

**THE IDEA OF EXISTENCE IN GUY VANDERHAEGHE'S
MAN DESCENDING AND MY PRESENT AGE**

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Abstract:

Guy Vanderhaeghe is an important name in literary arena. He dealt with multiple serious themes in his writing. The present article attempts to explore existential ideas in his Man Descending and My Present Age.

Keywords: *Guy Vanderhaeghe, existentialism.*

Ed is the central character in “Man Descending” and “Sam, Soren, and Ed” the last two short stories in the collection *Man Descending* (1982) and the novel *My Present Age* (1984) by the Canadian writer Guy Vanderhaeghe. Vanderhaeghe modeled Ed on Kierkegaard whose “life was filled with constant and intense suffering” (Pojman, 901). Like Kierkegaard, he is “frustrated in love” (901) and “frustrated in his vocational aspiration” (901). Like Kierkegaard, Ed's life is also centered on the questions, “‘How shall I live my life?’ ‘What kind of life is worth living the aesthetic, ethical or religious?’ ‘What does it mean to have faith?’ ‘What does it mean to love?’ ‘What does it mean to accept one's suffering and how can one do this?’ ” (Pojman, 901-902). But unlike Kierkegaard, he does not lead “a deeply religious life” (901). Ed does not know the meaning of his existence.

Existentialism is defined by *The World Book Encyclopedia* as “a philosophical movement that developed on the continent of Europe during the 1800's and 1900's” (Vol.6, 415). The members of the movement were concerned with “the nature of *existence* or *being*” (The World Book Encyclopedia 6, 415). This philosophy got developed mainly because of the works of Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, thinker and theologian who is widely considered as the founder of existentialism. The other significant existentialists of the period were “the French writers Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gabriel Marcel; the German philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger; the Russian religious and political thinker Nicholas Berdyaev; and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber” (415).

Existentialists believe that human beings have limitations in taking decisions. They find “human life as being basically a series of decisions that must be made with no way of knowing conclusively what the correct choices are” (Vol.6, 415). According to the existential philosophers, human life is based on utter confusions as an individual must himself/herself decide “what is true and what is false; what is right and what is wrong; which beliefs to accept and which to reject; what to do and what not to do” (415). But finally individuals “must make their own choices” (415). That means, humans have free will which makes them “responsible” (415) for what they do. Hence responsibility becomes “the dark side of freedom” (415) as the human beings “are completely responsible for their decisions, actions, and beliefs” (415). This responsibility gives way to “*anxiety*” (415). They try different ways “to escape from this anxiety by ignoring or denying their freedom and their responsibility” (415). This denial ends up in “*deceiving*” (415) oneself. It is this “*self-deception*” (415) that the existentialists want to resist.

The existential philosophy had found its expression through “many novels, poems, short stories, and plays” (415). Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* has widely influenced Guy Vanderhaeghe's stories and novels. Stephen Dunning argues that Vanderhaeghe's first novel *My Present Age* takes its title from Kierkegaard's book *The Present Age* (75-89). Both the works make use of existential philosophy which

holds the idea that “religious faith is irrational” (*The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, 246). This philosophy is of the view that “when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd” (Pojman, 904). It was Kierkegaard who first illustrated the “absurdity” (246) or “logical impossibility” (246) of the Christian belief that “God, who is infinite and immortal, was born as Jesus Christ, who was finite and mortal” (246). Another example which attained popularity is “the absurdity of religion in Genesis 22” (246). This is the instance when “God commands Abraham, for no apparent reason, to kill his only son, Isaac” (246). This story is the perfect example of man's extreme obedience to God.

