

Malcolm Lowry And The Treatment of Nature

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Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957), a modern English novelist of the thirties celebrated for his masterpiece, *Under the Volcano*, also wrote subtle and allusive shorter stories. A group of Malcolm Lowry's stories entitled *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, was published posthumously in 1961. Like *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's stories are rooted in personal experiences. He noted down whatever caught his eyes ---Letters, advertisement newspaper headlines, graffiti and wasted little. He also had the genius to transform such material into art, revealing through brilliant intuition and refined intelligence the working of a man torturously engaged in the creative process.

Since time immemorial Nature has had been a perennial source of inspiration for poets and writers. They have often turned to her and sought her bounty in the process of creation. William Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet treated Nature as man's "Prime teacher", a great moral force shaping man's life, enabling him to penetrate into the inner reality beneath the surface of things and see the pervading spirit that animates the entire universe. His poems exhibit not only his love of nature but also his feelings of reverence for her.

To Shelley, the revolutionary and the idealist, Nature stands for hope and belief in the glorious future succeeding the era of gloom. The concluding line of his 'Ode to the west wind', 'If winter comes can spring be far behind' is a statement of this optimistic belief.

Keats, whose poetry is inspired by a passion for beauty, seems deeply drawn towards nature. Being much afflicted with the 'weariness, fever and fret of the human world, he turned to the nature for Solace and Comfort.

To Romantic poets and also to Malcolm Lowry, Nature is constant and perennial source of health, strength, energy and vitality. Lowry turns to Nature and draws a large number of images from her and makes them 'objective correlative' for his emotions, passions and feelings. Recurrent and predominant images drawn from the world of Nature are the earth and the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, the plants and trees, fruits and flowers, the rains, rivers, sea, waves, ice and snow etc, and through them he expresses his vision of the age.

These dominant images drawn from nature are characteristic of his stories. For instance, the title 'The Bravest Boat' is pregnant with significance. On the one hand it gives an insight into the theme of love, withering all storm and on the other hand it may give rise to a misreading to the story that it is a symbolic one denuded of the matrix of a specific

situation. But the story is to be interpreted on both the planes- symbolic as well as realistic. Two lovers are there in Stanley Park in Vancouver. One is Sigard, a seaman embarking on a cruise and the other is Astrid, a beautiful, passionate girl. The story writer beautifully describes the natural scene against the backdrop of which the love drama is being enacted. Between the untameable world of nature and the grotesque horror of the city lies the park in which the story takes place. A refuge for the seabirds and for those who cannot live in the city, it is a kind of Eden, a place where man and nature can be the city and nature can be part of the same entity, and so a place where it is possible for man, even if only momentarily, to identify himself with his surroundings. And the park is a vantage point as well as a sanctuary; from it they see not only the mountains and the city, but also the “lowly little self-built shacks and float houses” which are “nearly the only human dwellings visible... that had any air of belonging, or in which their inhabitants could be said any longer to participate” and it is within or near the park that they see the homes ‘as of some Edward Columbian Adam who had calmly stolen back with his Eve into paradise, under the flaming sword of the civic cherubim. These shacks, which are to become throughout, Hear Us O Lord, both the site and symbol of a precarious but deeply-rooted human happiness, adumbrate the book’s major theme; that man can only complete himself by thoroughly involving himself in the world around him, by becoming an integral part of a landscape. The boat is symbolic of a pair of lovers sailing through the rough sea buffeted by the tossing waves, it is likely that the boat of lovers may capsize... and the lovers may meet their watery grave. But the lovers are quite confident and both struggle against the tempestuous sea and reach the shore safely. It is love that is triumphant in the face of the perilous sea and strikes the keynote of the universe that Malcolm Lowry’s stories will unfold.

The Forest Path to the Spring is the nucleus around which the whole sequence of Hear Us O Lord revolves. The novelist, a resident of Eradanus, a shack at Vancouver going along the path to spring to fetch water meets with a Lion and this lion also figures in Dante’s Inferno. The lion is inimical to the world of man but it goes away. In the same vein the novelist pictures himself as a pilgrim through hell encountering the forces shaping his hold on life but braving the odds he shows no signs of flinching from the forces of despair. The scene in the tale, depicting the protagonist’s homecoming, embracing his wife with gay abandon, is worth nothing:” when I returned home it was as if I had flown into my wife’s arm and I tried to tell her about it. But no matter how hard I tried I could not express what the feeling was like_ beyond saying that it was almost as if a great burden had been lifted off my soul.”¹ In “The Forest Path to the Spring” We see the long process by which a man achieves harmony through his gradual assimilation in to the world around him. Within the structure of Hear Us O Lord it presents a movement into both the past and the future; it begins in the early years of the Second War, and takes us through to a time in which various events, including the destruction of the protagonist’s home and a voyage to

Europe, have been weathered. The story is a triumphant statement of the theme of Hear Us O Lord as a whole- that man, once he is able to overcome his self destruction impulse and live in harmony with the natural world, is able to survive; it at once takes up the motif of regeneration which closes "Gin and Goldenrod", and brings the book back to its starting-point.

The unnamed protagonist who brings his wife to Eridanus for their honeymoon is a man divided against himself; while his love for his wife is intense, and while he quickly comes to observe and appreciate the world of nature around him, he is aware of the things which threaten their happiness. One threat is the War which is engulfing the world, and which he feels himself obliged to join; "It 's a hell of time to live", he tells his wife callously, "There can't be any of this nonsense about love in a cottage".²

From this point on, the couple are not finished with trouble, or threat, or loss; but their assimilation of themselves into each other and into their world gives them the strength to perpetually renew themselves, so that even the burning of their shack leads to a kind of rebirth, a fresh baptism. The protagonist can grow old with equanimity, confident that his wife is always increasing, and can even see age as a part of a greater flux: "I wondered if what really we should see in age is merely the principle of the seasons themselves wearing out, only to renew themselves through another kind of death."³ And watching the raindrops falling on the water, he answers Fairhaven's despair in the face of the evanescence of human life; "Each drop falling into the sea is like a life, I thought, each producing a circle in the ocean, or the medium of life itself, and widening into infinity, though it seems to melt into the sea, and become invisible, all disappear entirely, and be lost."⁴ He can at last see human lives as part of the harmonious cycle of nature, as part of the unmoving flux of the Tao; so that in the end, the couple can accept the dark and menacing reaches of the stream of life and still drink from it joyfully .With this affirmation of man's capacity to become complete, and in becoming complete, to survive, Hear Us O Lord returns to its starting point; the supplication for endangered voyagers sounded in the Manx fishermen's hymn, is answered.

Thus we can draw the Kailyard touch of Lowry in revealing the complete aspects of life in the capsule of expressionism. Lowry makes a rich treatment of nature in his stories.

Works Cited

- *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* reprinted in *Penguin Books with Lunar Caustic* 1979
- 1. p.271

2. p.231

3. p.281

4. p.285-86

➤ *The Forest Path to the Spring*

