

CLOSED CIRCLE

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ONE OF THE MOST impressive qualities of *The Double Hook* is the fineness of the correlation between content, form, and tone. All are spare, elemental, and dramatic. From the essential simplicity of the work, many meanings open out and reverberate so that finally a great depth is achieved; the structure is a skeleton and the author, instead of padding it with flesh, polishes the bones until they glow.

The novel's structure is that of classical comedy, concerned with the social relationships of a small community and the transformation of that social order from the grip of the old regime into a more vital, life-oriented one. The fact that there are elements of tragedy contained in the transformation is quite consistent both with Aristotle's definition of comedy and with the example of Elizabethan plays of that genre.

The setting emphasizes the isolation of the little community in which the drama takes place. The bare, dry hills enclose the people, setting them apart as if on a stage, and imparting a quality of self-containment to what happens there. There is no tie to the larger, external world, and apparently no one to discover or care about the murder of Mrs. Potter. Not even God watches them; as Ara says, "there were not enough people here to attract his attention." Burials and births are handled by the community alone, which is thus a law unto itself, and a harsher law than any an outside authority could impose. Only James Potter tries to find a way out of the isolated, enclosed setting, and the road he takes is a dead end, barricaded by his mother's spirit.

It is essentially a childless setting, in spite of Angel's ragged brood who are in the beginning merely misfits trailing after their mother, who is like a stray cat "trying to step her way through the puddles of the world. Fighting the dogs. Mousing for her young."

The objective world pictured in the novel reflects an invisible, absolute order; the condensed syntax and clustering of images around the central metaphor of the double hook creates intensity and underlines the classical structure and

bare setting. These spare, terse qualities are reflected in the style and tone of the prose; for example, the account of the murder on which the book hinges occupies a single paragraph:

James walking away. The old lady falling. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James's will. By James's hand. By James's words: This is my day. You'll not fish today.

The characters fit into this dry, spare world precisely and, like the units of a constellation, take their unique places in the novel's symbolic pattern. Without always being explicitly described as such, they represent objective forces such as Destruction, (Mrs. Potter, Greta) Fear (Coyote, Mrs. Potter) Creation, (Gretchen, Felix) Light, (Heinrich) and Insight (Kip, Coyote) as well as unique individuals. There are many references to the elemental nature of the characters also, Mrs. Potter and Greta representing Fire and Air; Ara, Water; Lenchen, James and Angel, Earth; and Felix, Air. The images of these people and their world form an integrated pattern which is as economical, complex, and carefully structured as a poem; the mystical truth embodied in the novel is ideally suited to its narrow, pseudo-poetic form. By isolating her characters as if on a stage, and focussing the pitiless eyes of the sun and Coyote upon them, Sheila Watson achieves an intense, transcendent quality which supports the spiritual and mythological content of the novel effectively.

The theme of the novel is the end of the old order and the birth of a new one, but this transformation does not result solely from James's physical action. Awareness, consciousness, is necessary to accomplish it, and therefore the theme of sight and insight is woven into every page of the novel. Each character is defined in terms of how he sees, what he sees, and, perhaps most importantly, how he feels about seeing. It is not ordinary perception which is the issue here, but a kind of seeing through or beyond ordinary events in order to discover their hidden meanings. This recurrent theme rests on a very profound and extended cultural base; the idea of a special sight is familiar to all mystical thought, from the "Third Eye" of the enlightened holy man of the East to the general description of individuals who possess prophetic powers as "seers" or visionaries". "He that has eyes to see, let him see"; and "There is none so blind as those that will not see."