Vanderhaeghe has been thoroughly fascinated and obsessed with this story of Abraham and Isaac that he presented it in “How the Story Ends”, one of the stories in the short story collection, *Man Descending*. According to Sorenson, this story “emphasizes a child's horror at the sadism implicit in the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac” (Pojman, 85). “It's stupid! It's stupid!” (*Man Descending*, 72) is little Paul's reaction to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Big Paul, Little Paul, and Tollefson stand for three different kinds of approaches towards religion. Big Paul is a grown up religious offender. He thinks that nothing is “normal” (57) with orthodox people. He sarcastically says that men like Tollefson, “walk the same” (56) and “talk the same” (56). He adds that “a preacher in the house” (61) is “hornier than a two-peckered owl” (61). Little Paul is a small boy who has “got to learn to see things through” (67). Sorenson is of the view that “Little Paul is uncomprehending” (87) when his great uncle Tollefson tries to explain to the child “the Bible's lesson of obedience” (87). Sorenson further observes that “Little Paul sees God as a voracious consumer who might even eat Little Paul” (89). When little Paul cannot make out the reason for such a sacrifice for God, it shows that people find it hard to understand the ways of God. Tollefson is an old man who has “private talks with God” (*Man Descending*, 56). He “tried to do more than he was capable of” (*Man Descending*, 58). He is of the view that “we must always try our hardest to please God” (64) as “God was willing to sacrifice his only son, Jesus” (64). It is because “he loved the world and wished to wash it clean of sin, as white as snow, by the saving mercy of His blood” (64). Tollefson admits to himself that “he was a sinful man” (66) who had “slept with other men's wives before he had come to know Jesus” (66). He believes that “everything God made, he made for a reason” (67). But Little Paul is only a beginner with regard to religious matters. So when Little Paul tells Tollefson that he “didn't like the story” (*Man Descending*, 64), it shows man's dislike to follow the religious practices blindly.

But for Kierkegaard, Abraham is his “religious ideal” (*The World Book Encyclopedia* 11, 246). Kierkegaard insists that even though God's orders are beyond human understanding, they should follow them without questioning. Kierkegaard says that we need to obey them however “ridiculous” (246) and “immoral” (246) they seem to be. For this, what we need is “faith, not reason” (902), says Pojman in his *Classics of Philosophy*. Pojman says that “faith is the highest virtue a human can reach” (902) and that “faith is necessary for the deepest fulfillment” (902). He argues that “there is something misguided in trying to base one's religious faith on objective evidence or reason” (902). This is what has been conveyed through Vanderhaeghe's writings as well. But both Kierkegaard and Vanderhaeghe realized that even when people declare that they are ardent followers of Christianity, they are most of the time, neither sincere nor moral.

It is an ordeal for an individual to develop himself religiously into “a real man” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 31). In order to become a religious man, he should learn “to be content with himself” (30). He is “taught to be content with himself and his relation to God” (35) rather than “being in agreement with a public which destroys everything that is relative, concrete and particular in life” (35). This is an age in which “People are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale for the smallest possible price” (Pojman, 904). It means that principles of morality are compromised for momentary happiness.

Momentary happiness should not be our concern. Hence, “every one should really and essentially be a man in a religious sense” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 41). It is learnt that “the person attacked is always the stronger” (41). We should be able to realize that a person who is willing to live a true Christian life is destined to undergo “a misfortune” (40). People may mistake it to be a “failure” but eventually it is a “victory” (59). Such a man's purpose of existence is not “to dominate” (59), “to guide” (59), or “to lead” (59) but “to serve in suffering and help indirectly” (59). Pojman says that the “correct interpretation of Christianity” (903) can resolve all “internal problems” (903). But our age seems to have miserably failed in realizing the necessity to live a religious life.

“Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 3). According to Kierkegaard, there is no “single man left ready, for once, to commit an outrageous folly” (3). Analyzing the complications of life, he elaborates:

Nowadays not even a suicide kills himself in desperation. Before taking the step he deliberates so long and so carefully that he literally chokes with thought. It is even questionable whether he ought to be called a suicide, since it is really thought which takes his life. He does not die *with* deliberation, but *from* deliberation (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 3).

However, carefully and intentionally, a decision is taken, “in fact, its ability, its virtuosity and good sense consists in trying to reach a judgement” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 4). That decision ends up only as “a decision without ever going as far as action” (4) and finally “nothing really happens” (4). But there are signs or indications as if something would happen.

“Indications are, indeed, the only achievements of the age” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 4). Also, “its skill and inventiveness in constructing fascinating illusions, its bursts of enthusiasm, using a deceitful escape” anticipates future actions (4). However, the actions which are intended to take place in the future always remain “dormant” (4). Man is not able to do away with the past, is not trying to come to terms with the present and is not going to make use of the future. That means, laziness or indolence have overpowered the present generation. It is “wearied by its chimerical efforts” (4), and relapses into complete indolence” (4).

Indolence and postponement of actions provides ample time for reflection. Kierkegaard is of the view that even a man of great strength does not have “the passion to be able to tear himself from the coils and seductive uncertainty of reflection” (*The Present Age*, 4-5). He further states that “his surroundings” (5) are no help to him that they do not “supply the events or produce the general enthusiasm necessary in order to free him” (5). Thus both his self and the people around him make him believe that “the shrewdest thing of all is to do nothing” (5). This is the worst judgement that the present generation can make.

