

CONFLICT AND CONCORD: SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S *MARCHING MEN*

¹*SUKHVINDER KAUR,

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY, PHAGWARA, PUNJAB

Abstract

The Present paper will explore such themes of human loneliness, human love and personal identity in this novel. Sherwood Anderson evoked different forms of human experience in all his literary works. *Marching Men*, was a social novel published in the year 1917 which deals with the sufferings of alienated men and women due to the industrialism. He shows that man has lost all human values and concepts of meaning in a society, dominated by superficiality. Human being has lost one's own identity, which Anderson seems to recognize in the novel. He implies that human being should reject to break down the barriers of human loneliness.

Key words: Identity, alienation, frustrarion, distortion and domination

Anderson's war period has provided an important personal experience for his novel. He is fascinated by an almost mystic concept of the unity inherent in large bodies of men working and marching together, welded into a non-thinking and strong-feeling mass. This concept is the basis for *Marching Men* and it accounts for much of his continued pre occupation with the power of men and machines in factories. He is also aware that man has lost his own identity is often brutal and battered by mass activity. Men must be united through mass action. Anderson observed this effect in the training camps and it perhaps account for his inability to conclude *Marching Men* for his lifelong unwillingness to identify himself completely with any mass movement and for his distrust of communism.

The novel *Marching Men* was a social novel published in the year 1917. In it Anderson examines the destructive impact of industrialism in Pennsylvania coal-mining town, upon the sensitive boy and traces the harmful effects of his wrapped personality upon society. Beaut McGregor, hero and protagonist of the novel is Anderson himself. This novel also gives the reader Anderson's early vision of himself, as an idealist and visionary leader of man.

The novel is justifiably dedicated to American Workingmen. Beaut McGregor, the protagonist of *Marching Men* is driven by his hatred for the people. Beaut McGregor is a lad of fourteen who lives in coal creek, Pennsylvania town. He spends his early life in his small town and finds life disorganized and meaningless.

He rebels to quest for meaning. He is unable to cope up with the life. Anderson delineates the small town of coal creek, Pennsylvania, as totally enlightened by the way the miners and their families are animalistic, and Beaut McGregor is both insensitive and dumb.

The main reason for the success of *Marching Men* (1917) is its rhetoric its grandiloquence. It embraces the problem of labour leadership in America, and spectacle of American workingmen marching together to redress industrial wrong. Anderson pronounces, “{...} I do not believe that a man will come to serve us. We must in some way, save ourselves and others through brotherhood {...}” (David 152). *Marching Men* reflecting this idea stress the importance of brotherhood. Young Beaut McGregor is a tall, awkward boy, who is a miner’s son. He becomes a lawyer and later a leader of working men. Beaut McGregor’s dream is to revolt against disorder in the contemporary society and his vision of achieving order through men. McGregor is the son of late cracked McGregor; he is nick-named “Beaut” because of his physical ugliness. This is the spirit that dominates Beaut McGregor when he is the joke of coal-creek.

Anderson’s vision of Chicago is highly dependent upon Beaut McGregor. A feeling of loneliness is pervasive and reinforced through the young Beaut McGregor who is quite aware of the effects of the town upon his parents. Beaut’s father cracked McGregor is a responsible and self-sacrificing man, who dies trying to help the trapped miners. He is a highly respected eccentric worker in the town. Beaut McGregor loves his lonely father. After his father’s heroic death, Beaut hates the community in whose eyes he is an outcast. Thus, “like his father he was marked man in Coal Creek” (20).

Beaut McGregor’s mother Nance McGregor is portrayed as hard-working, sympathetic and self-sacrificing woman. She owns a small bakery in the coal creek. Her fortunes are tied directly with those of the people around her. Beaut’s mother thinks only of her son’s welfare. It is through Nance McGregor’s self-sacrifice that Beaut relates himself to the rest of the humanity. Edith Carson, the heroine is suitable to this mother image, so he marries Edith Carson.

