

MALCOLM'S KATIE

Images and Songs

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ISABELLA VALANCY CRAWFORD's "Malcolm's Katie", as we learn from the sub-title, is a love story. But even the most cursory reading reveals that this is not simply the story of love between a man and a woman. "Malcolm's Katie" in fact consists of a series of interrelated love stories. In addition to the story of the love of Max and Katie, we have the story of Malcolm's love for his daughter, the story of Katie's love for her father, the story of Alfred's perverse love for Malcolm's gold, and the story of Max's patriotic love of his wilderness community and the nation of which it is a part. These stories culminate in the triumph of love in all its manifestations, the creation of a new Edenic society, and the transformation of Malcolm and Alfred from alienated beings, whose first love is wealth, to total human beings capable of love in the widest and narrowest senses of that term. On all levels there is conflict, and on all levels love triumphs in the end.

The main image of the poem is the ring of the opening lines, and it provides a key to an understanding of the many love stories:

Max plac'd a ring on little Katie's hand,
A silver ring that he had beaten out
From that same sacred coin — first well-priz'd wage
For boyish labour, kept thro' many years.

The image of Max's reworking of the prize of his labour introduces the two anti-theoretical value systems that are to dominate "Malcolm's Katie" and generate the power that will vitalize the dramatic structure. Money, the symbol of exchange, is transformed into ring, the symbol of love. But values are embodied in persons, and thus we have in this poem two kinds of persons: the ring or love people, Max and Katie, on the one hand, and the money people, Malcolm and Alfred, on the other. This broad conflict is carefully dramatized, and the tranquility of

the conclusion tells us that the money people have been transformed into ring people.

The subtlety and richness of the dramatic structure in "Malcolm's Katie" can be suggested by a consideration of the recurring garden images which support it. These images function in a number of ways: they indicate the relationship between Max and Katie (Part I), the relationship between Katie and Malcolm (Part III), the quality of life at Malcolm's domain (Part III), and the quality of life in the new Eden (Part VII). The garden, in short, functions as an image of a society in which love and harmony are the ruling principles. It can be thought of, therefore, as both the microcosmic and macrocosmic correlative to the ring image.

In Part I Katie says to Max, "I have made/Your heart my garden."¹ The garden in this instance stands as an image of love and fertility at the individual level. Part III opens with a picture of the "great farmhouse," which is a projection of Malcolm's utilitarian impulses: "The great farmhouse of Malcolm Graem stood,/Square-shoulder'd and peak'd-roof, upon a hill,/With many windows looking everywhere . . ."² The house, like Malcolm, stands isolated and looks out at the wheat (wealth) fields. But this somewhat stark structure has been partially transformed by Katie's garden: "Katie's gay garden foam'd about the walls,/Leagur'd the prim-cut modern sills, and rush'd/Up the stone walls — and broke on the peak'd roof." The garden dominates the farmhouse precisely to the degree that Katie has influence over Malcolm at this point, and thus we see that it is an objective representation of Katie's love in the process of converting Malcolm from an acquisitive, isolated individual into a "social-soul'd" person like Max; for the climbing vines will grow as they are wont to do and soon cover the house entirely.³ At the end Malcolm leaves his isolated house when he leaves his isolated individualism and becomes a member of the new Edenic community.

In the conclusion Malcolm is in a new world, a new culture. Katie affirms that she would not change her "wild and rocking woods,/Dotted by little homes of unbark's trees/ . . . For the smooth sward of selfish Eden bowers . . .". The new Eden, then, is quite the opposite of the grim and grey utilitarian world typified by Malcolm and his farmhouse. In this new world both Malcolm and Alfred are fully human, which means that they have rejected their former individually centred values and come to accept the socially centred values of the new community. They have found love in its social form and escaped their alienation. The garden, therefore, functions as the symbol of a civilization based on love rather than power.