If a generation were given the diplomatic task of postponing any action in such a way as to make it seem as if something were just about to happen, then we should have to admit that our age had performed as remarkable a feat as the revolutionary age (*The Present Age*, 5).

Causing a dramatic change is the achievement of the revolutionary age. “A revolutionary age, is an age of action” (*The Present Age*, 6). Such an age involves or causes dramatic changes. But “ours is the age of advertisement and publicity” (6), further observes Kierkegaard. “The age of great and good actions is past, the present age is the age of anticipation” (7). Anticipation and anxiety occur side by side and one cannot find solace with learning, understanding and thinking of action. Action is the only solution to ease “a restless conscience” (*My Present Age*, 69). Nothing can replace its effect, even intelligence cannot.

“Intelligence has got the upper hand to such an extent that it transforms the real task into an unreal trick and reality into play” (9). Living the reality and imagining the fancy often gets mingled with each other. Clinging to fancy often leaves the discussion on “what ought to be done” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 10). The consequence is “an age without passion” (11) which “has no values, and everything is

transformed into representational ideas" (11). The only thing that has value in the eyes of the modern generation is money.

"Money will be the one thing people will desire, which is moreover only representative, an abstraction" (12), argues Kierkegaard. He drives home the point that "nowadays a young man hardly envies anyone his gifts, his art, the love of a beautiful girl, or his fame; he only envies him his money" (12). Money seems to be the only thing that bothers the present generation.

Several of the characters in Vanderhaeghe's novels and stories are the ones who believe that their situation can be improved with money, and only with money. For example, Vanderhaeghe presents Robert Thompson, a man who plans "to spend most of the rest of his life riding around on people's shoulders" (*Man Descending*, 15) in the short story "The Watcher". He claims to be a Buddhist but says that "the Lord Buddha might have been able to subsist on a single bean a day; I can't" (16). This story shows "how firmly bound we all are to the wretched wheel of life and its stumbling desires" (16). This story also conveys that "those who are in the grip of desire, the grip of existence, the grip of ignorance, move helplessly round through the spheres of life, as men or gods or as wretches in the lower regions" (16). The second story in *Man Descending* shows Jack Cosgrave, a man who thinks that things would have been different for him if his father-in-law had not turned down "a business proposition" (42) that he once raised. The conversation between Cosgrave and Albert Stiles also shows that people are obsessed with money. Kierkegaard says that such a man "would die with nothing to reproach himself with, and under the impression that if only he had had the money he might really have lived and might even have achieved something great" (*The Present Age*, 12). Greatness cannot be achieved without a passion for action.

The further discussion about reflection in *The Present Age* tells us how a passionless man of the present generation "lets himself be deceived by his reflection" (13) and its results are "both dangerous and unforeseeable" (13). Too much of reflection makes things worse like knowledge. Kierkegaard is of the opinion that "An increased power of reflection like an increased knowledge only adds to man's affliction" (13). It seems evident that "no task is more difficult than to escape from the temptations of reflection" (13). Reflection is a kind of running away from reality. "...reflection is capable of explaining everything quite differently and allowing one some way of escape" (13). Reflection seems to serve the purpose of satisfaction. Even though it provides only an uncertain satisfaction, that "uncertainty is filled with *hope*" (13). However, this "leaves the whole of life ambiguous" (14) and "everything continues to exist factually" (14). Eventually facts are the outcome of "freedom of thought" (Either / Or I, 25). This freedom is utilized only for thinking and not becoming.

"The present age is still struggling with all the difficulties of 'becoming'" (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 13). People try to compromise with the moral and the immoral. "Neither moral nor immoral" (14) and "merely ambiguous" (14) are Vanderhaeghe's protagonists. They fall between good and bad. Hence, their goodness is "neither appreciated nor worthwhile in this world" (14) and "tantamount to stupidity" (14). This confusion between good and evil leads to the loss of "inwardness" (15). It takes to "the extent in which the relation no longer exists, or else forms a colourless cohesion" (15). Eventhough, "the relationships still exist...they lack the force which makes it possible for them to draw together in inwardness and unite in harmony" (17). The absence of support, solace and sincerity in a relationship make it exist for the sake of existence alone. Whether it is in a personal relationship or in an official relationship, people are confused regarding what to do and what not to do and finally they end up doing nothing. People often feel that "there is something missing" (Pojman, 902) in their lives but they do not try to understand what they must do. This state leaves "a tension which exhaust [s] life itself" (*The Present Age*, 17). This tension in relationships makes inwardness which is the ability to look into one's own mind, spirit, or soul quite tough. This is what happens to the various relationships in the novel and stories by Vanderhaeghe.

