

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS

A. Society in the Modern Era Depicted in Seven

The important matter to do- for the very first time- in analyzing Seven is to give illustration of the physical world of the play, in order to comprehend the play. Christopher Russel Reaske, in How to Analyze Drama, provides that “it would be futile to enter immediately into a discussion of the play without some brief explanation of the physical world it takes place” (18). Thus, the following discussion will describe about the physical world of the screenplay and thereby describe the setting of place and time.

The setting of place is in an unknown city in the United States. It is assumed that it was a city somewhere in the Northeast (Oliver n. pag.). This is perhaps because it is mentioned that it was situated near Philadelphia. What is more, it is suggested that it was more or less like New York City. Such assumption is possible since the screenwriter, Kevin Andrew Walker, “wrote Seven in New York City while working as a cashier at Tower Records” (SevenSpacey.com n. pag.). There, thus, it is believed that it was an urban metropolis city (Seagal n. pag.). Throughout the following discussion, the depiction of the condition of the city in which the screenplay takes place will be given.

Ever since the opening scene, it has been depicted obviously the landscape of the city. The setting of the city displays the atmosphere of a city with its modern

characteristics. The air is polluted since there are many smokestacks belong to the huge industrial factories built in the city. "Cars screeching, people yelling, sirens blaring" (Walker n. pag.) were heard most of the time. Such a sound pollution cannot be avoided even when it had already been late at night. What had been done by Somerset (one of the main characters played as detective that was about to retire), for example, gives depiction of how annoying the sound of the city is. Somerset had to play a metronome before he went to sleep in order to get relax and have the city's sound faded. He listened to the metronome- which swang back and forth- so that it competed the sound of the city. As soon as his metronome became the only sound he could hear, he eventually could fall asleep. Besides the pollution, the heavy traffic had been part of the daily scenery of the city. Moreover, most of the buildings are skyscrapers ones with several entertainment places such as porno theaters. For those reasons, Somerset planned to move from the city.

He wanted to live in a peaceful place, which was totally different from the one he used to live in. The place was surrounded by farms and forests in which he could still hear the birds sang. This next dialogues between Somerset and a man whose job was selling houses indicates how different the two cities is.

MAN. Is there something matter?...

SOMERSET. No, there's nothing wrong. It's just that everything here seems... so strange to me. All this...

MAN. I was going to say. Cause this place is about as normal as places get.

SOMERSET. That is exactly what I mean. Strange. (Walker n. pag.)

At the moment Somerset said "Strange," it can be known how different the city in which he used to live in is, compared to the one that he was about to stay. The new one seemed so strange to him for it was not as crowded and grimy as the old one. The comparison between the two of them gives distinct illustration about the kind of city where most of the setting takes place.

From such a depiction, it can be noticed that the setting of time is in the modern era. It is assumed that it was around 1980's until 1999 (Oliver n. pag.). From this point on, it can be identified what kind of people who live in such a city.

The people are described as society that enjoyed the facilities created by modernity, but at the same time did not realize that it also caused their moral decay. Technology as the result of modern rationalism has taken part in every aspect of their lives so that they consider ones who do not accustom to it as weird. This was happened to Somerset when he visited Mill's apartment. At the moment, he admitted that he did not like watching television.

SOMERSET. All television does is teach children that it's really cool
to be stupid eat candy bars all day long.

TRACY. I've never met anyone who doesn't have a television
before. That's... weird. (Walker n. pag.)

From the conversation, it can be inferred that television has become part of modern culture. One who is not used to watch television is considered as an odd person. In

other words, it implies how technology has become part of modern life of the society. Rationalism has been counted on as a way in conceiving progress in human life.

Meanwhile, modernity also gives contribution to the changing of people's morality. The people are observed as "wicked men and women" (Oliver n. pag.). Violence and crimes had become daily scenery of the city as it was mentioned through the talk between Somerset and his Captain.

SOMERSET. Did you read in the paper today, about the man who wanted to take his dog for a walk? And, how he was attacked? His money and his watch were taken, and then, while he was still lying unconscious, out cold, his attacker stabbed him with a knife in both eyes. It happened last night, a few blocks from here.

CAPTAIN. I heard.

SOMERSET. I have no understanding of this place anymore.

CAPTAIN. It's always been like this, Somerset. (Walker n. pag.)

Such a crime is only an example of violence (from many presented in Seven) happened in the city.

