

Theme and Image in Norman Duncan's "A Beat t' Harbour"

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IT WAS A FORTUNATE occurrence for Newfoundland literature that the Canadian author Norman Duncan travelled from New York City to Notre Dame Bay in the summer of 1900. Throughout that summer and the two which followed, Duncan observed outport life in northern Newfoundland and made use of those observations in his short story collection, *The Way of the Sea* (1903). From story to story he aims at creating a mood of hardship and danger as his characters struggle to survive in their hostile setting. One of these stories, "A Beat t' Harbour," is a psychological study of Dannie Crew, a man born into this environment but handicapped by his particular sensibility. The story is worth a close study, partly because it illustrates what can be achieved when an accomplished writer is inspired by the romance and adventure of his material, and partly because Duncan has preserved the spirit of a way of life which might otherwise have vanished without being recorded. The background and action of the story are formed by images which repeat themselves into patterns so that they come to define various themes. These themes become interrelated as the tale progresses until they ultimately provide the unity of impression that marks a good short story.

The dominating background image is the gale. This repeated image reinforces the theme of constant danger as a primal fact in the lives of men who, equipped only with small sailing boats, depend on the sea for their livelihood. The idea is suggested in the opening lines of the story, as the gale whips up the sea during Dannie's birth:

It was a great gale — a wild, wet gale from the nor'east, grey by day and driving black by night: noisy all the while with breaking water and the swish and moan of winds rushing in from the sea. (259)

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A couple of pages further in the story we see Dannie as a child, safe in the comfort of the family fireside; but outside "another gale" rages. The gale image, constantly repeated throughout the story, establishes an impression in the reader's mind of persistent danger from natural forces which challenge human strength and will. It is an inescapable fact of Dannie's life; it was there before he was born and it is present in the final scene after he is lost at sea:

It was late in the fall of the year: a wild, wet gale from the nor'east was blowing; it flung spray against the black window-panes, and ran howling past to the wilderness. (304)

In the scale of things the gale has an eternal, dangerous and malignant quality, dwarfing men and constantly threatening their lives.

Parallel to the theme of danger, an image pattern develops illustrating Dannie's personality, certain traits of which he shares with his father, Thomas Crew. During Dannie's birth his father "fell into a play with words, as his habit was." Thomas personifies the wind as the hand of God, creating in his imagination an entity with a conscious will and purpose of its own. He addresses this entity directly as if asking it for mercy when he implores, "Hold Thou me not back from the shelter o'harbour, lest the water o' the sea get me!" (260) As a boy Dannie plays similar word games, encouraged by his father. He attributes human and animal characteristics to the gale. He pictures the wind as a pack of hounds preying on schooners; he likens its sounds to those of an old man sighing and moaning as he coughs up blood. The sound of the breakers stirred up by the gale he imagines to be the sound of clods falling on the old man's coffin. Unfortunately, the imaginative boy's injection of human and animal qualities into the gale and the sea not only gives the elements an association with sickness and death but also attributes to them a will and malignant purpose of their own, opposing the strength and will of the seaman. The imagery of fear develops from this:

In the silence, a furious blast of the gale shook the house and went screaming past; and as it went it whipped the black window-panes with spray from the breakers. For Dannie Crew, the noises of the night had now a clearer meaning — the sighs of the sick and the groans of the dying; so he shivered, for he was afraid. (266)

An active imagination such as Dannie's possesses the faculty of acute visual imagery, picturing not only what has happened, but also what might happen. Internally, he dramatizes the human struggle against the elements and, bearing in mind the irresistible strength and malignant will of the gale and sea, imagines too vividly the possibility of his own defeat and death.

It is human nature to avoid perceived danger. Images of safety convey Dannie's desire to be secure from the danger of the gale. The warmth and security of his family home, the ticking of the clock, and the clicking of his mother's knitting needles are introduced as images of regularity and stability, countering but not eliminating the threatening sounds of the gale blowing outside:

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Tick, tock! click, click, click! and the snoring blaze! But the far-off moan and the hissing under the window and the choking cough could not altogether be shut out from the quiet tick, tock! of the little clock. Every blast of the gale that flung spray against the window gave Dannie Crew a new fright. (262)

Fear is a fundamental taboo in a primitive society whose essential daily work involves great physical risk. Dannie is born into a group where it is an ethical obligation to suppress fear of the sea. Intuitively aware of this obligation even as a boy, he tries to deny this fear to his father by insisting that he is not afraid to sleep overnight "on Flat Rock" during a storm. His courage is obviously false:

"I isn't afeared," Dannie boasted. "I isn't afeared o' the hands o' the sea," the voice falling. "I isn't afeared o' the spirits that ride the winds o' night," with a wide-eyed glance about. Then, in a whimper, "I isn't afeared o' anything." (267)

Thomas Crew recognizes Dannie's psychological conflict when he points out that "'tis not wise t' think too much about words," and that "fancies make cowards o' men." He indicates the proper, pragmatic attitude to the gale and the stormy sea when he says that "the wind ... is but the wind" and "the sea is but water" (270-1). Thomas regrets that he has encouraged his son to develop his imagination; he himself has struggled all his life with a similar handicap. He tries to warn his son that, in the constant danger of the Newfoundland environment, fear is the greatest danger since it impairs judgement. A steady realism and sense of proportion in times of peril and hardship may be all that saves the seaman from disaster.

The ticking clock also functions as an image suggesting the inexorable passage of time. Dannie cannot remain young forever; inevitably he will have to earn his living, and as an outport Newfoundlander this means going to sea. This is recognized in the first scene of part III of the story, where young Dannie is fishing with his father. He expresses his wish to stay ashore but recognizes that his talents as a song-writer and his desire to make boots are not acceptable as alternative means of earning his living. Despite Dannie's wish to the contrary, it is clear (as his father says) that in Ragged Harbour "a man must cotch his own fish an' make his own boots" (276).