The relationship expresses "its presence and its absence simultaneously, not completely rather as though it were drawled out, half-awake and uninterruptedly" (*The Present Age*, 17). Thus, the relationship

becomes “almost meaningless” (18). This meaninglessness or ambiguity is that “which satisfies our reflective and passionless age” (18). A reflective age makes one imagine that one is better than other people. A passionless age always leaves one with a feeling drained of energy. It is the “deprivations” (18) that causes reflection in one.

“Deprivations” (18) is not an excuse for not leading a true Christian life. But in actuality, “the established order of things continues to exist” (18) but only in “ambiguity” (18). This ambiguous state makes majority of the people of the present age remain “unrepentant” (19) because they think they have not offended the existing religious beliefs. So they leave “the Christian terminology untouched” (19). But “man's only salvation lies in the reality of religion for each individual” (29). Also, the attainment of salvation is a gradual process which involves “errors” (29) and “courage” (29). Everyman has to have himself great courage and enthusiasm to reach his spiritual destiny. This would make him a hero.

“The hero is enthusiasm made manifest” (*The Present Age*, 19). According to Kierkegaard, in a passionate age, “*enthusiasm* is the unifying principle” (19) but in a very reflective and passionless age, *envy* is the negative unifying principle” (19). Thus, in the present age, “the idea of reflection is envy” (19). He elaborates the concept of envy as a “twofold action” (19). Kierkegaard is of the view that envy “is selfish within the individual and it results in the selfishness of the society around him, which thus works against him” (19). That means, “the individual has to break loose from the bonds of his own reflection” (20) and also from “the vast prison formed by the reflection of those around him” (20). Kierkegaard takes the idea further when he says that “the envy in reflection (within the individual) prevents him making a decision passionately” (19). He elaborately and eloquently says that it is this envy that “imprisons man's will and his strength” (20). However, Kierkegaard finds a solution to escape from the “second imprisonment” (20). It is to lead “a new simpler life” through the help of religion. Otherwise, a person may fall for “the flattering and conceited notion that the *possibility* of reflection is far superior to a mere *decision*” (20). That means, a person will finally think about various possibilities of doing something rather than actually make a decision and do something. That is, “it prevents him from doing anything” (20). Kierkegaard says that this kind of envy “spoils” a person like “an indulgent mother” (20). This is because “the envy within him prevents the individual from devoting himself to others” (20).

Envy seems to be an evident characteristic of the age which is in turn reflected in the characters of *Man Descending* and *My Present Age*. Kierkegaard says that it is inherent in human beings to long for “variety” (*The Present Age*, 21). He argues that even a person's admiration for something cannot sustain for long. He says that “it is a fundamental truth of human nature that man is incapable of remaining permanently on the heights, of continuing to admire something” (21). Thus instead of “the happy love of admiration” (22), one possesses “the unhappy love of envy” (22).

Not only does reflection make a man envious but also “indolent” (22). This leads to a “want of character” (22). Most of the individuals in the present age, because of their indolence “will aspire to be nothing at all” (38). A person of the present age, out of reflection, may fall into “utter wretchedness” (23). Thus, “a passionate age storms ahead setting up new things and tearing down old, raising and demolishing as it goes” whereas “a reflective and passionless age does exactly the opposite: “it hinders and stifles all action” (22). Not even a “gifted man” (25) can free himself from reflection because he “becomes conscious of himself as a fractional part in some quite trivial matter”. Hence, “he fails to achieve the infinite freedom of religion” (25). A person of the present generation, in spite of his fear of “the judgement” does “no longer belongs to God, to himself, to his beloved, to his art or to his science” (26). He exists only in the form of an “abstraction” (26). Reflection gives the individual “a momentary, selfish kind of enjoyment” (27). But reflection may end in “the destruction of the individual” (27). Such a man “does not become an outstanding man or a hero” (30). He is “thrown back upon himself” (34). This finally makes “the evil worse and the conditions of salvation more difficult and the probability of decline more certain” (38). The deeper is the evil, the more severe the decline.