Another feature of the society is that most of them were ignorant people. They can be portrayed as people who lived in a sophisticated communication world, but they did not know each other anymore (Sindhunata 9). They no longer help each other. It was like they lived in a world where individualism and secularization had been part of their lives. This phenomenon is indicated from Somerset's speech:

SOMERSET. In this city, minding your own business is a perfected science. At the precinct, Sunday nights, a public crime prevention course is offered. The very first thing they teach is that you should never ever scream for “help.” Always scream “fire,” because people don’t want to get caught up in anything. But, a fire...that’s an evening’s entertainment. They come running. (Walker n. pag.)

What had been said by Somerset reflects how the society experience moral decline. A cry for help no longer made people gave their helps immediately. It even alarmed them not to intervene others’ affairs.

That is evident that society had lived in “a world of no meaning and purpose” (Sindhunata 10). Such changing of value is what Nietzsche calls nihilism. It is “a condition which all ultimate values lose their value” (qtd. in Nash n. pag.). Everything which used to be considered as sacred and meaningful starts to lose its flavor and meaning. Even Mills, who plays as a defender of law, also realizes that sometimes he had lost his sense of humanity.

MILLS. ... I got the guy with one shot. Right between the eyes. The next thing I know, the mayor’s pinning medal on me...

SOMERSET. How was it?

MILLS. ...You know, I took a human life... but, I slept like a baby that night. I never gave it a second thought. (Walker n. pag.)

He had killed a man (although the man was a criminal who deserved to be punished) without feeling guilty. Mills was just like others in the modern society whose morality tended to sink. It was like they lived in “ a world that no longer believes in sins” (Godawa n. pag.).

Modernism presupposed an understanding of human identity and self that was unified, coherent, and autonomous: man was a thinking being capable of rationally perceiving, knowing, and conquering the world—and he would. To be “modern,” then, was to embrace the power of scientific rationality, the spirit of progress, a vision of unlimited potential for human society, and an optimism for the future in which man could obtain his two greatest needs: meaning and material security. (Hurd n. pag.)

Unfortunately, the people in Seven are depicted as the one who seek material security more than the meaning of their lives. They lived “in a sickened and morally bankrupt modern society, distracted by technology and money, and material possessions” (Craig n. pag.). This condition is represented in the character of the man who was being investigated by Mills when John Doe had done his action for the sin of lust. He was the owner of a hothouse massage parlor, which place had been the location of the murder. Through the investigation it can be known that the person does not pay attention whether what he is doing is a good one or not. As long as he could earn his living, morality is no longer worth.

MILLS. You didn't hear any scream? Nothing? You didn't notice when this man walked in with a package under his arm?

BALD MAN. No, I did not!

MILLS. You didn't notice anything wrong? Nothing seemed strange to you?

BALD MAN. Everybody who goes in there has a package under his arm. Some guys are carrying suitcases full of shit. And, screams? Nothing? There are screams in there every single day. It all goes with the territory, little boy!

MILLS. You like what you do for a living? You like the things you see?!

The bald man smiles strangely.

BALD MAN. No. No I don't, but that's life. (Walker n. pag.)

Thus, he really does not care about others' businesses since he believes that it has nothing to do with him. This fact catches the critic's awareness that writes: "The guy who own the sex club where the murder takes place is even more apathetic when he is brought to the police station for questioning. He was just doing his job" (Jackson n. pag.).

The same attitude as the previous person had done is also done by the person who sold tool for John Doe in killing the lust victim. He agreed to make a tool ordered by John Doe.

It is a picture of a belt, made with extra leather straps so it can be worn securely around the groin. It is like a strap-on phallus, but there is no plastic protuberance. Instead, there is a metal knife, it is a strap-on butcher knife. (Walker 1994)

From the description of the kind of thing ordered, it can be seen that such thing is very unusual. But, he still makes it since he got paid for that. “The man who sold device used for the killing just shrugs his shoulders and says he’s had customers asks for weirder things” (Jackson n. pag.). He does not care for what the stuff is. The important thing is that he does his job, and he gets the payment done.

Basically, the world described in the screenplay is the world where mankind experienced physical welfare (with rationalism- through science and technology- as a device) and moral decline as well, at the same time. In this world, people tended to separate material and spiritual aspects of life. They paid attention more on the way to achieve material prosperity in life as the way in finding happiness. Aside from that, they seemed not realizing the negative sides of such achievement.

From the statement above, it can be noticed that “modern rationalism and technological proliferation have brought us to the brink of disaster. The myth of “modern progress” ends up in a nightmare of violence” (Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum n. pag.). It should be emphasized once again that the result is nihilism, the collapse of values and meanings encompass human life. The values that used to be sacred have become trivial. Things such as prostitution, gun producing are even being legalized. There is a tendency that the values of life starts to lose their meaning so

that it makes people lose guarantee and guidance in comprehending the world and life (St. Sunardi 22-23).