IN THE BEGINNING of *The Double Hook*, the land and the people are parched, sterile, and hopeless under the dominance of Mrs. Potter

and Coyote. Both of these characters are omnipresent and all-seeing; as it says in the first line, all the action takes place "In the folds of the hills/under Coyote's eye". His extraordinary sight, however, as well as Mrs. Potter's, is used only for spying. The old lady sees all, but in a very important sense she is blind, searching with a lighted lamp for something in the broad daylight, something which she never finds. Coyote, the outsider, inspires fear in the people because he is inhuman and detached from the community, uninvolved and therefore merciless as he laughs at what he observes. He is a totemic figure who releases spirits and controls them, and his creative power is used perversely.

Coyote made the land his pastime. He stretched out his paw. He breathed on the grass. His spittle eyed it with prickly pear.

The life-giving forces of breath and water eye the land with monstrous, spiky plants; the eyes he creates and uses are hard and troublesome to people.

Under the influence of Mrs. Potter, the individuals of the community are isolated from each other and inarticulate. They are blinded by wilful ignorance and the denial of perception, a deliberate refusal to see which stems from fear: as Kip observes, "Angels can see but Theophil's let fear grow like fur on his eyes." Ara is aware of her lack of perception and says bitterly to William, "Could I be blinder than I am? Seeing things only in flashes." The Widow insists, fearfully, "I hear nothing. I see nothing." Mrs. Potter is, like Coyote, an inverted figure with great emotional power, having given life only to strangle it. Her grip extends beyond the human community to the barren land itself, since she "was there in every fold of the country," and it lasts beyond her death because she has created a successor in her daughter, Greta.

More than any of the others, Greta is the victim of the old woman's negative, life-fearing aura, and although she had been as eager as James to be rid of her oppressive presence, she is not freed by her mother's death. On the contrary, she inherits the old woman's characteristics and takes her place as mistress of the sterile house. As James soon realizes, Greta has merely replaced Mrs. Potter: she had

... sat in the old lady's chair. Eyes everywhere. In the cottonwoods the eyes of foolhens. Rats' eyes on the barn rafters. Steers herded together. Eyes multiplied. Eyes. Eyes and padded feet. Coyote moving in rank-smelling.

Nothing had changed.

Ara reflects, after Greta destroys herself by fire, that Greta "had inherited destruction. . . . She lived no longer than the old lady's shadow left its stain on

the ground. She sat in her mother's doom as she sat in her chair." Part of this doom is the rigid, fear-based repression which masquerades as morality in the wasteland of the old woman's world. The grip on the young girls is particularly harsh; William admits that Greta was the victim of far more pressure than he or James, and that she too had once been as free-spirited as they.

You wouldn't know how she was. Sliding down the stacks and falling into the creek. Ma was hard on her, he said. She thought grief was what a woman was born to sooner or later, and that men got their share of grief through them.

For a short time after her mother's death, Greta tries to manipulate the power she feels is now rightfully hers. She denies the truth and refuses to "see", snapping at Angel's question, "Why don't you take your own lamp and go looking for something?" and warning Ara not to interfere:

You've been seeing things, Ara . . . Like everyone else around here. You've been looking into other people's affairs. Noticing this. Remarking that. Seeing too much.

But she is literally burning with resentment, destroying herself finally because she "never thought of anyone. Not even herself. Only what had been done to her." Identifying with her mother, she projects her self-destructiveness on to James, saying that he will kill her too and comparing herself to a moth drawn into a flame. She is a victim of the old order, her mother's order, but James asks, "must the whole world suffer because Greta had been wronged?"

The answer is no. With the old woman's death, a new force has been released and Greta is too closely tied to Mrs. Potter's identity to survive her destruction. At Greta's death, Coyote cries ironically, "Happy are the dead/for their eyes see no more." In the living, however, changes begin to take place. Ara, dry and barren, fearful that William is the father of Lenchen's child, has a vision as she walks toward the house where Mrs. Potter lies dead of a dry stone coming to life:

She bent towards the water. Her fingers divided it. A stone breathed in her hand. Then life drained to its centre.