Like the garden, Nature performs an important dramatic function in "Malcolm's Katie," and this can be seen in the correlation between nature and the psychological drama. The poem begins with Max and Katie in harmony with external nature: "Nay, Kate, look down amid the globes/Of those large lilies that our light canoe/Divides, and see within the polish'd pool/That small, rose face of yours — so dear, so fair . . ." The time is summer and the hills are "Rich with hill flow'rs and musical with rills." External nature becomes a reflection of the lovers' internal states, for they have pledged an undying love — an eternal love existing in an eternal summer — which the poem will soon put to the test.

Part II opens with a glorious passage: "The South Wind laid his moccasins aside,/Broke his gay calumet of flow'rs, and cast/His useless wampum, beaded with cool dews,/Far from him, northward . . ." The time is Indian summer when "At morn the sharp breath of night arose . . ." Bound together by the chain of necessity, the opposites, summer and winter, are anthropomorphized and the Indian summer playfully mocks the symbol of winter, the moon: "Esa! esa! shame upon you, Pale Face!/Shame upon you, Moon of Evil Witches!/Have you kill'd the happy, laughing Summer?" This parallels the ways in which Max playfully mocks Katie in Part I where Kate answers: "'Oh, words!' said Katie, blushing, 'only words!/You build them up that I may push them down'." The sun (summer on one level, Max on another) is absent from the moon (winter on one level, Katie on another) and the movement from summer to Indian summer with its cool mornings is made to mark the degree of separation of Max from Katie; the further movement to the end of Indian summer in Part II, with the bare trees where the "pale, sharp fingers crept", prepares us for his trial in Part IV. External nature thus is made to represent Max's psychological state. For if Max labours safe in the knowledge that he is loved, and if nothing eventful happens in Part II, the images of a changed external nature prepare us emotionally for what will happen in Part IV. The extended opening in Part IV, therefore, where we meet the North wind and an external nature in which "High grew the snow beneath the low-hung sky," tells us that something is about to happen to Max, for it objectively represents Max's inner state. We are in this way prepared for his depression and madness when we meet him in this Part. Again, the North wind tells his "white squaw," "Spread thy white blanket on the twice-slain dead,/And hide them, ere the waking of the sun!" The sun, of course, will be the new summer sun and the "twice-slain dead" prepares us for Max's double defeat at the hands of Alfred. His subsequent "death" underneath the fallen tree makes him like all the other dead things beneath the snow. He dies

but he will rise again like the sun, a principle of natural regeneration and simultaneously a Christ-like figure who will save Katie in Part VI.

Katie is tested in Part VI; the season is autumn: "The Land has put his ruddy gauntlet on,/Of harvest gold, to dash in Famine's face . . .". But this will be an autumn from which no winter will ever follow, for here, too, external nature reflects an inner state. There is the fear of winter in the external world and there is the internal fear that Max may no longer love her, but good overcomes evil and true love triumphs.

THE SUN-MOON IMAGE sequence serves a dramatic function and supports a number of themes in "Malcolm's Katie." This imagery operates both on the human and external nature level. Asked by Katie, "Are you content?" Max replies, "Yes, crescent-wise, but not to [sic] round, full moon." Literally the image is one of the young crescent moon with which we can see also the shape of the full moon since it is outlined by light from the other side of the earth. In folklore this is known as the new moon in the old moon's arms, and on the thematic level we can see Katie and her father, the new Canada in the arms of the old. Clearly, "crescent-wise" also refers to her tender years and the outlined full moon may serve a double function by suggesting the fulness of her womanhood which is already discernable. Above all, the moon is a symbol of Katie's spiritual chastity and constancy. This is Katie as Diana. Yet again, the moon symbolizes the feminine principle and Katie is nothing if she is not feminine. Max, for his part, as we saw in the discussion of nature and the psychological drama, is connected with the sun, the masculine principle. Obviously there are cross-references to be made here with the garden imagery also, because Max is the garden in which she grows and the resurrected sun who brings life to her in her despair in Part VI. The fertility of love connects the two images.