B. John Doe and Kierkegaard's Existentialism

Before looking further into John Doe's actions, it is important to be comprehended how his character is. Physically, he was described as a male at the age around forty or fifty years old. He had a short, straight brown hair with skinny body. He was typical person that is cynical, domineering, violent, cruel, unapologetic, annoyed, and unemotional, has endurance, determined, secretive, unforgiving, jealous, confident, and intolerant. He was very smart, especially good in figuring out what others are thinking. As a matter of fact, he was an eccentric person who is mentally ill, obsessed, and deluded (Oliver n. pag.).

As the main adversary of the screenplay, John Doe must have motivation in doing his conduct. It is obvious, of course, that the world in which he lived—a nihilism world, has been one of it. In How to Analyze Drama, Christopher Russel Reaske explains that “most plays have central motives” and he mentions several of “giant human emotions, which motivate most people in real life” (41).

From the several common motives mentioned, religious feelings motive is the one owned by John Doe. He is motivated by his religious faith. This motivation is later on translated through his actions. He based his murders on religious doctrine seven deadly sins. The sins is elucidated as follows:

The seven deadly sins were made part of Catholic doctrine in the late 6th century AD by Pope Gregory the Great.” Traditionally, “Christian” doctrine has been based solely upon the interpretation of passages in the Bible. The Catholic Church, while based upon the same text, has added tradition and dogmas of their own that have no textual basis, such as the hierarchical system of clergy, reverence of the saints, glorification of Virgin Mary, penance for the sins, the concept of Purgatory, etc. (Jackson n. pag.)

He had prepared the murders perfectly. He had chosen victims- including he himself- as the representation of the seven sins; gluttony, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and wrath. By murdering the victims --and also committing planned suicide, he considered himself of preaching the society. He believed that society had lived separately from their God. They tended to think everything with their ratio so that they seemed to doubt anything that could not be thought logically. Thus, they lived as if God was no longer exist. There thus emerges a world full of violence. Such notion is represented through John Doe’s dialogue with Mills and Somerset.

JOHN DOE. You can see a deadly sins on every street corner. On every corner and in every home, they may seem trivial.

They are not. I am showing the true face of sin.

SOMERSET. All you brought this world is more misery and pain.

JOHN DOE. I bring God’s anger in the form of pain.

MILLS. You got off on this. You like it.

SOMERSET. You did it for your own pleasure.

JOHN DOE. I won't deny my personal desires... my intention to turn sin against the sinner. But, I merely took each sin to its logical conclusion. I don't mourn the victims in this, anymore than I mourn the thousands who died in Sodom and Gomorrah. (Walker n. pag.)

Since modern society was marked with the use of ratio in solving any problems, John Doe tried to give counter attack against such thought. He argued that he also made logic punishment for those who had done sins. It should be noted moreover that he compared the people in his city with those who lived in the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two cities were described by Rachmat Djoko Pradopo in his explanation of a poem entitled "Sodom dan Gomorrha" by Subagio Sastrowardjo (30-31). He gave description as follows: God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because the people live there were those with corrupt morality. They did not have faith in God; their lives were dedicated for material pleasures. They were described as those who enjoyed parties. Their attitudes were compared with the ones where John Doe lived. He believed that his society's civilization had sink and his people had no trust in God anymore. Therefore, he came with the idea that the number of victims he had killed was just a small numbers compared to those who died in Sodom and Gomorrah and thereby mourned more for them.

From his manners, it can be implied that he was inspired by religious feelings, which folded, in his philosophical view. He followed existential philosophy,

particularly religious existentialism. According to existentialist, “each individual man is what he makes of himself by a succession of actions undertaken in a complete freedom of choice” (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 466).

By this simple statement, it can be inferred that an individual existence- in order to create his meaning of life —is determined by series of actions done. Those series of actions are what make a person can be considered exist in the world. The view can be noted from the dialogues between Mills and John Doe.

MILLS. Who are you Johnny? Who are you really?

JOHN DOE. It doesn't matter who I am. Who I am means absolutely nothing.

...

JOHN DOE. You both know I'm different. You, of all people, know what I'm doing is special.” (Walker n. pag.)

The dialogues shows that John Doe really concerned with his actions instead of who he was for he believed that who he was, was defined through the actions done. His actions presented his existence.