This vision, so reminiscent in its quality to that of the narrator's experience who looks into the drained pool in Eliot's "Burnt Norton" and sees it suddenly "filled with water out of sunlight" is repeated for Ara. With Greta's death Ara, the dry one,

remembered how she'd thought of water as a death which might seep through the dry shell of the world. Now her tired eyes saw water issuing from under the

burned threshold. Welling up and flowing down to fill the dry creek. Until dry lips drank. Until the trees stood knee deep in water.

Everything shall live where the river comes, she said out loud. And she saw a great multitude of fish, each fish springing arching through the slanting light.

Through Ara, William comes to see that his perception is not deep enough. She tells him, "You're seeing things all the time, but you never look at anything here" and he finds, on reflection, that this is true: "... I've not seen what was growing up in my own yard. It's like a man who stands on a rock looking over a valley. He doesn't notice the rock, he said. He just stands on it." His basically positive view of life, that "it's better to be trusting and loving", begins to come closer to realization.

Heinrich moves from the fear he felt at "seeing light the way I've never noticed before" to an acceptance that he must "be born into a light which burned but did not destroy." When Greta burns herself to death, he is able, with William and Ara, to contain the destruction and stop the fire from spreading.

Lenchen is subjected to the same uncharitable hardness as was Greta; in her mother's eyes, she is "a fat pig of a girl" once she has lost the price of marriage, her virginity. But unlike Greta, Lenchen has strengths which save her. She has spirit and independence, and is not cut off from the natural world. As her brother Heinrich says, she "was part of any animal she rode. Moved with its movement as if she and the horse breathed with the same lungs. Rode easy as foam on its circling blood. She was part of the horse. Its crest and the edge of its fire." This unity with life and movement makes her strong; she is not destroyed by the rejection of her by her mother and lover. She is a physical and creative force, and as the values of the community move from death toward life, her guilt ("all because of me the whole world's wrecked") is transformed into absolution and regeneration of the society.

Kip's role in the novel is that of Coyote's human counterpart. He has a unique gift of perception; Coyote calls him, "Kip, my servant Kip". But seeing implies responsibility; it is Coyote's lack of responsibility that makes his omniscience so frightening. Unlike him, Kip is tied to the human community and it is his perversion of his special gift, by trying to blackmail Lenchen, which leads to his punishment. He is not allowed to retain his place as seer and messenger if he abuses it. James, the most active agent in bringing about the change from old to new, blinds him with a whip. This is not the gratuitous act of violence it might seem, but comes only after many warnings from Heinrich, William, and

Theophil. Kip himself accepts responsibility for bringing it about: "I kept at him like a dog till he beat around the way a porcupine beats with his tail." Like Lenchen, the blinded Kip turns to Felix for help, and it is this which causes Angel to leave Theophil, who refuses to "see", and return with her children to Felix. Because she had seen things through Kip's eyes, she mourns his blinding: "Who'll see anything worth seeing now?" Angel is aware of the healing quality of Felix's spiritual gifts, but she returns to care for Kip and Lenchen because, as she says, "there's things to be done needs ordinary human hands."

THE CONFLICT between the older, repressed, death-oriented figures and their children resulted in Lenchen's exile, Greta's death, and Kip's loss of sight. Through James and Felix, however, a new way of life is made possible for the future. James is the physical father of the new order; he does what not even God could do — he stops his mother's fishing. His strength is thus established at the beginning: "This is my day." (p. 19) and although he is unable for a time to assert himself positively to take her place, his action has been decisive, and he is determined to break his mother's hold completely. He tries first to escape her influence by running away; he rides to the distant town, only to learn that distance is not the answer. The town is merely an extension of the wasteland he has left, and is full of its reminders. The first thing he sees there is the river, and "the dark figure of his mother playing her line out into the full flood." He spends his time in the town in the company of Traff, the man whose thick yellow hair reminds him of Lenchen.

