

# ISABELLA VALANCY CRAWFORD

## *The Canoe*

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**E**VEN THE CASUAL READER of the best poetry of Isabella Valancy Crawford can hardly fail to be impressed by its boldness, vigour and originality. In passage after passage, he will meet with an extraordinary energetic imagination which, while obviously neither uneducated nor insensitive to literary influence, has succeeded in creating an art that is as distinctively individual and "Canadian" as anything in our literature. The aim of the present limited study is not so much to praise these obvious virtues of Crawford's best work as it is to suggest, by means of a relatively detailed study of her lyric "The Canoe", that in her finest pieces we have a poetry which is not only vital and distinctive, but also rich in symbolic significance and sophisticated and subtle in technique. James Reaney, in his brilliant pioneering essay on Crawford's poetry<sup>1</sup> has of course outlined a symbolic myth and a "grammar of images" which seem to form the backbone of her work. However, although Reaney has certainly told us a great deal about her art as a whole, I feel that Crawford is a poet of sufficient substance to warrant a closer scrutiny of some individual pieces. It is also only through a relatively close analysis of individual poems that it is really possible to show the virtuosity of Crawford's technique.

A convenient starting point for an analysis of "The Canoe" is the fact that the poem constitutes, both in the viewpoint of its narrator, the canoe, and in her account of her "masters twain", a study in the psychology of the primitive mind. Particularly notable is Crawford's remarkable awareness of the animating and

myth-making proclivities of primitive man. That is, as is evident in some of the most striking similes and metaphors in "The Canoe", the poet is familiar with the tendency of the primitive to see everything in terms of life, and of human life in particular:

Thin, golden nerves of sly light curl'd  
 Round the dun camp, and rose faint zones,  
 Half way round each grim bole knit,  
 Like a shy child that would bedeck  
 With its soft clasp a Brave's red neck;  
  
 Sinuous, red as copper snakes,  
 Sharp-headed serpents, made of light,  
 Glided and hid themselves in night.

Another significant aspect of Crawford's treatment of the primitive mentality is her romantic sense of its primal and direct character. In "The Canoe", as in D. C. Scott's "At Gull Lake: August 1810", the poet evidently finds in the behaviour of the "savage" Indian a sort of psychological apocalypse of the basic forces of human nature. This is particularly evident in Crawford's lyric in the love-song of the two braves, with its frank expression of impulses and emotions which at first appear scarcely less elemental than those of the hounds who dream of "the dead stag stout and lusty":

My masters twain sang songs that wove  
 (As they burnish'd hunting blade and rifle)  
 A golden thread with a cobweb trifle —  
 Loud of the chase, and low of love.  
  
 "O Love, art thou a silver fish?  
 Shy of the line and shy of gaffing,  
 Which we do follow, fierce, yet laughing,  
 Casting at thee the light-winged wish.

Even if "The Canoe" were simply a poetic study in the psychology of uncivilized man, it would still do considerable credit to Crawford's powers of insight and imagination. However, as Reaney has shown, Crawford is not merely a clever poetical dilettante, but an artist with a vision of sufficient dimensions to come to grips with the great questions of human existence. It is therefore reasonable to assume that her remarkable re-creation of the primitive mind in "The Canoe" is not simply an anthropological study, but possesses a wider frame of human reference. One obvious possibility follows from the supposition that Crawford sees in the primitive the direct expression of man's primal psychic impulses. This is that

she is using the mentality of the Indian in essentially the same way as Wordsworth employs that of the peasant: to exemplify or explore in the workings of a simple and uninhibited mind certain basic principles of man's psychic activity which are normally buried, suppressed or modified in the case of the civilized person. In terms of modern psychology, Crawford might be dealing in "The Canoe" with those forces which in the European normally belong to the realm of the subconscious, but which nonetheless exert a pervasive influence upon his life. It would then of course be possible that the external world as it is seen through the myth-making and animating focus of the primitive mind becomes a symbolic projection of the psychological realities with which the poet is dealing.

