

Deconstructing Sentimentality in Mark Nowak's Coal Mountain Elementary

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the book *Coal Mountain Elementary*, a collection of poetry, written by Mark Nowak. More specifically, I tackle this postmodern book through oppressor\oppressed lens. In this book, Nowak attacks the global coal industry mainly by three fronts. First, the author shed some light on the Sago Mine explosion in Virginia in 2006, and its effect on the miners and their families. Second, Nowak shifts the focus to China and its mining system, and the horrors that the miners go through. Lastly, the author attacks the American Coal Foundation and its capitalist approach to the education system. My main argument in this paper is that how Nowak manages to uncover the brutal and inhumane life conditions that the miners are facing, without offering them as objects of sentimentality. By doing this, I prove how it is more effective to abandon the notion of sentimentality and look at the victims as subjects rather than objects. I reach the conclusion that *Coal Mountain Elementary* is a fundamental work of literature in voicing the concerns of the coal miners and their families. Also, how sentimentality can in certain situation weaken the message being sent. This paper attacks the global mining system, as well as capitalism.

Keywords: sentimentality, postmodern, oppressed, working-class literature

1. Introduction

No one can argue against the advantages that the working-class literature brings to our world. Literature becomes the means to voice the concerns of the oppressed all around the globe. Many writers have devoted a great amount of their writings to help the cause of the less fortunate. Working-class literature exposes the weaknesses of the social system, whether it is related to gender, race, or ethnic issues. Mark Nowak is one the most prominent contemporary working-class literature writers. He has published numerous books where he makes the lives of the poor workers visible to the public. Some of his works include: *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004,) *Workers of the Word, Unite and Fight* (2005,) and *Coal Mountain*

Elementary (2009.) Almost all of his works highlight the lives of the working class. His writings uncover how capitalism affects the lives of millions of people all around the world. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, for example, deals with the lives of the coal miners inside and outside the United States.

Nowak brings to the surface, through his poetry, the sufferings of the poor miners. He critiques the socio-economic conditions of the miners' lives. It is no secret that Nowak "has been a vocal opponent of the neoliberal economic policies that have defined global capitalism since the 1970s" (Craven, 2020). The degrading socio-economic conditions of the workers in this industry are a direct result of the neoliberal policies that dominate the world. It comes as no surprise that the mining industry has "low levels of compliance with regulations and policies and this has decreased the socio-economic and environmental benefits of the sector" (Mwakumanya, Maghenda, & Juma, 2017). Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch (2010) call the mining industry a "harm industry" especially in its "destructive transformation of the environment and in the toxic exposure of workers and other people living nearby to health threats from the minerals themselves, such as lead, asbestos, and uranium, or the chemicals used to process minerals" (Benson & Kirsch, 2010). This is alarming, since the harm that the mining industry causes transcends the miners as it may affect the nearby locals. The mining industry, and most importantly, the working conditions of the miners has always been Nowak's concern. Justin Parks (2021) touches on the same issue when he writes that "*Coal Mountain Elementary* exposes the human and environmental effects of neoliberal extractivist practices" (Parks, 2021).

Nowak mentions in his essay, "Rethinking Working-Class Literature," that while he is writing about the working class, he makes sure that he is not sentimentalizing them at the same time. Thus, Nowak's philosophy on writing about working-class literature is that he does not want to portray the poor as objects of sentimentality. Jenefer Robinson (2012), outstandingly, discusses the notion of sentimentality, and whether it is vice or virtue. She writes that "sentimentality in *real life* can be ethically problematic" (Robinson, 2012). She adds that "the term 'sentimental' is often also used as a term of abuse. In this sense sentimentality is 'the name of a deficiency or a weakness,' a defect in moral character" (Robinson, 2012). Robert Solomon (2004) takes a similar stance when discussing sentimentality. He sees sentimentality as "an expression of and appeal to the tender emotions, such as pity, sympathy, fondness, adoration, compassion" (Solomon, 2004). It is this sense of sentimentality, which I argue, Nowak is refraining from attributing it to the miners in *Coal Mountain Elementary*. There is a negative connotation associated with the word sentimentalism that Nowak is trying to detach, as I will explain in this paper, from the miners.