Just like evil, reflection is “a snare in which one is caught” (31). Reflection brings in “all the possible views of life” (31). It is “a fantastic illusion” (33) which comes the way of “a passionless, sedentary” (33), and “reflective age” (33). People are carried away by its “dazzling brilliance” (31).

Altogether, Kierkegaard gives clarity to the idea of reflection by saying that if used properly, reflection provides “a greater capacity for action” (42) and that it “is not the evil” (42). It is only “a reflective condition” (42) which transforms “the capacity for action into a means of escape from action” (42).

This is an age in which “even the most insignificant man can add to the most insignificant action, and thus become tremendously self-important” (48). On the other hand, “modesty, repentance and responsibility” (50) seems to have vanished in the present age. Everything is found having a superficial existence which is “the manifestation of emptiness” (50). According to Kierkegaard, “superficiality” is “the result of doing away with the vital distinction between concealment and manifestation” (50). Even love has ceased to exist in its pure form. Now, it is the age of flirtation. For Kierkegaard, flirtation is “the result of doing away with the vital distinction between real love and real debauchery” (50). Thus to conclude, in the present age, “everyone knows a great deal, we ought to know which way we ought to go” (53). But the problem is that “nobody is willing to move” (53) as “action is met by indolence” (53). Sustained indolence should be restrained and remedied to instigate action.

Indolence leads to reflection which is “an escape, a distraction and an illusion” (54). This illusion takes away the “interest of reality” (54). This in turn hinders “the divine growth of inwardness which ripens to decisions” (54). It is quite impossible to save our age from the hold of reflection. Forming groups of any number of people to have a discussion on what is to be done is common as “one man is curious about another” (54) and “everyone is undecided” (54). Even though everyone hesitates in action, they all have “an opinion” (55). This is the age in which “twenty-five signatures make the most frightful stupidity into an opinion” (55). The present generation does not know “the danger of reflection” (61) because often “goodness and badness are mistaken” (61). Therefore, one finds it hard to choose one of the “two roads” (*My Present Age*, 33). In Ed's words, “There they are, two roads” (33) but “one choice” (33). According to Ed, “we can choose to simplify our lives, or we can choose to complicate them” (17). He is of the view that “the simplifiers want less, the complicators want more (36). He proceeds by illustrating it with an example of a man who wakes up one morning to realize that “he can't stand his wife” (36). Ed thinks that if the husband is a true simplifier, he will “walk out on her” (36), and if he is a true complicator, he “finds himself a girlfriend” (36). But in his relationship with Victoria, Ed is unable to either break with the past or look up to the future for a girlfriend. Ed does not belong to either group. Thus, he falls into the category of neither good nor evil. He is caught somewhere in the middle of the two feeling confused.

The confusion between good and evil makes one an “isolated individual” (Marcuse, 262). A lonely or “isolated individual” is the prime concern of the existentialism philosophy. Marcuse says that “every individual is unique” (264). But “every individual, in his innermost individuality, is isolated from all others” (264). Also, Marcuse is of the view that “no union, no community, no 'universality'” (264) can alter this state of isolation and hence everything happens as a result of the decisions made by the individual himself. Marcuse adds that “truth is forever the outcome” (264) of such decisions made by the individual himself. He thinks that “the burden of achieving a life in truth ... is the basic concern of Christianity” (265). It is in search of this truth that Marsha's husband Bill Sadler in *My Present Age* goes. But “truth lies only in action and can be experienced only through action” (264). Marcuse says that an individual's existence is “a thinking existence” (264) which leads him to make decisions one after the other. “The sole decision open to the individual is that between eternal salvation and eternal damnation” (264). That means the “free acts that springs from his decision” (264) paves way either to the protection or destruction of the soul of that individual. The whole of existential philosophy was “developed as a fierce opposition to Western rationalism” (265). Facts were the basic concern of the Western radical thinkers.

Rational thinking does not lead to “truth” (Marcuse, 264). According to existential philosophy, “there is only one truth” (Marcuse, 264) which is the “eternal happiness in Christ” (264). Also, “there is only one proper decision” (264) which is “to live a Christian life” (264). The existential philosophers tried “to restore religion” (264) as the ultimate solution for “liberating humanity from the destructive impact of an oppressive social order” (264). The existential philosophers criticized the society of the modern age as “one that distorts and shatters human faculties” (265). To ward off all the distractions is pragmatic only through Christianity and a Christian way of life which involves “incessant struggle and ultimate humiliation and defeat” (265). Marcuse believed that religion is a relief for a “destitute and tormented individual” (265).