An analysis of "The Canoe" along the lines just proposed may begin with the love-song of the two braves. This lyric occupies a central position in Crawford's poem, and we may divine that it is intended to stand out as a kind of climax or core, to which the preceding and following lines function essentially as a prologue and epilogue. It is accordingly significant for our line of argument that the song is concerned with a paradox involving one of the fundamental impulses of man's psychic life. The paradox, which under normal circumstances would exist only in the subconscious of civilized man, is that human love in its sexual aspect is also violence, and is destructive as well as creative, death-dealing as well as life-giving:

O Love, art thou a silver fish?  
 Shy of the line and shy of gaffing,  
 Which we do follow, fierce, yet laughing,  
 Casting at thee the light-wing'd wish,  
 . . . . .  
 O Love! art thou a silver deer,  
 Swift thy starr'd feet as wing of swallow,  
 While we with rushing arrows follow;  
 And at last shall we draw near,  
 And over thy velvet neck cast thongs —  
 Woven of roses, of stars, of songs?

The darker aspect of sexuality is expressed in the song of the braves in terms of the pursuits of fishing and hunting. These images of force and slaughter are of course offset in the song by what Reaney would term the "golden daffodil" images of laughter, song, lily, rose, gold, silver and gems.<sup>2</sup> However, the manner in which the song is introduced ironically undercuts the positive implications of these images:

My masters twain sang songs that wove  
 (As they burnish'd hunting blade and rifle)  
 A golden thread with a cobweb trifle —  
 Loud of the chase, and low of love.

Similarly, the predominance of “golden daffodil” symbols in the second stanza of the lyric is implicitly offset by the imagery of violence and death in the line immediately following. In the primitive or sub-conscious context of “The Canoe”, the creative and life-giving aspects of sexuality are thus paradoxically accompanied, and even overshadowed, by a dark lust for destruction and death. In terms of the symbolic scheme outlined by Reaney, “The Canoe” is thus a “black daffodil” poem, in which the chase of love is still essentially the dark line of the rush to annihilation. It is only near the conclusion of Crawford’s poem that we receive symbolic hints that this black line is becoming the “black circle” in which evil is ordered and redeemed.<sup>3</sup>

The dark vision of sexuality in the love-song of the braves is reinforced by the imagery in the passages which precede and follow it. Thus, the almost domestic tenderness of the “crotic” treatment of the canoe with which Crawford’s poems open is ironically undercut by the grim references to the hunting and fishing activities of the braves, which involve numerous images of shooting, stabbing, binding and hanging. We should particularly notice in the lines preceding the love-song the description of a deer, which has been shot, bound and hung from boughs:

My masters twain the Slaughter'd deer  
 Hung on fork'd boughs — with thongs of leather.  
 Bound were his stiff, slim feet together —  
 His eyes like dead stars cold and drear . . .

The psychological paradox just outlined, with its emphasis on the dark aspects of human sexuality, is also reflected in the animating and myth-making images of “The Canoe”, of which there are several striking examples in the lines preceding the love-song of the braves.<sup>4</sup> It will be noted that the relevant similes and metaphors are all images of light. The source of this light is in each case the campfire of the two braves, whose designation as a “camp-soul” indicates that it serves as a symbol of the source and centre of primitive consciousness in the psychic activity of the “savage” mind. In the images under consideration, either the light of this “camp-soul” or what is revealed by it carries sinister implications of malignity. Thus, the extended simile concerning the “faint zones” of light cast by the campfire on the trunks of pine trees (11. 12-20) expresses the frightened

paralysis of human innocence and love in the face of the dark powers of cruelty and violence that reside in man. A similar sense is conveyed by the image in which the firelight becomes a human figure who lays an "anxious" hand on the foam-flecked shoulder of a hanging deer, and peers into his dead eyes. In this strange metaphor, we evidently have a recognition of the consequences of a lust for violence and slaughter in which there is a child-like mixture of fascination and fear. The two images just mentioned thus depict an essentially naïve consciousness suddenly becoming aware of the innate capacities for evil in the human soul. However, in neither of them is the firelight itself seen as something sinister, as it is when it becomes "Thin, golden nerves of sly light", or "Sharp-headed" snakes slithering into the darkness. In both of these latter images there is a suggestion, not of the naïveté which we find elsewhere in "The Canoe", but of the subtlety of the serpent who tempted Eve.