This is very challenging for a writer who invests his writings in helping the cause of the underprivileged. However, I believe that Nowak, in *Coal Mountain Elementary*, succeeds in voicing the miseries of the poor miners without positioning them as objects of sentimentality. In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how Nowak beautifully composes *Coal*

Mountain Elementary without sentimentalizing with the miners. I will explain how he uses specific techniques as a scheme to avoid empathy toward the workers. Through my analysis of the book, I will touch on both the form and its content.

Before I dive into discussing Nowak's work, I feel the need first to explain why Nowak, or some writers in general, tries to eliminate sentimental discourse from his poetry. Nowak does not explicitly state why he is against sentimentalism in literature, but it is obvious that he is distancing his writings from this notion. In the article, "Poor Eliza," Lauren Berlant touches on how sentimentality might negatively interfere with politics. She asserts that sentimentality:

Uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically. Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. (Berlant, 1998).

The discourse of sentimentalism brings into play the question of morality. Being sentimental makes us look at the victims as objects rather than subjects; it prevents us from identifying with the oppressed. Sentimentality clashes with reason. In other words, sentimentality "has the power to destroy high culture because it offered psychologically attractive alternatives to thought, responsibility and growth" (Camfield, 1988). Thus, it is this passive empathy that Nowak is trying to avoid. He does not want his readers to sympathize with the underprivileged; instead he calls for the readers to use reason. He wants the readers to react and participate in offering solutions to end the miseries of the workers.

Ann Douglass wrote a very famous book titled *The Feminization of American Culture*, where she discusses the negative connotations associated with the notion of sentimentality. She argues that this notion reinforced women's submission and it helped in removing them from the social, political, and economic life in the United States. I assume that Nowak is building on the same argument. He is conscious of how sentimentality might disrupt all of his efforts in giving voice to the oppressed miners. He wants the working class to blend into the society. Thus, sentimentality proposes a threat to Nowak's ultimate goal. Being sympathetic and emotional is not enough; feelings should turn to actions to end the sufferings of the oppressed. It is fair to say that, according to Nowak's philosophy, sentimentality works against the benefits of the working class, instead of helping their cause it will do the opposite.

2. Body of Paper

Nowak uses many techniques that detach sentimentality from his work. The first notable technique that he incorporates, in his book of poetry, is his use of "documentary

poetry.” In its basic definition; documentary poem is the combination of other elements besides poetry writing. It could be photographs, legal documents, letters, lesson plans, and so forth. However, documentary poetry is far complicated than this simple definition. This type of poetry usually touches on some significant cultural and social matters. The author who composes such poetry usually aims to offer an analysis, critique, or assessment on a major social, or political matter. The documentary poetry “testif[ies] to the often unheard voices of people struggling to survive in the face of unspeakable violence” (Metres, 2007). In *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Nowak deploys three elements of documentary poetry; the first is the many news reports/testimonies, the second is the photographs, and finally the three lesson plans.

Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell, in their book *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics*, explain the significance of documentary poetry in Nowak’s book. They write, “Nowak’s documentary poetry creatively bridges the gap between poetic innovation and political critique” (Rankine, 2007). Thus, the works of Nowak combine poetic aesthetics as well as political issues. The poetic innovations are manifested in his use of news reports, images, and lesson plans combined together, and the political critique is directed toward the capitalist’s corporation for their exploitation of the poor workers. To put it simply, Nowak’s poetry revolves around serious social concerns, besides being aesthetically creative. In the coming paragraphs, I will explain how each element is carefully employed in order to avoid sentimentality.