After losing the money for his escape in an encounter with a whore, James thinks of Lenchen and their coming child, and "saw clearly for a moment his simple hope." From secret lovemaking, denial, and escape he moves to openness, determination, and a sense of the values in his life: "Whatever the world said, whatever the girl said, he'd find her. Out of his corruption life had leaved and he'd stepped on it carelessly as a man steps on spring shoots." The change which has taken place in him is rewarded; fate grants him a new beginning when he returns to find his mother's house in ashes. He experiences liberation and rebirth with this dramatic ending to his mother's power: "He felt as he stood with his eyes closed on the destruction of what his heart had wished destroyed that by some generous genture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things." He resolves to build a new house, for himself and Lenchen. His transformation and assumption of responsibility most clearly exemplify what Margaret

Morriss has called "the religious ritual celebrating the re-entry of love into the wasteland."

As James creates a new world through his actions, Felix Prosper nurtures the growth of that world and takes his rightful place as its spiritual father. In the beginning he is inert and passive; his indolence has caused Angel to leave him, and he passes his days "sitting there like the round world all centred in on himself", his mind recalling fragments of the Latin mass, impotent and irrelevant. He considers chasing the old lady out of his pool, but cannot make the effort. His images are all religious; "St. Felix with a death's head meditating", "anointed", but they are only fragmented reminders of his abdicated role. He exists, he accepts: "Things came. Things went." And he turns away from drinking the cup of "her bitter going" which Angel left to him.

When he is needed, however, he begins to come to life. He takes Lenchen in and, not knowing what else to do, he blesses her. It is, he murmurs, "Introibo — the beginning." Then Kip comes to him and Felix, making a great effort, goes for Angel. Finally direct, he says "I need you" and to this, she can respond. He is useless in practical matters, but his union with her gives him strength so that he is able, when the time comes, to help deliver Lenchen's child. He also takes on his family responsibilities as he has never done before: "When a house is full of women and children, Felix said, a man has to get something for their mouths." His initial paralysis has been replaced by leadership; the return of Angel restores the satisfying balance between his vision and gentleness and her practical, intuitive wisdom.

In the end, Kip accepts his altered state and finds a home for himself with Felix, and Lenchen becomes a madonna, bearing new hope for them all. Even her bitter mother, who had supported the old order, finds that "there are things so real that a person has to see them. A person can't keep her eyes glazed over like a dead bird's forever." She repents, opens her heart, and is able to find a place for the new child.

The community experiences a collective miracle of unification, centering on Felix's house. It is marked outwardly by the birth of Lenchen and James's child, and inwardly by Felix's experience of transcendence as he watches the birth:

If only he could shed his flesh, moult and feather again, he might begin once more. His eyelids dropped. His flesh melted. He rose from the bed on soft owl wings. And below he saw his old body crouched down like an ox by the manger.

He is the spiritual father of the new baby (whom Lenchen names "Felix"),

just as James is the physical one. The victory of life and unity over the divisive force of fear is accomplished; a new order, more vital and more humane, has replaced the old.

The clarity and concentration of the dialogue and description in the novel are outstanding. The work appears simple because of the spareness of the style and the primitive, circular movement from death to life which is simultaneously its structure and its content. It has a classical effect, a feeling of ongoing truth which is not bounded or limited to specific time or place or people, and this elemental nature is emphasized by the fact that, throughout the novel, the lines between man and landscape are blurred. Coyote, who makes fear articulate, is both animal and human, a figure of prophecy and adversity. He speaks last.

It is clear that the new order is not a simple replacement of the old repression with unrestricted freedom, but something more subtle and difficult: an acceptance of the dual nature of existence, and a refusal to let the presence of fear continue to dominate the community. Fear is still present, but it is no longer omnipresent. As the child's birth symbolizes hope, Coyote's final message is a reminder of the price of hope: life is both pain and pleasure, and if the pain is not accepted and dealt with, it will grow and overwhelm the community. Life is a double hook, and both sides are swallowed together or not at all.

When you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too. . . . if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear.