

The metaphorical suggestions and representation that can be derived from so many works have a significant power to tap into personal feelings, emotions or struggles of the viewer. The metaphorical meaning of artworks can greatly differ depending on the viewer and their particular experiences, or they can be plainly read by varying audiences.

John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* can act as a metaphorical representation of the ongoing struggle that Africans face with the growth of the overpowering AIDS epidemic. Dividing the work into three main sections-- the shark, the shark's potential victim in the water(Watson), and the people on the boat-- each section plays a significant part in representing the different roles that are involved with regard to the African AIDS epidemic.

The shark that is in the lower right corner of *Watson and the Shark*(figure 1) is an obvious uncontrollable and considerably oppressive force. Copley has provided detailed explanations of the work, informing the audience of what has occurred and is occurring in the moment that he captures with the work. The shark is understood to have already attacked Watson, and is returning for a more severe, potentially fatal attack. Understanding the power of a shark, and its method of attacking anyone in its path rather than seeking out a particular victim, it can easily relate to the AIDS epidemic. (Watson and the Shark)

AIDS, which only began to come to public awareness in North America in the 1980s, has been a major impacting force on life across the continent of Africa for a number of years. Like the shark in Copley's work, the force could be controlled with a certain amount of effort. The amount of work that would be required to stop such a force though may be considered as more overwhelming than the actual shark itself. Comparing this thought to the ever prevalent AIDS epidemic in Africa, much of the suffering could be reduced, even diminished if more outreach and concern was established in developed and more fortunate nations. There is also an existing contrasting belief though, that it may simply be too late to stop such a domineering entity at this point in time. This is the implication that can be metaphorically arrived at from Copley's work. The point of attack that the shark is captured at may portray that it is too late for Watson's chance of a successful rescue. As the AIDS epidemic thrives, especially without the amount of help that is

needed to put up and adequate fight against it with the aid of developed nations, it may be too late to escape such a force. (The Sheldon M Chumir Foundation)

The victimized character in Copley's work is understood to be young 14 year-old, Brook Watson, who was attacked by a shark when swimming alone in a harbour of Havana, Cuba. The figure's obvious vulnerability and desperation make it entirely suiting to act as a representation of the people of Africa who are continuously victimized by AIDS. (Watson and the Shark)

Each year the impact of AIDS in Africa becomes significantly greater. Millions are lost every year to the epidemic, and without more outreach from neighboring, more economically secure nations and continents, the atrociousness of the fatal virus will only persist. In 2004 alone, AIDS took the lives of 2.2 million Africans, mainly in areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and many others were infected. Within the continent there are now roughly 25 million people living with HIV and AIDS and the number is constantly increasing. (Aids in Africa)

There is an obvious vulnerability of the victim within the work. This is portrayed both by his positioning and closeness to the attacking shark, and by his nudity- something that is commonly associated with vulnerability. The victims who face the real life horror of AIDS can also be connected to a similar sense of helplessness. In the work, Watson seems completely dependent on the outreach and willingness of the men on the boat for survival, much like the many Africans who lack the means of adequate health care, nutrition, education, and much of a chance to overcome the epidemic that victimizes them.

The moment captured in *Watson and the Shark* is one of an actual occurrence in Havana, Cuba. As unpredictable as it may seem, the outcome following the moment portrayed in the work, is that Watson is saved by the men in the boat after been repeatedly attacked, but not enough for a fatal result. This outcome could relate to an optimistic potential result for the epidemic. With the help of others, a resolution could be made, and the problematic impact of AIDS could be diminished. It has already been proven that certain HIV and AIDS programs established within areas of Africa that provide knowledge on HIV and AIDS, has a considerable positive effect on the people of the given area. It could be believed that with more help that provides education to African people, along with more advanced medical assistance, much could be done

in the fight against AIDS. At this point, as the attack of AIDS has become such a widespread force it is difficult to determine whether it is too late or not. (Aids in Africa)

In the context that Copley provided in *Watson and the Shark*, the men, and potential rescuers in the boat are putting forth a tremendous rescue effort to save Watson. The descriptions and outcome of the dramatic event that accompanied the work in an exhibit in London, England, concluded that the rescue effort was successful, and even though Watson suffered the loss of a limb, which is evident in the painting, he recovers shortly after. (Watson and the Shark)

Observing the men as one unit, they are representational of the thoughts and actions that occur around the world regarding the problem with AIDS in Africa. The varying positions and expressions of the men help to represent this, as there are numerous different standings on the issue. Looking at each of the men as individuals, the many different reactions, from a sense of defeat to hope become quite clear.

The apparent sense of hope that exists in the work is portrayed by the men who are nearer the front side of the boat, closer to Watson. Those with outstretched arms, and particularly the man who is driving his spear downward toward the shark, show a significant amount of hope. They seem to have faith in their efforts and are willing to do all they can to overcome the powerful shark. The background also plays a part in representing the faith that some have in their ability to overcome the attacker. Looking mainly at the sky, most of it consists of either a dark or neutral tone. The sky behind the man with the spear shows a breaking of light though, that surrounds most of his body. Both the sky and the water behind him surround him in an aura of light. As light is often symbolically connected to a sign of hope, this makes the particular man even more significant in his effort to overcome and believe that they may still have a chance.

Regarding the thoughts on the AIDS issue in Africa, the men who portray a sign of hope in the work, represent the people who are reaching out to help those in need, whether it be a nation, organization or individual. As overpowering as the AIDS issue has become, there is work done to educate and provide more medical care for the victims in Africa by different groups, such as Doctors Without Borders and World Vision. (Aids in Africa)

Without the realization of just how severe the issue is, and a lack of knowledge regarding the silent

killer, many people throughout the world aren't working to fight AIDS, as they don't realize the seriousness of it, or perhaps don't believe that anything can be done at this point. In *Watson and the Shark* this is portrayed by the men who are behind those who are fighting through their immense struggle. The man who is almost unnoticeable to the first glance, sitting behind the man with the spear, seems to be suited for representing a lack of hope. He is aimlessly sitting, almost as an observer of the dramatic scene, perhaps arriving at the thought that nothing can be done to really help. (Nachtwey)

Understanding how the various divided sections in *Watson and the Shark* come together to act as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle with AIDS in Africa, it becomes a strong piece beyond Copley's original intentions. Observing the various gestures and emotions, from the aggression of the shark, to the helplessness of Watson, one can easily discover the metaphorical suggestion of the African struggle, when understanding the true desperation that so many people have when becoming effected by such a sinister force. Raw human emotion, whether captured in an artwork from the eighteenth century, or seen on the faces of people within a society today, is one of the things that is universally comprehensible. The universal understanding, and timelessness of strong emotion is what easily connects a contemporary struggle to an artwork from any period. The pain, desperation and relentless fight for survival that is portrayed in *Watson and the Shark* help the intensity of the situation to be better understood by an audience, and also connect the work to an issue of great severity including the African AIDS epidemic.

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