Coal Mountain Elementary features both news reports and excerpts from testimonial transcripts. The italicized news reports are taken from Chinese resources, while the transcripts are from West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health and Safety in the aftermath of the Sago disaster. What is worth mentioning here is the complete absence of Nowak’s own voice. This absence reflects his approach in composing this book. “Nowak’s use of textual documentation reinforces this sense that we’re not getting the whole story, so to speak” (Rankine & Sewell, 2008). Nowak wants the readers to engage with the textual documentations; he deliberately leaves a space for the reader to fill in. Throughout the prose, we do not encounter any comment or observation from Nowak. He could have, for example, used sentimental language in order to engage the readers with the text. He could have identified the names of the miners, and explained how the disasters had changed their lives. Instead, he relies on some factual accounts on what happened in both Virginia and China.

Through this technique, he eliminates any possibility of sentimental discourse in his text. Nowak pushes his readers to a direct engagement with the poor miners. We, as readers, establish a direct rapport with the victimized miners through the narrative of the news reports and testimonies. In these narratives the language is direct and factual. They explain things as they have happened. The reader would be acquainted of what had happened without any additions. So, Nowak manages to voice the oppressed without including any sentimental language that might hinder his genuine goal. Therefore, the absence of Nowak’s own voice in the book indicates that how attempts to disassociate sentimentalism from his book of poetry.

Photographs have a very significant role in *Coal Mountain Elementary*. There are twenty-five photos in the book. The photos are all taken from both the United States and China by Nowak himself and Ian Teh; the images speak directly to the theme of the book. In order to examine how photos are within Nowak's framework of anti-sentimentalism, I will introduce one of the photos in this paper and analyze how images function in the book. Even under all the photos in the book, Nowak does not tell his readers where the photos were taken, or when they were taken from. There is a sense of mystery that revolves around the photos. This is a very clever strategy from Nowak for two reasons. First, by not offering any details (place, time, identity) on the photos, the author wants us to examine carefully the photos. The reader would have to spend some time trying to speculate on each image. Consequently, each photo becomes a puzzle for the readers; they would attempt to know its origin. In my own experience of reading the text, I found myself spending more time examining the photos than I usually do in any other book that includes images. I believe that the reader has no choice but to unconsciously engage with the images. Thus, the first step for Nowak is that he gets his readers to realize that images have an important role in the book.