In the external nature of the poem the sun and moon are mutually dependent contraries which divide between them day and night and summer and winter; they represent respectively life and death.⁴ In Part II we find Max separated from Katie and "In this shrill moon the scouts of Winter ran." Indian summer gives way to winter:

... too late the Sun
 Pour'd his last vigour to the deep, dark cells
 Of the dim wood. The keen two-bladed Moon
 Of Falling Leaves roll'd up on crested mists,

And where the lush, rank boughs had foil'd the Sun
 In his red prime, her pale, sharp fingers crept
 After the wind and felt about the moss. . . .

The same moon threatens Katie in Part V: "Katie on the moonlit window lean'd,/And in the airy silver of her voice/Sang of the tender blue Forget-me-not . . ." As with Max, so with Katie; the threatening moon is an objective representation of her own state for she is going to fall victim to the fear that Max no longer loves her. Indeed, the "Forget-Me-Not Song" reminds us of this.

The moon is made to represent not only death in external nature, however, but also the death and decay of civilizations. For when Alfred argues that nations are not immortal he says:

. . . The lean, lank lion peals
 His midnight thunders over lone, red plains,
 Long-ridg'd and crested on their dusty waves
 With fires from moons red-hearted as the sun,
 . . .
 Below the roots of palms, and under stones
 Of younger ruins, thrones, tow'rs and cities
 Honeycomb the earth.

The solution offered to the problem of change in its many forms is love in its many forms. On the individual level of the lovers we find that

. . . Love, once set within a lover's breast,
 Has its own sun — its own peculiar sky,
 All one great daffodil — on which do lie
 The sun, the moon, the stars — all seen at once,
 And never setting, but all shining straight
 Into the faces of the trinity —
 The one belov'd, the lover, and sweet Love!

On the social and political plane we see the refugees from a world without love in "the quick rush of panting human waves/Upheav'd by throbs of angry poverty,/And driven by keen blasts of hunger from/Their native strands" moving into a new world of harmony and love as they "Throb down to peace in kindly valley beds,/Their turbid bosoms clearing in the calm/Of sun-ey'd Plenty, till the stars, and moon,/The blessed sun himself, have leave to shine/And laugh in their dark hearts!" The steam engine images of "panting", "rush", "throbs", and "blasts" serve simultaneously as nature images and suggest the state of the immigrants; they have been ejected by the industrial machine of the old world

and they will become closer to nature in the new. As with the lovers, so for all others in the new Edenic community are "The sun, the moon, the stars — all seen at once", for the problem of change has been transcended. And so it is with the new Eden of the conclusion; there is no mention there of seasons or seasonal change because they would have no function. They could not reflect change in a stable society which, as the vision has it, is without change. The new civilization will give the lie to Alfred's claim that no nation is immortal!

We do not have to read too far into "Malcolm's Katie" before we note that there is a constant anthropomorphization of nature and that a goodly portion of the work presents us with a picture of nature as Indian. There seems to be a good reason why Crawford specifically singles out Indian culture and continually collapses it into nature so that the two become as one. The function of this anthropomorphization of nature as Indian seems to be to provide a background onto which other images of society can be superimposed in much the same way as succeeding forms of an evolving western culture were superimposed on a land that formerly belonged to the Indian.

So far as nature as Indian is concerned it is but a short leap from the metaphorical "From his far wigwam sprang the strong North Wind/And rush'd with war-cry down the steep ravines,/And wrestl'd with the giants of the woods" to the literal

The warrior stags, with does and tripping fawns

...

[had never] Seen, limn'd against the farthest rim of light

Of the low-dipping sky, the plume or bow

Of the red hunter; nor, when stoop'd to drink,

Had from the rustling rice-bed heard the shaft

Of the still hunter hidden in its spears;

His bark canoe close-knotted in its bronze,

His form as stirless as the brooding air. . . .

The Indian here blends completely into the nature of which he and the culture which he represents are part. For his is a culture which did not (generally) seek to transform nature and it is precisely for this reason that the anthropomorphic images of nature as Indian prove such a useful background for the cultures of the white men who did.

