THE MAN, THE BOY, AND THE MYTH: SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S "DEATH IN THE WOODS"

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Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods" is, as Irving Howe notes, "bare as a winter tree," but "marvelously rich in substance,"[1] for beneath the surface level of narration and by means of a pattern of symbols Anderson ponders the ultimate reality of life and death. The narrator of the story is a man, but he recounts past experiences, some of which have taken place when he was a boy. The tale which he tells is on the surface level a simple one concerning an old woman who lives in poverty with her husband and son on a farm near the town in which the narrator lived. In her youth she is a servant girl, bound to a German farmer, whom Jake Grimes has to fight in order to carry her away. She bears Jake two children, a son and a daughter, but the daughter dies. Jake and the son treat her cruelly and make little effort to keep the farm in operation. The burden of feeding the inhabitants of the place falls on the woman.

> How was she going to get everything fed?--that was her problem. The dogs had to be fed. There wasn't enough hay in the barn for the horses and the cow. If she didn't feed the chickens how could they lay eggs? Without eggs to sell how could she get things in town, things she had to have to keep the life of the farm going?[2]

One day in the winter the woman, carrying a few eggs to trade, goes off to town. Her walk is difficult because the snow is heavy and for the past few days she has not been feeling well. She carries with her an old grain bag in which she plans to put the gains of her barter. Because she has a successful trade, her grain bag is heavy, and on the way home she stops to strap it to her back. When she comes to a clearing she sits down to rest and falls asleep. The dogs which have accompanied her leave to hunt rabbits in the woods. After a while the dogs, joined by some others, come back to the clearing. The night is cold and clear, and there is a moon. The dogs begin to run in circles around the clearing. Occasionally one of them leaves the circle and comes to stand in front of the old woman. When the woman dies, the dogs gather around her and rip the pack from her back, tearing her dress along with it, but not touching her. When she is found her body is frozen stiff, "and the shoulders were so narrow and the body so slight that in death it looked like

the body of some charming young girl." (p. 31) The narrator accompanies a group of men into the forest, and when he sees the body he trembles "with some mystical feeling."(p. 32) The scene in the forest, the narrator says, "had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am now trying to tell." But the fragments of the story, the narrator says, have to be picked up slowly and "long afterwards."(p. 33)

The narrator's place in the story must be carefully examined, for, as he suggests, the simple story of the old woman's experience is not the "real story" which he is trying to tell. Not to examine the position of the narrator and to consider it as part of the total meaning of the story is to fall into a misreading and perhaps to suggest, as Howe does, that a "clumsiness in perspective which forces the narrator to offer a weak explanation of how he could have known the precise circumstances of the old woman's death" is the story's one "significant flaw."[3] The narrator offers the key to a symbolic reading which makes of the old woman's experiences a surface beneath which lies a deeper meaning which has significance to all mankind. "The whole thing," the narrator says, "the story of the old woman's death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off. The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time. Something had to be understood."(p. 34)

The narrator recreates the story of the woman's life and death by drawing parallels from his own experience to add to the meager facts that he remembers from his youth. He speaks in general terms of old women like the one in his tale: "She was an old woman and lived on a farm near the town in which I lived. All country and small town people have seen such old women, but no one knows much about them. Such an old woman comes into town driving an old worn-out horse or she comes afoot carrying a basket."(p. 23) From his knowledge concerning this type of old woman, the narrator constructs his description of the life and circumstances of the woman in his story. Further, he recreates the feelings and the situation at the home of the German farmer by paralleling them with his own experiences. "Things happened. When I was a young man I worked on the farm of a German. The hired girl was afraid of her employer. The farmer's wife hated her. I saw things at that place."(p. 33) In the same way the narrator recounts the facts of the old woman's death by paralleling them with his own experiences:

> I knew all about it afterward, when I grew to be a man, because once in a woods in Illinois, on another winter night, I saw a pack of dogs act just like that. The dogs were waiting for me to die as they had waited for the old woman that night when I was a child, but when it happened to me I was a young man and had no intention whatever of dying.(p. 30)

Throughout the story the narrator is concerned with how he has managed to locate the information which he needs in order to tell the story. There is

a mystery about his recollection. "I wonder how I know all this," he says. "It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy."(p. 25) Even when he has related the story he insists that there is a mystical quality attached to the events, something beyond understanding.