Seen with regard to the traditional value of light as a symbol of goodness, love and life, the above images with their sinister implications apparently involve an ironic reflection of the psychological paradox which Crawford is treating elsewhere in "The Canoe". In connection with "primitive" sexuality, and perhaps the whole of man's fundamental psychic life, creativity is overshadowed by destructiveness, and love by bloodlust and violence. On a symbolic level, the light of the "camp-soul" which represents the psychic life of the primitive is thus really akin to darkness. This paradox of a light which embodies blackness is suggested symbolically by the redness of the firelight in three of the above images. This colour has of course appropriate associations with blood and burning, together with its connotations of violence, lust and death. This "demonic crimson" is in turn probably intended to be contrasted with the silver fish and the silver deer of love which we find in the song of the two braves.

The symbolic pattern which runs through the myth-making and animating imagery of the "prologue" to the love-song is of course carried on into the "epilogue" in the radical simile in which "slaughter'd" fish, reddened by the light of the campfire, are compared with scimitars stained with the blood of "new-dead" wars. However, in the final myth-making image of "The Canoe", there is a reversal of the symbolic values of the images just discussed:

The darkness built its wigwam walls  
Close round the camp, . . .

This metaphor is of course an image of darkness rather than of light, but the darkness in this case is evidently that of the "black circle," in which the line of

evil and destruction has become the whirl from which the golden daffodil will ultimately re-emerge. This positive connotation is implicit in the reference to the weaving of a wigwam wall, which is not only an image of an upward gyration,<sup>5</sup> but also one of creation rather than of destruction. Thus, in symbolic opposition to a light which is really darkness, we have in the last myth-making image in "The Canoe" a darkness from which light and order are beginning to be born, just as they are in the first stages of the Creation in Genesis. The nascence of light from blackness, and of cosmos from chaos, is likewise suggested in the last two lines of the poem by the white shapes, albeit still "thin-woven and uncertain", which press at the "curtain" of shadows. In psychological terms, we presumably see in the closing images of "The Canoe" a representation of the first stages of a transformation of the dark side of man's nature into sweetness and light".

"The Canoe" thus evidently constitutes a symbolic exploration of the human psyche. However, there is another of Crawford's poems which indicates that "The Canoe" has a further dimension of symbolic significance. This is the "Epilogue" to "Gisli, the Chieftain", in which the poet evidently conceives of the universe as a whole in terms of the same inextricable union of good and evil, creation and destruction, darkness and light, which we see in the primitive mind in "The Canoe."<sup>6</sup> This suggests that for Crawford the psychological paradox explored in "The Canoe" is really a microcosmic reflection of a metaphysical situation, and that she therefore sees a definite analogy between the constitution of man's psyche and that of the cosmos which he inhabits. This correspondence would follow as a consequence from the origin of both man and nature in the same great cosmic flower.

Whatever its basis, such an "analogical" vision would have important implications with regard to the symbolic value of Crawford's poetry. The perception of a radical correspondence between the internal and external worlds would make it possible for her to write a "double-barrelled" poetry, in which metaphysical and psychological questions were treated in one and the same set of symbolic images. The action of a poem like "The Canoe" could in this case take place within the human mind, and yet at the same time extend to embrace the whole of the cosmos. Crawford's poetry would thus involve a double apocalypse, in which the depths of man's mind and those of the universe surrounding him were simultaneously revealed.

These presumptions about the nature of Crawford's poetry are supported in the case of "The Canoe" by the way in which certain of the images in the poem override the logical distinction between man and the world which he inhabits.

Thus, we have the similes and metaphors in which external phenomena are represented in anthropomorphic terms, together with those of the song of the braves in which human love becomes a fish and a deer, and a wish is represented as "light-wing'd". Such imagery of course implies that for Crawford man's psyche and the external world are in some manner analogous, and therefore imaginatively interchangeable. The same implication is also conveyed, although less directly, by the images in "The Canoe" which confound the extensions of man's personality in the world of art with the "untouched" realm of nature. The poet's representation of fire-lit fishes as swords and scimitars, and the play of shadows around the camp as the weaving of wigwam walls, have already been noted. Such representation of the outside world in human terms, and vice versa, point towards a poetry in which a close correspondence is seen between man's inner life and the external universe, and which could therefore deal simultaneously with both. Thus, the outlook of the primitive in "The Canoe" may very well involve not only a psychological projection, but also a metaphysical vision. It would then represent an insight into an external world which displays the same paradoxical union of good and evil, death and life, light and darkness which we have in the depths of man's mind.

