chaotic situations. The

findings also affirm the idea of Sutherland (2013) that the whole human race is the product of one of God's bad days. It is because there are genuine upsurges of the causes and the feeling of absurdity arising from various actions.

There are some similarities, but the findings provide something different. While Raney (2001) reports the absurd in terms of bureaucratic absurdities, this study views it as a single motif shown in the protagonist Coverly. That is, such absurdity is identified, and the causes of it are explored and reported, depending on specific situations. The study supports the findings reported by Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018) that the separation is one of the key factors causing absurdity. However, it views that the lack of money of the lonely young man is also a cause. Job loss results in having no money. It can be also said that the application rejected leads to problems. According to this study, the state of unemployment can be both the root and the result of the absurdity. Coverly has realized that he cannot pass the test, so he shows his absurdity through his parents' absurd actions. Then, he fails the psychological test. Moreover, unlike Phothisuwan and Aimchoo (2018) who report death as the result of absurdity, the study finds no death caused by Coverly's absurd manners. The absurdity of Coverly reflects Camus' perspective on the absurd as he "argues that we should keep the absurd alive rather than attempt to suppress it through philosophical suicide, or destroy it through physical suicide" (Camus, 1975, as cited in Foley, 2014, p. 332).

The study argues that absurdity is often found when ill-prepared humans are trapped lonely in the world that is modernized. The absurdity results in not only blinding humans to behave normally but also forcing them to be trapped in chaotic situations. However, the results of the absurdity do not destroy the humans' lives. In the story, Coverly cannot pass a test for emotional make-up, but the failure to get a job does not drain him of hope. There are various jobs in the cities waiting for him, including other young suburbanites to work and get

paid. If men are young, they still have a hope for better life. According to the findings, the absurd does not lead the young ones to death.

Conclusion

Of course, the study concludes that life of the Wapshot family affected by the economic and social changes of the 20th century is depicted in Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Leander and his two sons: Moses and Coverly are characterized as the main characters. Although various works report life which gets worse in the American society modernized under materialistic ideals, this study discusses the term *absurdity* through Coverly, the younger son. The term is redefined mostly under the definitions proposed by Albert Camus and John Sutherland as the states of meaninglessness, unreasonableness, or ridiculousness or all of them under the senses of separation, loneliness, depression, or anxiety. The study finds that the young Wapshot possesses absurdity. It is seen when he goes to a psychologist to be tested for emotional make-up required for the job he applies for. Coverly demonstrates his father's unusual features which indicate the sense of the absurd. Similarly, he also does this to his mother. Through the descriptions of his parents, Coverly's absurdity is reflected. The feeling of anxiety is viewed as the cause of his absurdity. In fact, the problems from his past and the pressures in the city are intertwined to form his anxiety which, then, gives birth to the absurdity. It can be said that the criterion for measuring his emotional state turns out to be the tool forcing him to present the absurdity. The study argues that absurdity results in blinding humans to behave normally and forcing them to be trapped in chaotic situations if the humans are not well prepared to be the citizens. The study suggests that the support of the family and a family relationship are necessary for humans who want to live in suburbs. As for a suggestion for further study, researchers should conduct on the absurdity of the mother Sarah Wapshot. Leander, Sarah, and Coverly also draw researchers' attention to be discussed in terms of psychological aspects.

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