What is more, there was indication that he employed Kierkegaard's existentialism. According to Kierkegaard, “the only significant part of man's life is what he does in the full consciousness of obligations as true Christian.” This refers to the more specific purpose in doing actions that mark someone's existence. Thus, the actions are devoted to God, in order to create individual meaning of life. Free will

that is given by God is intended to let people to “find out the truth of his own existence in a solitary confrontation with God” (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 471).

Unfortunately, John Doe regards the people around him as those who did not follow the same idea as his. This can be seen from John Doe’s note read by Somerset.

SOMERSET. What sick, silly puppet we are and what gross little stage we dance on. What fun we have, dancing and fucking, not a care in the world, not knowing that we are nothing. We are not what God intended. (Walker n. pag.)

John Doe believed that the essence of man’s life lied in the actions he made as the faithfulness towards God. That is why he commented the society as silly puppet that did not do actions to create their own meaning of life in the devotion towards God.

Moreover, it can be understood that John Doe, in a way, represents Kierkegaard’s concept “leap of faith” in doing his conducts. The concept had been summarized by Brian Godawa as follows:

This leap is necessary because according to Kierkegaard, reason and rationality simply cannot be employed to find the true meaning to life in the universe. Rationality only goes for so far but not far enough. The value of life must be found in what is irrational or undiscoverable by reason. You can’t prove or disprove God and meaning in life because such things are contradictory to the rational mind, they are

“beyond proof” and can only be understood by an irrational commitment of faith against evidence. (Postmodern Movies II n. pag.)

From the explanation above, it can be noted that sometimes there are things that cannot be explained by ratio. Therefore, Kierkegaard proposes three stages of human existence in which the third stage contains the concept ‘leap of faith.’ John Doe had come to that stage of existence --the religious level-- “where man realizes full maturity and dependence upon his Creator through absolute purity of devotion” (Postmodern Movies II n. pag.). John Doe believed in the religious doctrine without having any doubt. He kept his faith although he himself did not know whether his faith would result a reward for him or not. He had “unquestioning faith in what he believes to be the will of God.” It takes a great courage to have such a faith, but he could make it. He made it “in the blindness absolute trust in God” (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 474).

Kierkegaard himself had given an example on this matter. He mentioned on how Abraham followed God’s will to sacrifice his son Isaac. Had he been thought rationally, he would not do it. But, he had a great faith in God so that he obeyed Him (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 474; Postmodern Movies II n. pag.).

Furthermore, John Doe questioned people’s existence instead of God existence.

SOMERSET. You want them to question God’s existence? You want them to..

JOHN DOE. No!! No!! I want them to question their own existence!

**I want people to question their own existence! (Walker
n. pag.)**

The reason why people should comprehend their existence instead of God's existence is that because it is related with the absurdity of human life. According to existentialist, human existence cannot be explained or rationalized and neither can the world he lived in (Wyatt n. pag.).

Kierkegaard explained further that:

“absurdity” was merely the natural result of man's inability to see the world from any but most limited point of view. The world is not absurd to God; but the mind of man cannot encompass the infinite, timeless mind of God and therefore man can never literally understand himself or the world he lives in. (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 475).

Kierkegaard's explanation had led to a comprehension of John Doe asking about people's existence. God's existence needs not to be questioned as had been mentioned before by Brian Godawa that people “cannot prove or disprove God” (Postmodern Movies II n. pag.) for human ratio will not be able to comprehend it.

So far, John Doe had followed the idea of existentialism constantly. He had done series of choices and acts upon his own will, and apparently accepted the consequences. He was being consistent with everything he did since he had responsibility for all that he had done. “An existentialist is free to disregard a law, as long as the consequences are accepted” (Wyatt n. pag.). This simple statement

supports the deeds done by John Doe for he bore the consequence of his acts, which resulted in the death of he himself [that is called “dies in a strategically planned suicide” (Bill Chambers n. pag.)]. “ An existentialist would be willing to make “the ultimate sacrifice” if doing so would protect the existence and freedom of many others” (Wyatt n. pag.). His death was a sacrifice that he gave in order to keep the civilization from declining. It is obvious; of course, that his decision caused impact upon the victims he had killed. It was inescapable. But, there was explanation about this matter. “Existentialist do not generally view decisions as “right”—a good decision merely minimizes any impingement upon the freedom of others. Because there is only a relative goodness to nay decision, no “black and white” situations exist” (Wyatt n. pag.). The importance of this latter point is that it justifies John Doe’s acts.