Malcolm is one of the figures who has been busy in the process of transforming nature, both external nature and his own. In terms of his own nature we see him described by Max in images of rock and we learn that for him grains of

wheat are "ingots!" A good image of the transformation of both internal and external nature we see in the long passage where Malcolm's "noisy mills" and the "goods" mark the extent to which Malcolm and all that he represents is separated from the untransformed world of the Indian. And it is between the extremes of Malcolm (not to mention Alfred) and the world of the Indian that Max's vision of a "lowly roof," "Kine," and "A man and woman" falls.⁵ Max will have his new civilization tied neither to the necessities of an untransformed nature which is the way of the Indian nor to the alienating necessities of wealth as Malcolm is. Moreover, Max is constantly connected with the axe and we see that three "technologies" are contrasted in this work: that of the bow and arrow, that of the axe, and that of busy mills.

Obviously Alfred can have no positive image of society attached to him in the poem because he is a nihilist, but we do get an impression of his vision indirectly in terms of a reference to the love theme. And this has social implications. He is part of nature red in tooth and claw as we shall see from the following passage. The hill speaks:

On my slim, loftiest peak, an eagle with
His angry eyes set sunward, while his cry
Falls fiercely back from all my ruddy heights,
And his bald eaglets, in their bare, broad nest
Shrill pipe their angry echoes: 'Sun, arise,
And show me that pale dove beside her nest,
Which I shall strike with piercing beak and tear
With iron talons for my hungry young.'

And that mild dove, secure for yet a space,
Half waken'd, turns her ring'd and glossy neck
To watch dawn's ruby pulsing on her breast,
And see the first bright golden motes slip down
The gnar'd trunks about her leaf-deep nest,
Nor sees nor fears the eagle on the peak.

At this point the scene shifts to Malcolm's house and we hear the words " 'Yes, sing, sweet Kate,' said Alfred in her ear . . ." Alfred is the eagle and the eaglets are the many cries of his unrestrained will: "If all man's days are three-score years and ten,/He needs must waste them not, but nimbly seize/The bright, consummate blossom that his will/Calls for most loudly". His will makes many cries and he simply follows the loudest. The dove is Katie through whom he will seek to increase his riches for "my pangs of love for gold must needs be fed . . ." Katie

happens to be the present object of his attentions, but he defines himself as a type who would not act differently with others. Indeed, he goes further, and believes that others should share his views, hence his proselytizing speeches to Max (Part IV). His vision of society is that of ruthlessly competitive struggle marked by the survival of the fittest, a superb exemplum of social Darwinism. No wonder then that he is the only character in the poem to use the word "Chance" (five times) and to insist that the world is ruled by Chance.

SONGS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE in "Malcolm's Katie".

Dorothy Livesay has observed that we should not take the songs out of their context in the poem as mere anthology pieces, and she is surely correct; they are essential components of the thematic and dramatic structures. Unfortunately space limitations will allow only a summary treatment of them here.

There are seven songs in "Malcolm's Katie" spread throughout the first six Parts. There are none in the conclusion. Of these seven songs two are for solo voice, four for chorus, and one for solo voice and chorus. The two solo songs are sung by Katie. These are the "Lily Song" in Part III and the "Forget-Me-Not Song" in Part V. The four songs for chorus are, "O light canoe, where dost thou glide?" (Part I), "O Love builds on the azure sea" (Part II), "Doth true Love lonely grow?" (Part V), and "Who curseth Sorrow knows her not at all" at the beginning of Part VI. The latter is definitely not a song but a choral chant in which the verse form follows that of the work as a whole. The work song of Max's in Part IV, "Bite deep and wide, O Axe, the tree!" is a song for solo voice and chorus. Certainly it would seem reasonable to argue that the axe's responses to Max should be sung by a chorus, for the axe speaks for a society, even if that society does not yet exist. However this may be, we see Crawford's skill in the way in which she has placed the songs. For Max's song is at the centre of the poem and it is surrounded by Katie's lyrics which in turn are surrounded by the four choral songs in a neat geometrical pattern. Moreover, the pattern recapitulates the main themes. Max is enclosed by Katie's love and both are enclosed by the new society they are building. If we look at this surrounding process as a series of concentric circles we have a geometrical and symbolic representation of the many forms of love.