Beaut McGregor realizes his own impotence in Coal Creek and becomes bitterer as he sees the miners in the coal creek are suffering. He does not understand why the men and boys shuffle into the darkness of the mines, or why the women and children suffer silently. He seems them as willing pawns, who are at the mercy. Many men have accepted their roles as mine operators. Beaut kicks out at everybody and everything. He sees that men are all alienated from others and they have lost their identity among them. These labour workers do not have the courage to fight against the capitalist. They turn brutes and becomes weak like cattle, and lack love and communication. Thus Beaut hates men in Coal Creek:

Men of Coal Creek [...] I hate you [...] I have you because come among you teaching the power of force. I should like to slay you one by one, not with weapons but with naked fists. If they have made you weak like

rats buried in a hole they are right. It is man's right to do what he can. Get up and fight. Fight and I will get on the other side and you can fight me. I will help drive you back into your holes (38).

The growing entrapment of industrialism is victimizing the characters. Due to the effects of industrialism, war has also dehumanized men. Anderson hopes that love, compassion, sympathy and understanding are the human virtues that raise man above his animal origins and prevent him from being a machine. But the transition in the mid-west from agriculture and handicrafts to mechanization has eroded the finest human value and ethos. Since there is a chance for acquiring wealth and positions, men become egoist and lose their human values. Beut McGregor's frustration becomes more and more, when he sees the suffering of the miners in the coal creek.

Anderson often emphasizes the importance of human life. During a bitter strike at the mines, Soldiers arrive at the request of the owners, who wish to frighten the laborers back to work. Beut McGregor fascinates to see their show of force and by the sense of dedication demonstrated by the marching soldiers. "He was thrilled by the sight of trained elderly men moving along shoulder to shoulder. "in the presence of these men the disorganized miners seemed pitifully weak and insignificant".(36)

With the scene of Marching Soldier before him, he begins to think that working men of the nation should be organized into a large marching army. So he starts dreaming of the movement. Beut rejects the idealistic talk "of a day coming when men would march shoulder to shoulder and life in coal creek, life everywhere, should cease being aimless and become definite and full of meaning.(11)

Beut McGregor is influenced by the people in the city. Like other young people in the town of America, he often thinks of "life in the city and the part he should play there" (28). He dreams of city to become a successful man in the world. He selects Chicago city, where opportunities for advancement are more in the world. In coal creek, Beut McGregor suggests a deterministic life, a sense of destiny. So he flees to city. Beut is completely alienated from his family and the society. Beut is full of hate, goes to the city in search of power and to seek his fortune. He reaches Chicago city, when he is eighteen years old. He is already filled with the thought of marching men- a troop of soldiers that has put down a riot at Coal Creek. Later while studying law, he realizes that "Brains are intended to help fist"! (John 122).

The lack of love is the consequences of the narrowness of human vision. The lust for power and money has turned men into hoards with no sense of discrimination and self-reasoning. Beut McGregor sees the people of Coal Creek are alienated from each other and passively accept their miseries as miners. Anderson shows that the nation can be righted only by charismatic leader who will whip the masses into revolt. The hero Beut McGregor despises the savage nature of the people who are disorganized and walk like cattle in the materialistic structure.

As Beut McGregor is on his way to Chicago after leaving Coal Creek, he finds that his burning hatred has set fire to his ambition. He looks back at Coal Creek, full of hate “Like Nero he might have wished that the entire town had but one head so that he might cut it off with a sweep of a sword or knocked it into a gutter with one swinging blow” (42). His first period in Chicago, Beut McGregor is completely lonely, because he has no love for others. The tremendous effects of loneliness are more important in understanding of the hero. His hatred for the people and society makes him feel lonely creature. Beut McGregor is self-determined and committed to a quest for truth, but he suffers from a sense of estrangement and loneliness.

The story examines the effects of urban life upon the city’s labourers, who has lured by promises of good life. Anderson suggests that dehumanizing elements of the business and industrial world has led to a sense of disorder. He creates a protagonist, Beut McGregor; who actively seeks to bring order to the chaos of urban living. In stressing the importance of human unity as a means of rebelling against the restrictions imposed upon laborers by industrialism. Beut McGregor proposes that the city’s leaderless working men should march together in order to free themselves. According to H.W Boynton’s explanation the novels hero “was a prophet of the masses, of mankind, the toiler finding his place in the sun” (Kenny Williams 92)

Chicago is a place of brute force and great ugliness. Beut goes to the city in search of power, but he soon finds that Chicago and his home town coal creek are more similar than he realizes. In the first year in the city, Beut works in the apple ware house. He finds that the city is horrible and men are victims of materialistic society. They have lost their moral values and are alienated from one another and they lack power to communicate among themselves, thus:

It is evening and the people of Chicago go home from work. Clatter, Clatter, Clatter, go the heels on the hard pavements, jaws wrag, the wind blows and dirt drifts and sifts through the masses of the people. Everyone has dirty ears. The stench in the street cars is horrible. The antiquated bridges over the river are packed with people. The suburban trains going away south and west are cheaply constructed and dangerous. A people, calling itself great and living in a city also called great go to their houses a mere disorderly mass of humans cheaply equipped. Everything is cheap. When people get home to their houses they sit on cheap chairs before cheap tables and eat cheap food. They have given their lives for cheap things (71)

Beut McGregor despisers twin discoveries in the city. He finds the disease of mechanization has curtailed life in the city. Another is the emphasis upon worldly gain which has made man lonely. He realizes that his rise in the city is effortless as he has imagined, and comes to understand that success is not waiting for everybody.

When Beut McGregor is angry, he finds an outlet for this when he moves to city. This is displayed in different ways by the novelist. The chaos and hopelessness of the city are reinforced through fascinating character in the novel. Beut is lost in his own thought as he sees the brutal city. He also discovers that

economic depression is so bad that “eager women driven by want sold their bodies to passerby for twenty – five cents” (White 62). Women in American society have lost their human values in life. “And always on the streets of Chicago are the restless moving people who have become victims of the city” (60). Beut McGregor bullies his way into a warehouse job, despises disorderly humanity and teaches himself law in order to reform society.

In Chicago, Beut McGregor finds an opportunity as lawyer and charismatic leader, to take revenge of his youthful sufferings. He views urban and industrial man as a dehumanized shell. McGregor becomes the master of a terrifying collective force whose power can be exerted against society. He accelerates the dehumanization by organizing the masses into battalions, subjects them strict discipline March in military fashion. Anderson’s faith in labour movement comes as a result of the value of communion and he decides to start the labour movement to reform the society. He also believes that beneath the political attitude of the labour movement, there is the concrete action and attitude of sacrifice and co-operation.

As Beut walks through the streets of Chicago his dreams of city life are changed considerably by the “filth and disorder” he sees and “the flame of anger within burned stronger and stronger as his contempt continues to grow” (76). His body shook with the strength of his desire to end the disorder of life. Beut McGregor sees in them a personification of the disorder in life. He realizes that the army has to identify the importance of the silent power of marching. Thus he declares:

Men have taught them that big lesson only when they wanted to kill. This must be different. Someone must teach the big lesson just for their own sakes that they may also know. They must march fear and disorder and purposelessness away. That must come first (106- 107).

Beut McGregor as a successful lawyer, dreams of the forth coming day when men would march together to fight for their freedom. The murder trial is,

Both an opportunity and a test for McGregor. For number of years he had lived a lonely life in Chicago. He had made no friends and his mind had not been confused by the endless babble of small talk on which most of us subsist. Evening after evening he had walked alone through the streets and had stood at the door of the state street restaurant a solitary figure aloof from life. Now he was to be drawn into the maelstrom. In the past he had let alone by life (135).

In defending Andy Brown, McGregor takes on an entire system and becomes a folk hero in the city. The relationship between men and women in this novel lacks love and communication among the characters. With the advent of industrialism, the love between neighbors and even between parents and children which is important components of village life has diminished. Anderson believes that women of his country are capable of giving love more than men. Since industrialism has made man of his country sexually impotent and spiritually empty. He concludes, that it is the American women, in the 1930’s alone could reintroduce

the “mystery” which a technological age has dispelled, and without which “we are lost men” (David 86 1967).

The heroine in this novel is a healthy Mid-Western farm girl who is ignorant of sexual fulfillment, but as lustful as the mid-western hero. Beut meets a woman Margaret Ormsby, who awakens his passion. Margaret Ormsby is the daughter of David Ormsby, a great financier justifies his life as being necessary for progress. The character of Margaret Ormsby is very significant one. She lives a useless life without any meaning. Margaret loves Beut McGregor, but he marries Edith Carson.

Beut McGregor is brutishly attractive to women, especially to pale weak women. Tempted by the pale weak women of coal creek to imagine marriage and children, he prefers to dream of organizing mines into the lines of mechanical march. He thinks that through this simple march, he can reform society against corrupted industrialism. The heroine Edith Carson whom Beut Mc Gregor marries is a pale and weak milliner. Both hero and heroine have no intense love relationship. They do not want to satisfy their lust outside of marriage. Anderson justifies that sex in marriage is only through begetting children. So beut gives warning to avoid sex there is a complex feeling in Beut:

[...] He thought there was sense of it. He also was afraid of the tall pale girl. Sometimes when he looked at her a pain shot through him and a combination of fear and desire gripped him. He walked away from it and went free as he went free from the life in the darkness down in the mine (26).

Beut also has the same kind of attitude towards marriage. Like his friend Turner, the barber, McGregor considers marriage as a means to beget children. So Beut McGregor declares: “...I know men and women cling to their children. It’s the only thing they have left of the dream they had before they married...” (163). This same idea is repeated later in the novel when the hero says that, “I have found out that though I want you I love Edith. She loves me. Look at her. Her beauty has won me. I follow beauty. I want beautiful children. That is my right” (174).

Beut McGregor marries Edith Carson, a pale and weak milliner desperate to have children, just when McGregor is desperate to organize the entire world into marching men. His success as a lawyer gives him a chance to leave his class, but his sense of unity prevails and the rest of the struggle is a struggle to make an army out of labour by progress. There is loss of love relationship between men and women. It has disseminated perverted ideas about human values, about love and sex. The labour workers in the mines work hard, but they have lost their human love among them. Only through love and unity can bring them together. Beut McGregor sees even their marriage life is not a happy one.

Loneliness is not merely a product of modern materials. Isolation originates in a narrowness of human vision and in ability, unwillingness to attempt to understand the complexities of human life and experience. The inability to communicate clearly specifies the movement is fore shadowed throughout the novel by a general

lack of understanding between the characters. Beaut finds that education alone cannot solve the problem of communication, rather says that order can be created out of disorder.

Anderson demonstrates the evil impacts of the technological society on the human virtues namely love. Due to urban and industrial civilization, men became strangers towards each other. The corrupting agent in the agrarian paradise is industrialism, which has elevated materialism and turned men into mechanical monsters. A Spiritual affinity would arise that can remove all barriers between men. Men can achieve meaning, dignity and fulfillment only through close association with their fellows. The Surface unity would indicate the depth of the spiritual unity.

The novel concludes with the implication that the movement is doomed and Beaut McGregor will go on with still fighting of workingmen and training them to march in disciplined silence to produce a sense of unity. In the end, Anderson reveals the only meaningful road for man. He says that man can never triumph over his materialistic environment, but he can only resist it.

Works Cited

Anderson, Sherwood. *Marching Men*. London: Lane Company, Inc., 1917.

..., Anderson, Sherwood: *An Introduction and Interpretation*. New York: Michigan State University, 1967.

...ed. Anderson, Sherwood: *Dimensions of his literary art*. New York: Michigan State Univeristy press, 1976.

White, Ray Lewis. *The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson*. University of North Carolina press, 1966.

Williams, Kenny J. *A story Teller and a city*. Northern Illinois University Press, 1988.

Ditsky, John. "Anderson, Sherwood *Marching Men: Unnatural Disorder and the Art of force.*" *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23.1Feb (1977): 102-114.