If "The Canoe" really does function symbolically on two levels, what would be the significance of its dual revelation in terms of the frame of reference provided by Crawford's overall vision of man and the universe? How could the double apocalypse of the poem fit into the Biblical pattern of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Apocalypse which Reaney sees as the backbone of Crawford's poetic system?<sup>7</sup> To put a further question which is closely related to the first two, what message could "The Canoe" be meant to convey to the civilized European who is the poet's intended audience? On the psychological level, we have already indicated that the primitive outlook of "The Canoe" is intended to illustrate a sinister paradox in the fundamentals of human psychology, which would in turn be of basic importance for civilized man, even if in his case it were suppressed or buried below the level of his normal consciousness. In terms of the Biblical schema which Reaney sees as providing the "bigger subjects" of poetry, this inseparable union of creativity and destructiveness, good and evil, in man's basic mental activities may be seen as the psychological aspect of his fallen state, with its frightening ramifications of his life. For Crawford, this fallen condition is presumably shared by the savage and the civilized man alike. In the case of the European at least, its negative side may be repressed or sublimated through the censorship of morality, but this control is at best imperfect, and for Crawford it

will never bring humanity back to heaven. The good and evil, creation and destruction, which are so intimately linked in the depth of the human psyche are in fact complementary aspects of the "golden daffodil" unity which is man's spiritual goal, and both are necessary for its attainment. What is needed is not for man to attempt to suppress the evil side of his fallen nature, but rather to organize and transform it by means of his powers of creativity and love. In order for him to do so, it is necessary for him to plunge into its darkness, as Dante descends into the Inferno on his way to God.<sup>8</sup> Only by so doing will man's nature finally be redeemed, and return to its unfallen unity. The Indian braves of "The Canoe" may be seen as pointing out this dark journey which must be taken by all men, including the European, in order to achieve redemption. The emphasis in "The Canoe" falls upon the negative aspect of this process although, as we have seen, there is a symbolic suggestion at the end of the poem of the ordering and transmuting of the evil in man.

The significance of "The Canoe" on a metaphysical level can be best approached by a consideration of the wilderness landscape of the poem as it is seen by the primitive mind. In all probability, the forest whose trees become grim warriors in the light of the "camp-soul" represents for Crawford what Blake terms "Eututhon Benython": the dark wood into which the Garden of Eden has degenerated as a consequence of the Fall.<sup>9</sup> Nature, instead of being subordinate to man as it was in the prelapsarian world, is now an independent enormity which surrounds humanity and threatens to overwhelm it. Like the evil within his soul, this menacing Leviathan must be redeemed through a process of organization and re-creation. As Reaney points out in connection with "Malcolm's Katie", Crawford sees the task of the European in the New World as being the redemption of the dark wood by converting it into a garden once again.<sup>10</sup> However, in order to "save" the wilderness, he must first plunge into it like the Indian braves of "The Canoe", and temporarily experience the terrors of its darkness. This preliminary step in the process of redeeming nature is of course analogous to the psychological plunge into his own fallen soul which is an essential part of man's return to the golden daffodil. In fact, Crawford undoubtedly sees the two processes as being inseparably related in actual practise. The settling of a country like Canada would involve for her a simultaneous redemption of both the outer and inner worlds. In "The Canoe", Crawford emphasizes the essential element of evil and terror which is involved in this re-creative process, with only suggestions towards the end of the poem of the rebirth of light and order from darkness and chaos.



In the course of this analysis, it has been indicated that the poet's "myth" and imagery have in "The Canoe" both a psychological and a metaphysical reference, exploring simultaneously the spiritual secrets of man's mind and those of the universe. This symbolic richness is accompanied in "The Canoe" by a subtle sense of paradox and a skilful use of irony which make the poem seem surprisingly modern, and which might not be expected from an artist as thoroughly romantic as is Crawford. These merits of "The Canoe" should serve to indicate that at her best the poet deserves neither the apologetic tone which Reaney sometimes adopts towards her,<sup>11</sup> nor yet damnation with faint praises.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See James Reaney, "Isabella Valancy Crawford," in *Our Living Tradition*, ed. Robert L. McDougall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957).
- <sup>2</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-279.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.
- <sup>4</sup> "The Canoe," I I. 12-20, 24-26 and 31-38.
- <sup>5</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 277-278.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-280.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.
- <sup>9</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 380.
- <sup>10</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-287.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.