But such tormented individuals are not capable of freeing themselves from the clutches of material wealth and temporary happiness as seen in the works of Vanderhaeghe. The short story “What I Learned from Caesar” in *Man Descending* presents a man who having lost his job falls under severe depression. Like most men, he wants to leave “a record” (*Man Descending*, 73) showing his “prosperity, success, and adaptability” (73). But “the particular shame of having lost his job” (73) leads him to the concealment of reality. He was a man who “suddenly discovers that all his lies were transparent, and everything he thought so safely hidden had always been in plain view. He had been living one of those dreams” (73). It was “the kind of dream in which you are walking down the street, meeting friends and neighbours, smiling and nodding, and when you arrive at home and pass a mirror you see for the first time you are stark naked” (73). This unnamed man in the story tries to conceal the truth about his employment to overcome his embarrassment. But the more he lies, the severe is his downfall. He does not want to accept the reality. He is “undignified in his own eyes” (73). “I got no money” (72) is his problem. His son does not know “why all this happened to him” (79). Perhaps there is no reason anyone can put their finger on” (79). According to the existentialists, a person running after money cannot attain peace. In the end of the story, his son hopes that “his father, like his ancestors, in the end, on that one day” (80) would “make the shadows real, and fight to be free of them” (80). These shadows are his reflections. He needs to fight to be free of them. It is the aspirations for a spiritual life that finally takes a person to his destiny. Most of the time, it is in the old age that people turn religious.

“Drummer”, another short story in *Man Descending* presents an old man who follows religious duties mechanically. The story shows how “he goes to confession like an oil change, every five thousand miles, or Easter, whichever comes first” (81). In contrast to him, there is Nancy Williams who “belongs to some other religion which doesn't allow her to dance.” (84). She is brought up in such a manner by her parents that she “prays over a hard-boiled egg for about a half-hour before she ate it in the school lunch-room” (84). According to her schoolmates, “right out where anybody could see, she prayed” (84). People are skeptic about those who seem to be a bit religious. But Billy thinks that “she seemed like a very nice person who had principles” (87). “I can't imagine what you'd have to do to redeem yourself after this mess ... you've got to redeem yourself. I don't even know how I'm going to do it. And none of it's my fault” (98), says Nancy Williams after a dance with Billy without her parents' consent. All these actions and comments from the part of the characters reduce the sanctity of pure faith. They belittle such religious performances to mere chores.

It is the “physical admiration for the devout Nancy Williams” (79) that tempts Billy “to attend the Faith Baptist Church” (79). However, Billy observes that when she sings the Baptist hymns, she “gets all hot and happy looking” (*Man Descending*, 98). Sorenson observes that “eventually Billy becomes fascinated by Nancy's joyous faith, shining in her face” (79) all over when she sings those hymns. “When her face gets like that there's no problem in it, by no means” (98), adds Billy. But Billy wonders how such Baptist hymns can bring her so much of solace and enjoyment. He is bewildered by the thoughts:

It's like she's dancing then, I swear. But to what I don't know. I try to hear it. I try and try. I listen and listen to catch it. Christ, somebody tell me. What's she dancing to? Who's the

drummer? (98).

It is unfailingly to the tune of God that she is dancing to and God is the drummer. Sorenson observes that the questions “What's she dancing to” (98) and “Who's the drummer?” are “challenging” (Sorenson, 79). Vanderhaeghe makes the readers think the answer for themselves. His method is “Ask yourself, and continue to ask until you find the answer” (Pojman, 903). It seems that “Vanderhaeghe encounters religion in a variety of ways” (78), observes Sorenson. The writer believes that it is high time that his fellow human beings thought about religion to erase the confusion regarding what one wants to be.

In “Cages”, in the same collection there is a man who “sometimes can't remember what he wants to be, a farmer or a pencil-pusher” (*Man Descending*, 106). He is an old man who “really hates that cage and the mine” (106) where he has been working for years. Vanderhaeghe's “darkly disturbing tales” (Dunning, 86) shows that “sorrow” (Sorenson, 87) is an evident feature of his works. According to Sorenson, “Vanderhaeghe is becoming one of our great delineators of sorrow” (87). Also, Sorenson observes that for the most part, Vanderhaeghe “finds the world to be an unforgiving place, and he prefers to undermine religious platitudes, exposing the ironies, potential or real” (89).