> You see it is likely that, when my brother told the story, that night when we got home.... I did not think he got the point. He was too young and so was I. A thing so complete has its own beauty..... I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. (p. 34)

The narrator's emphasis on the mystical quality of the experience and on his efforts to draw details and feelings from what is, in a sense, his own subconscious memory forces the reader to look beyond the details of the story in order to locate what the narrator feels is its ultimate mystery. The compelling mood which springs from the narrator's use of the depths of his own memory suggests the remoteness of a past far beyond the dawn of civilization. The old woman seems to spring from an unknown past and to be unknown and unrecognized by other people--although her kind is universal--"All country and small town people have seen such an old woman."(p. 23) "People drive right down a road and never notice an old woman like that."(p. 24) "She was one of the nameless ones that hardly anyone knows."(p. 24) Anderson reinforces this suggestion of a remote past when he makes a strong point of the primitive instinctual behavior of the dogs: "The running of the dogs may have been a kind of death ceremony. It may have been that the primitive instinct of the wolf, having been aroused in the dogs by the night and the running, made them somehow afraid."(p. 30)

This notion of a prehistoric past is strengthened by the parallels between certain events of the story and the system of taboos by which men lived before they had advanced to the point of creating myths and religions. In those times men attempted to control their lives and protect themselves from death by an elaborate set of taboos.[4] Fear of death and of the unknown is uppermost in these taboos. For this reason a group of men adopted a totem animal in order to secure protection. In return for this security members of that totem were forbidden to eat or in any way to molest the the totem animal.[5] In "Death in the Woods" a parallel situation exists. Although the Grimes family live in poverty, they keep dogs which they feed to the best of their ability and at their own expense in contrast to the other animals on the farm--the horses, the pigs, the cows, the chickens--which in some way provide food or service for the family. In prehistoric times members of a totem clan would don skins of their totem animal in their ritualistic dances in order to secure the necessary magic to ward off death and starvation.[6] In "Death in the Woods" the ritual performed by the dogs around the dying woman suggests regression to the depths of early times when men perhaps would have covered

themselves with skins and danced in order to frighten away the evil spirit of death.

Another such taboo was the one against a man's marrying a woman of the same tribe, which made it necessary for men to go to other totem groups to take their women by force[7]--in the same way, perhaps, as Jake Grimes does when he fights the German farmer for the girl and rides off with her. Related to this taboo is the ancient one against a man's marrying a virgin, a taboo which connects virginity with blood and death and forbids a man to marry a girl who has not been previously deflowered.[8] The vestiges of this belief can be seen, perhaps, in Jake's indifference concerning the virginity of the girl he marries. Although he has no actual proof, Jake feels that the girl he marries has had a sexual relationship with her employer.

In ancient times the fear of death extended to the dead body itself. To touch the body was forbidden. The taboo even covered the utterance of the dead one's name.[9] These old, long forgotten prohibitions are suggested by the behavior of the hunter who discovers the body and of the men who follow him to the forest. "A hunter...found the old woman's body and did not touch it."(p. 31) "As a matter of fact, the hunter had not looked closely at the body. He had been frightened."(p. 32)

> No woman had come with the party from town; but one of the men, he was the town blacksmith, took off his overcoat and spread it over her. Then he gathered her into his arms and started off to town, all the others following silently. At that time no one knew who she was.(p. 33)

These symbolic actions mirror not only men's earliest attempts to understand and control life and death, but also the more sophisticated ones of classical civilizations such as the Demeter-Proserpine story which personifies the reality of life in death.

Proserpine, the daughter of Demeter, is surprised by Pluto and carried off by force to his underground realm of Hades. Grief-stricken, Demeter roams the earth in search of her daughter until a river nymph shows her Proserpine's girdle and tells her that she has seen the earth open and swallow Proserpine. Demeter, blaming her loss on the earth, causes it to be barren, so that nothing but thistles grow and the cattle die. The nymph intercedes, telling Demeter that the earth had opened unwillingly and that Proserpine is in Hades, sad, but no longer frightened. She has become the bride of Erebus and Queen of the Dead. Upon learning this, Demeter hastens to Jove. At his intercession Proserpine is allowed to return to earth for six months of the year, but must spend the other half of the year underground in Hades.[10]

There can be little doubt, Bulfinch notes, that this story of Demeter and Proserpine is an allegory: "Proserpine signifies the seed-corn which when cast into the ground lies there concealed--that is, she is carried off by the

god of the underworld. It reappears--that is, Proserpine is restored to her mother."[11] There can also be little doubt, when we trace it back, that the origins of the myth are in the familiar aspects of nature--the gloom and decay of autumn and the brightness and verdure of spring.[12]