The songs in "Malcolm's Katie" also serve a dramatic function. In essence they do one of two things: they either reflect personal states and suggest the direction that the action will take, as the songs of Max and Katie, or they comment on

particular situations from outside, as in the choral songs. Thus the choral song, "O light canoe, where dost thou glide?" at the end of Part I shows the unity of the lovers, the canoe, the heavens and earth, reflecting a universal harmony resulting from the pledge of eternal love. It also suggests, however, that there may be rough waters ahead for this true love. The second song, "O Love builds on the azure sea," hints that Max is safe even as the threatening nature imagery suggests his coming trial. For even though Max is busy in the wilderness attempting to create a community in which love can flourish, the song says that love does not finally need buildings because "Love's solid land is everywhere!" Katie's lyric in Part III, the "Lily Song," is one that was written for her by Max in which the lilies turn out to be an objective representation of Katie. The song with Max and the axe in Part IV shows the love Max has for his nation-building labour and sets the scene for the arrival of his tempter Alfred. Katie's "Forget-Me-Not Song" in Part V implies her growing fears that Max has indeed forgotten her. The choral song at the end of Part V, "Doth true Love lonely grow?" assures us that true love will triumph even as all the cards seem to be stacked against it. The choral chant at the beginning of Part VI, "Who curseth Sorrow knows her not at all," prepares us for the darkness of Part VI which will be followed by the light of the Edenic Part VII.

As inadequate as this summary is it offers some sense of the dramatic and thematic functions of the songs. Since the songs are so carefully placed in a neat geometrical pattern we must assume that Crawford knew exactly what she was doing. This assumption being granted, the question arises as to why there are no songs in the conclusion. In view of the theme we might well have expected something at the end in the manner of Schiller and the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth. We can only speculate but it seems possible that Crawford tells us by the absence of song in Part VII that song, art, has disappeared into the fissures of the new Edenic society itself, for society has now become one large undifferentiated work of art. This view is in keeping with the vision of "Malcolm's Katie", for Max is a poet. We see in him the balance of labour, love, and art.

The songs and main image patterns of "Malcolm's Katie" all work to support the dramatic structure and the result is a complete, coherent, and perfectly consistent work of art.

NOTES

¹ Connected with the image of Katie as flower is the image of her as lily, for she surely is the lily of Max's "Lily Song".

- ² Note also the careful juxtaposition of Malcolm's "great farm-house" at the beginning of Part III with "the black slope all bristling with burn'd stumps/ . . . known . . . as 'Max's House'" at the end of Part II.
- ³ This process is supported by another image. Max describes Katie as "A seed of love to cleave into a rock/And burgeon thence until the granite splits/Before its subtle strength". The rock will be Malcolm which the seed (Katie's love) will gradually break up and help to convert to fertile earth. Since Max is the garden in which Katie grows, Malcolm also will become a garden. And they will all live in the better than Edenic garden at the end.
- ⁴ Note also the connection between some moon and axe images: "the bright axe cleav'd moon-like thro' the air"; "The keen two-bladed Moon". If the moon symbolizes death in external nature, it is still only one phase of a dialectical process because we are assured that the sun and regeneration will necessarily follow. Just so Max's axe destroys like the moon, but out of that destruction will arise a regenerated society.
- ⁵ Max and Malcolm are contrasted by socio-political images. Malcolm is described as "lordly" and as the "king" of "silent courtiers". This suggests the hierarchical view of society and the sense of his own position in such a society that has prompted Malcolm to reject the lowly Max. Max on the other hand takes an egalitarian view. He will have no slaves to build his civilization (his house). Indeed such a civilization will bury kings: "And have I slain a King?/Above his ashes will I build my house—/No slave beneath its pillars, but — a King!" While Max is speaking about kings of the forest the image obviously goes much further than this and connects with the nationalist and anti-imperialist theme.