The same thought that “the world to be an unforgiving place” (Sorenson, 89) is employed in another story, “Going to Russia”. It presents a man who hears “an insistent, persistent, hidden voice [that] has been saying for years” (*Man Descending*, 121-122) that this is not the life that he should be living. That voice seems “to know another world, to foresee a different life, not yet to be found on earth but which will come and cannot fail to come, for only then will true reality be achieved” (121-122). People often have the doubt whether true reality would always be the same as how it has been expected.

This doubt about the true reality is seen in “A Taste for Perfection”, where David is the only “orderly” in the story. He thinks that “reality could never equal the bounty, the splendor, the milk and honey of the land” (*Man Descending*, 130) of the one that he imagined. Though Ogle is not bothered about the other world, he, like many other characters in Vanderhaeghe stories thinks “I don't belong here... It's a mistake” (139). It reflects “the desire to enter into a different world, to escape, at any cost, the present” (148). When he says that “there is no escaping this ward. Not even for a moment” (148), it shows that he is still in darkness where there is no enlightenment of spirituality. Vanderhaeghe wants to arouse a desire for spiritual quest in his readers.

Some element of spirituality overtly or covertly is displayed in his works. Thus in “The Expatriates' Party”, which is a story of a father and son, the father thinks from the appearance of his son that he looks “like a bloody convert to Catholicism,... more Catholic than the Pope” (*Man Descending*, 152). This sarcastically tells that mere appearance would not help one achieve salvation. This story criticizes the “conventional lusts of a consumer society” (155). In this story also, the protagonist longs “to be made whole” (156). He too realizes that something is “wrong” (158) and is “filled with anxiety” (159). This anxiety is shown in the next story also.

In “Dancing Bear”, Mr. Bethge thinks of a man who is “hiding, lurking in disguise” (175). That man is Mr. Bethge himself who longs to have redemption before his death. It seems Vanderhaeghe is “unwilling to let go of the Christian story” (Dunning, 89). But the modern age seems unwilling to let go of its “nothing to do all day” (*Man Descending*, 188) attitude. The “man descending” in the titular story presents Ed, the perfect example of a man who belongs to the present age which “is essentially one of understanding and reflection” (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 3). Ed is told by his wife Victoria that “sometimes stuffiness is preferable to complete irresponsibility” (*Man Descending*, 190). Like most of the stories discussed, here also it is Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* that provides an opening “to read Ed and his world” (Dunning, 81).

Ed admits that he is one who likes to “dwell on” (*My Present Age*, 196) other's sins than on his own. The life of Ed, “like every other life, could be graphed” (192). He takes resolutions but is unable to live accordingly. He is a character not meant to undergo any change. He thinks about himself:

I have begun the inevitable descent, the leisurely glissade which will finally topple me at the bottom of my own graph. A man descending is propelled by inertia; the only initiative left him is whether or not he decides to enjoy the passing scene. (193).

He admits that he intends “only on maintaining his balance” (193). Like Ed, in the present age, most of the people are either the epitome of “gluttony, lechery, sloth or violence” (*Man Descending*, 201). The last story “Sam, Soren, and Ed” shows that Ed is “incapable of imitation” (207) and is “entirely dissociated” (211) from what he does. It is like “we make our way in the world however we can” (212). There are always reflections and excuses and never actions. That is why Ed says that he “spends more time thinking about writing than actually writing, and even more time talking about writing than actually writing” (213). Ed understands that “it's a malady of the modern age” (211).

Ed realizes that in the modern age, one should “sink or swim” (219). But he does not take the least measure to change his present life and situation which he himself does not like. Nevertheless, he hears footsteps and sees “a man standing there, face obscured in shadows” (*My Present Age*, 252) which is his own reflection. His reflection has overpowered him limiting his actions, especially religious.

Sorenson observes that “the more one considers his [Vanderhaeghe's] fiction over the past twenty years, the more it emerges that Guy Vanderhaeghe does care about God” (84). Sorenson adds that “the questions at the end of many of the stories indicate a spiritual hunger” (84). But those characters who really undertake a journey to reach salvation are quite less because they are not heroes with great enthusiasm. Hence, Dunning finds that “there are few heroes in Vanderhaeghe's fiction, and plenty of traitors and cowards” (89). This is a conscious effort from the part of Vanderhaeghe to highlight the significance of making a definite ethical and religious choice in life.

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