Closely allied to Demeter and Proserpine is Hecate, goddess of the moon and of death. In art Hecate is often portrayed as having three bodies, three heads, and six arms, signifying a Demeter-Proserpine-Hecate trilogy. Around this complex of myths grew up one of the most solemn of all Greek religions, the Eleusinian mysteries. The rituals of the cult were a closely guarded secret and were never revealed, but it is supposed that the culmination of the rites came in a revelation involving the sprouting corn.[13] This revelation was accomplished in awed silence and with an unparalleled solemnity. It was a mystical experience never to be forgotten, disclosing as it did that Demeter and Proserpine were one. Incorporated in the idea of the single entity of the old mother and the young maiden is the belief that life and death are related in the same way.[14] Demeter, goddess of grains, is called the great mother and the great nourisher, but in her Proserpine form she is worshipped as the goddess of death. Jung and Kerényi comment on this relationship:

> The all embracing idea of birth, of the everlastingly repeated beginning of life, united mother, daughter and child in a single unit pregnant with meaning. The meaning of birth is not the beginning of all things, not the unique, the original beginning, but continuity in an uninterrupted sequence of births.[15]

The major symbolism of "Death in the Woods" centers around this myth. The woman is easily identified in her Demeter role not only by the grain sack which she carries but also by her symbolic function as nourisher:

> The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway that is all she ever did. She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died. She fed animal life in cows, in chickens, in pigs, in horses, in dogs, in men....On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life. (p. 34)

The figure of Proserpine can be identified with the young woman who, on a June day at the wheat harvest, is carried away by Jake Grimes in a horse and buggy amid much violence--just as Proserpine was carried off at the same time of year by Pluto in his horse drawn chariot. In the person of Jake Grimes are the characteristics which made Pluto one of the most unpopular of gods. Although people worshipped Pluto, they worshipped him out of fear; and when they offered him sacrifices, they did so with averted faces. Anderson makes

the point neatly when the narrator describes the time that Jake Grimes tries to join a group of men who are loafing at a livery-barn. The men pay Jake no attention and no one speaks to him.

The identification of the old woman with Hecate is also accomplished deftly. As the old woman dies the moon comes out, and in an unearthly atmosphere the dogs howl. From these circumstances emerges the ancient figure of Hecate, goddess of the moon and of witches, whose presence was always announced by the howling of dogs, as she roamed through the night in company with dead souls. Hecate symbolizes the essential female governed by the moon; the sowing of the seed and the reaping of the harvest are determined by phases of the moon. In her worship are combined the elemental forces of life and the inevitability of death.

The figure of the old woman, then, combines the ideas symbolized by the Demeter-Proserpine-Hecate trilogy, and it is to this that the young boy responds in the forest clearing. He might have been a celebrant of the Eleusinian mysteries at the revelation of the identity of mother and maiden: "She did not look old, lying there in that light; frozen and still. One of the men turned her over in the snow and I saw everything. My body trembled with some strange mystical feeling."(p. 32) The revelation of the beautiful girlish body of the old woman fills the boy with wonder and awe. The aura of mystery and beauty prevails; and, as he grows older, the experience is like music heard from afar. But, still, there is something to be understood, and from his attempts at understanding comes the meaning of the story. As a boy he has not been able to understand; as a man he feels compelled to tell the story in the hope of understanding, but he remains dissatisfied.

From the earliest times, men, in their efforts to understand the mysteries of life and death, have been impelled to create myths. But while the myths are beautiful and comforting, they do not adequately explain basic questions, and as long as there is no explanation, men will continue to create their stories of rebirth and regeneration--as the narrator does in this story through his tale of the life and death of a woman and as Anderson does through the structure of symbols which relates the narrator's tale to other attempts by men to understand.

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Footnotes:

[1] Anderson, The American Men of Letters Series (New York, 1951), p. 165.

[2] Ten Modern Masters: An Anthology of the Short Story, ed. Robert Gorham Davis (New York, 1953), p. 27. Hereafter page numbers will be inserted in the text.

[3] Howe, p. 167.

[4] James George Frazer, The New Golden Bough, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York, 1959), pp. 194-260.

[5] Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, ed. A. A. Brill (New York, 1938), p. 808.

[6] Ibid., pp. 808, 888.

[7] Ibid., p. 809.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity," The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XI (London, 1957), pp. 193-199.

[9] Frazer, pp. 251-256. See also Freud, "Totem and Taboo," p. 828.

[10] Summarized from Bulfinch's Mythology, Modern Library (New York, n.d.), pp. 47-51.

[11] Ibid., p. 51.

[12] Frazer, p. 366.

[13] Ibid., p. 359.

[14] C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology (New York, 1949), pp. 151-152.

[15] Ibid., p. 199.

IN FORTHCOMING ISSUES:

Tentative plans for a special issue on the American Indian are being considered by the Editorial Board. Manuscripts on Indian art, civilization, folklore, sociological problems, anthropological studies, or literary implications will be welcomed; and appropriate illustrations can be forwarded with manuscripts to the Editor at Lawrence.

--JRW