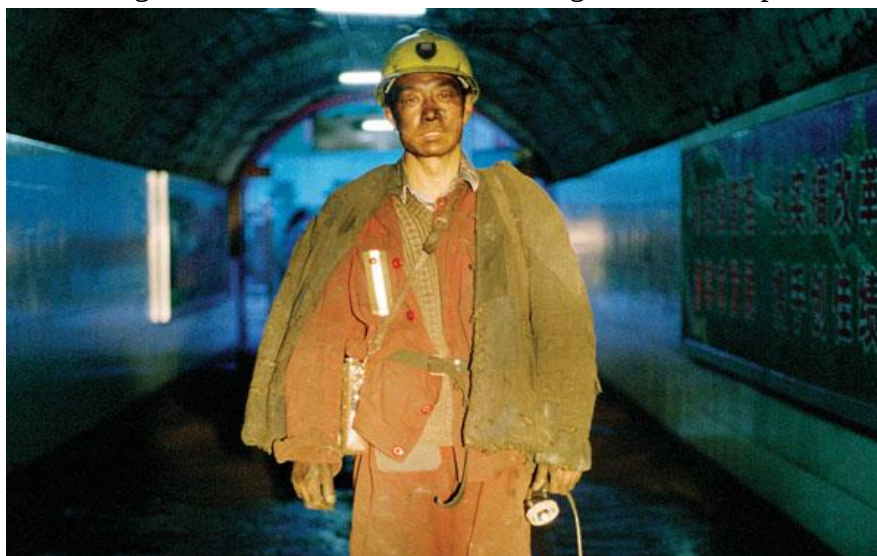


Figure 1: A picture of a troubled Chinese coal miner

Second, the next step is that Nowak wants to push his readers to analyze the images, after spending some time looking at them. In the photograph above, I will offer my own interpretation of it. It is obvious that the man standing in the photo is a poor Chinese miner worker. By looking closely at his face, we will get a sense of how troubled he looks. The dirt on his face and the way he looked at the camera suggest how the poor miner is exhausted from work. From just looking at this image, I am sure that this man is working for long hours, probably more than his body can handle. Nothing looks uplifting for the poor worker. Another important observation is how the poor miner seems to lack the necessary safety tools, apart from the helmet. The poor miner has to go underground with this unfit uniform, which is shocking. The miners are always in danger of disasters, but this poor miner lacks the basic needs for safety or rescuing tools. Also the background of the image hints at something.

The photo is probably taken in a tunnel, and it seems as if the man is standing at the end of it, there is no outlet for him. The miner is trapped. So, Nowak is suggesting that the miner's life is depressing, as he has to spend the larger part of his day underground, and the risk of death is always there. This image contrasts with the saying that "there is light at the end of the tunnel." The gloominess of the image reflects the life of a miner whether in the United State, China, or all around the world. In a sense the poor miner in this image is dehumanized. His facial expression tells a story of sufferings and miseries.

Nowak draws the attention of his readers to the images in *Coal Mountain Elementary* without using sentimental discourse. In the example of the photo that I introduced, the reader establishes almost a personal relationship with the miner, just like what he does with the narrative. So, instead of identifying him as an object, the reader puts him/herself in the position of the poor miner, and imagines what it is like to be a miner in the twenty-first century. Through the different images in the book, Nowak puts us in front of reality. A very harsh reality that makes visible the devastating lives of the poor miners. Again, Nowak abandons any sentimental language in his images. He introduced the images without any single word of description. He calls for the reader's own ethical judgment. The author is trying to voice the troubles of the oppressed miners without appropriating their voices, which is a very challenging task. Nowak succeeds in doing so. Images, in this book, are as important as the narrative. They tell a great deal of the troubles that encounter the lives of the miners. In *Coal Mountain Elementary*, pictures speak louder than words, and Nowak depends on them in sending his message. They play a pivotal role in engaging the readers to the whole theme of the book.

The lesson plans that Nowak introduces are taken from The American Coal Foundation website, and they include: objectives, materials, procedures, national standards, discussion questions, and differentiations. The three lesson plans play a part in eliminating any possibility of including sentimental language in the text. For one reason, they shift the focus of the reader from the conditions of the labors to the educational system. This shift breaks any possibility of empathy from the readers to the miner workers. The inclusion of the lesson plans changes the focus of the readers, and make them question their value. The readers would eventually ask questions on whether the schools teach their students about coal mining, especially if they know that they are taken from the American Coal Foundation. Thus, instead of thinking about the victims, the readers will think of the advocates of the coal mining. By including the lesson plans, Nowak is pushing his readers toward recognizing the people who are responsible for the inhumane life conditions of the miners. In other words, the lesson plans direct the readers to the opposite direction. This direction points to the greedy people who prioritize money over the safety of the lives of many miner workers.

The readers do not have to jump to the end of the book to read that the lesson plans are actually taken from a source that polishes the coal mining industry. The lesson plans clearly contradict with the other two elements in the book: the narrative and the photographs.