The negative effect happened as the result of his deeds- that were the death of his victims- is only a small one compared to the declining of human civilization as a whole. How many lives would be taken as the consequences of the disaster brought by modernity if he did not warn the society with, of course, his own way. The number must be greater than seven people he had murdered. His acts are also the representation of his responsibility for his own individuality and for all mankind. Therefore, what had been done by John Doe is “philosophically correct” (Godawa n. pag.).

C. John Doe and Postmodernism

Seven as a postmodern cinema has the characteristic of postmodern fiction. As explained by Linda Hutcheon, postmodern fiction may contain about history that is newly problematized with the use of irony or paradox. And, it concerns with “the dominance of the sign and the loss of the real, and a scepticism towards the ‘grand narratives’ of human history and progress” (Selden and Widdowson 179). The main attention in Seven is that it is talking about the history of human progress, in this matter is the modern era, that is being observed in its gloomy, pessimistic view instead of its success. It reflects the postmodernist paradox, a “use and abuse” of history (qtd. in Selden and Widdowson 187).

Moreover, Peter Brooker has explained about postmodernism that “in general it can be said to describe a mood or condition of radical indeterminacy, and a tone of self-conscious, parodic skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual, and political life” (qtd. in Selden and Widdowson 175). This explanation is added by R. Wesley Hurd in his article “Postmodernism: A New Model of Reality.” He said that “The central characteristics of postmodernism present us with a radically different way of looking at life” (n. pag.). Moreover, it is mentioned about how postmodern worldview can be seen in the matter of personal identity. “At the level of individual, there abides a sense of uncertainty about how to understand oneself; most people consciously search for a sense of identity—for who and what they are and for what significance and worth they have” (Hurd n. pag.). This explanation helps in comprehending the character of John Doe- who searches for

what he is and his existence means. He believes that he could create his meaning of life through his consistency of being an existentialist. He has become a person who has found his identity since he had already realized and done the purpose of his life, though others may not agree with all that he had done.

In postmodernism, since it often deals with “the theme of the absent center” (Selden and Widdowson 178), “there is tendency that there is no absolute reference point to judge true or false, right and wrong” (Godawa n. pag.). Therefore, people have the right to decide whether their actions are correct or not. In other words, the question is no longer whether an action is truth or not, but it is a matter of according to whose truth the action is considered correct, as explained by Linda Hutcheon (qtd. in Selden and Widdowson 179). This explanation leads to the next thought, that is the belief that there is no objective truth since people may create their own truth.

According to postmodernist, “all truth is subjective.” It means, “truth now means personal preference and personal empowerment” (Leffel and McCallum 1996). The same thought is also communicated by Gene E. Veith, that truth is defined by the will of one’s own (7). This idea can be noticed from what John Doe had said to Somerset.

SOMERSET. You did it for your own pleasure.

JOHN DOE. I won’t deny my personal desires... my intention to turn sin against the sinner. (Walker n. pag.)

Thus, when truth no longer has its standard, then people may define their own concept of truth. This kind of thought is recognized as postmodern relativity. And, as

the result it can be seen that such a thought causes great effect for human life. The effect even can cause a person has the courage to end other's lives. The "radical subjectivity leads to the dangerously arrogant inference that peoples can never be wrong about what they believe" (Leffel and McCallum 1996). This is what happened with John Doe. He has his own standard of truth and he has imposed that on others. Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum have also explained such tendency of people that believe in their own truth. "Every time people claim to be in possession of truth, they end up repressing those who don't agree" (n. pag.).

With his existentialism philosophy, John Doe tries to convey his own concept of truth to others. As the result, it can be inferred that "The killer in Seven sees only what he wants to see and believes only what he wants to believe, and targets those who offend his scorched and skewered sensibilities. Advocating murder to justify one's opinion is not justification" (Craig n. pag.). Thus, it can be seen that what he had done brings the negative result that is the lost of a number of people's lives.

Eventually, Brian Godawa crowns this analysis in his writing. He expresses his idea about this movie as follow:

A movie that addresses the negative results of postmodern relativity is the thriller, Seven, starring Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman. Despite the fact that this dark and dreary film has a religious serial killer, a common hate-bating cliché against Christians, it makes a powerful moral point and hammers it home with profundity. The killer, after being caught for his murders based on the seven deadly sins from

Dante's Inferno, explains to the two detectives that society, by ignoring moral absolutes had actually bred the worst of evils. A world that no longer believes in sins, no longer has authority to distinguish moral differences or condemn the worst of villainy. This movie where the killer is actually philosophically correct makes us look at ourselves to see the monsters we have become. (n. pag.)

CHAPTER IV