They work in favor to the proponents of the coal mining industry. In the second lesson, for example, the objectives read as follows:

Students will participate in a simulated ‘mining’ of chocolate chips from cookies, using play money to purchase the necessary property, tools and labor; 2- understand the various costs associated with mining coal, including environmental remediation, as demonstrated in the simulation; and 3- calculate costs and profits from cookie mining and relate them to the mining industry. (69, 74)

Examining closely the objectives, they seem to familiarize the students with mining industry. They encourage students to learn about costs, profits, and calculations. In other words, these objectives are money-oriented. The lesson’s objectives reinforce the ideology of capital, where every object is valued according to how much money it can generate. Through all the objectives included in the book, they do not suggest nor hint at the dangers associated with the mining industry. They do not aim to raise the students’ awareness of the risks of this industry, and how fatal is this business. So, what the objectives of the lesson plans call for are against the book’s main theme. Since the objectives of the lesson plans oppose to the message of the book, Nowak is satirizing how the advocates are trying to advertise their business. In sum, the lesson plans serve as a significant element on two fronts. The first is that all the three lesson plans do not contain any part where it could make the readers feel sympathetic toward the miners. They eliminate completely the possibility of sentimentalism. The second is that the lesson plans shed some light on the people supporting the coal mining industry. They expose the hypocrisy of the coal mining companies.

For being an anti-capitalist poet, Nowak brings to the surface the corporations’ role in the horrific conditions of the miner worker. The poet uncovers this power structure. In “Notes toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics,” Nowak explicitly states that his writings are anti-capitalist, they tend to see “the relationship between a US-controlled agenda for globalization...and the future of language and the imagination amidst ubiquitous privatization.” (Nowak, 2008) Nowak’s book urges people to react, and not just offer their sympathy to the coal miners. The political critique calls for solidarity, because the sufferings of the workers are hardly on the news. These poor miners are neglected, and almost thrown out from our social, political, and economic life. The readers, then, are forced to direct their attention to the role that major corporations have in this industry. So, if the readers were starting to feel sentimental toward the miners, this sentimentality would no doubt turn to anger. This anger would be pointed to the advocates of this industry.

After explaining how each element in *Coal Mountain Elementary* plays a significant part in escaping sentimentality in the book, now I will explain how these elements work together in achieving the same goal. The way that Nowak situates the three components reflects his artistic skills. In terms of the structure of the book, fragmentation has a very significant role. By flipping through the pages, the readers notice that Nowak juxtaposes the reports/testimonies, images, and lesson plans. They all interfere with each other. This is a

very powerful technique in terms of avoiding sentimentality in his work. If the readers read the narrative all at once, there would be a strong possibility that they might feel sentimental toward the oppressed miners. Consequently, viewing the oppressed worker as objects of empathy. Therefore, discontinuity separates the readers from engaging emotionally from the text. On one page we read a testimony from one of the survivors of the Sago disaster, and on the following page we would come across the materials needed for a lesson plan, and then we encounter an image, and so forth. This process is repeated throughout the book. Moving constantly between reports, visuals, and educational lessons would disrupt the readers. So, Nowak makes sure that he interrupts the readers' emotional engagement with the poor miners; through the way he fragments his book.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, Nowak is “engaging with a range of ‘public worlds’ constructing a lyric mode that is historically aware, socially generative, and overtly interested in moving toward an expansive and connective consciousness” (Rankine & Sewell, 2008). *Coal Mountain Elementary* is a unique example of a book of poetry where the author is not just trying to voice the concerns of the oppressed, but also consciously directing how we approach the poor miners. I believe that Nowak has successfully exposed the difficult life conditions that the miners encounter on daily basis, without identifying them as objects of sentimentality. After reading the book, the reader would undoubtedly develop a clear understanding of the unfair treatment that the coal miners receive from their superiors. The book catches two birds with one stone mainly by how Nowak “undertakes a documentary praxis that situates these conflicting interests in a more inclusive context, one that acknowledges and accounts for the suffering workers under capitalism endure in the name of safeguarding an economic stability” (Vance, 2007). Overall, *Coal Mountain Elementary* is an exemplary book of poetry, as it raises a very delicate ethical concern that seems to be hidden from the public. Moreover, the book is a great model on how different postmodern poetic elements are combined together to extract a really meaningful text. In other words, the form and content of *Coal Mountain Elementary* is really extraordinary.

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