At this point Dannie announces his decision to sail on a trading schooner and his ambition to become a skipper. His father thrills with pride and relief, hoping that this is an announcement of manly purpose. Naming his son Daniel had indicated his hope that the boy would be courageous at sea, but he has also expressed a fear that Dannie's temperament will lead eventually to cowardice. Dannie, however, has already anticipated this danger by persuading himself that an extra measure of skill as a seaman will compensate for his fear. A theme of hiding his fear develops. His ambition is a form of escapism which over-compensates for his fear. It reflects back to his boyhood boast of being willing to sleep out in the gale to deny his fear. Ironically, in this scene in which he

announces his plan to be “a great man — so great as they is,” the sea is calm; and after the day's fishing they catch “the evening breeze back to the harbour tickle” (277). It is, however, merely the calm before the storm of Dannie's adult life. In the rest of the story the already established theme of danger, and the conflict between seeking safety or facing this danger squarely, work their way towards the inevitable conclusion.

The fact that Dannie becomes skipper of the *Early Bird* suggests that he has, in fact, compensated for his fear by making himself a competent sailor. Dannie is not simply a coward; he is a man too sensitive for his brutal environment who wrestles with his internal conflicts. He constantly attempts to keep himself up to the mark psychologically by reminding himself, “I'm Skipper Dan Crew!” (279) After he becomes skipper the image patterns continue. The imagery of the gale seems to increase in intensity since Dannie is now in real physical danger. The theme, established early in the story, of Dannie's imaginative sensibility is developed by contrasting him with the realism of other sailors like Tommy Tutt and Sam Budgell.

Tommy Tutt, the clerk on the schooner, gives his perception of Dannie's behaviour at sea. Skipper Dan successfully brings his ship home despite the stormy weather, but his state of mind is obvious to the whole crew. Dannie's overriding obsession is to get to harbour (an image of safety, echoing similar images encountered previously). Tutt functions as a seaman with the indispensable quality in a crisis of not dwelling unnecessarily on factors beyond his control; he fears the sea but is still able to sleep at night since he lacks the imagination to look into the future and visualize himself drowning. He is a realist who sees the sea for what it is, a physical presence full of danger, but not an agent with a will of its own that deliberately seeks his life. Such stoicism is a necessary quality for survival. Dannie's urge to personify the sea disturbs Tutt, as he tells Luke Dart, the schooner's owner:

“ ‘Reef?’ says he t' me. ‘Not with this gale chasin' us! I'm wantin' t' make harbour.’ But I'm thinkin' 'twould be better an he didn't look so much t' the wind an' the sea. Lord, zur, he calls the wind the Black Pack; an' says he, once, zur, ‘ 'Tis cold in the Sea's arms.’ ” Tutt looked over his shoulder to make sure that the door was closed. “I'm thinkin',” he added, “that he's —” (280)

Tutt is unwilling to utter the taboo word: afraid.

In part v we see Dannie's behaviour for ourselves as the schooner beats in to harbour through a gale. The ever-present gale image establishes the background; the themes of Dannie's fear and his imaginative visualization of the sea as a will opposing his own in open conflict are present. Tutt, as stated, is a man without imagination, one who knows the sea for what it is. He fears the storm but is willing to ride out the gale stoically since in his judgement as a sailor this is a safer course than to risk capsizing the boat by beating in, but Dannie is obsessed with getting out of the gale into the safety of the harbour.

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Over and over again he states, "I'm wantin' t' make harbour" (290). Danger cannot be avoided, but Dannie's fear and desire for safety affect his judgement and force him into a more dangerous situation than he is already in.

On this occasion Dannie makes harbour safely, but the subsequent scene in the forecabin of the schooner constitutes a form of epiphany for Dannie as he learns that this safety is only temporary. Old Sam Budgell brings him to a sense of reality for the first time in the story, when he comments on Dannie's belief that he has saved his life by getting out of the gale. Sam points out, "'Tis but one gale." With malicious intent, he passes judgement on Dannie's perceived cowardice in a speech which looks ahead to the climactic point of the story:

"Ay; but one. You're safe from *it*, but 'tis not the last you'll have t' weather. You're in harbour now, lad, but you'll have t' put t' sea the morrow. 'Tis not the last gale that'll blow. They's all the fall gales o' this year, an' all the the spring gales o' the next, an' all the fall gales t' follow; they's the spring gales o' the year after, an' the fall gales o' that season — ay' the fall an' spring gales o' all the years —" (295-6)

Sam makes Dannie see that the safety of harbour is temporary; the gale and its dangers are constant facts of life for a Newfoundland seaman. Sam drives his message home when he declares, "They's noa such thing as harbour!" (296) For the first time Dannie admits to himself that life, by its intrinsic nature, cannot be completely safe. Being alive means being at risk for each individual, and life demands dignity and a calm steady realism; otherwise it will destroy the individual. Ironically, the only safe harbour from the dangers of life is death. Dannie realizes that fear is a constant and unavoidable factor in his life. As long as he remains alive and at sea, he is going to be in danger — not merely of losing his life, but of disgracing himself as a coward.

However, when Dannie gives up his life in the wreck of the *Early Bird*, he dies a brave man, sacrificing his life to save others. It appears that "Skipper Dan kept true to his duty" (302) and functions as a good captain, decisive and deliberate in a crisis:

Skipper Dan was a man — ready, sure, masterful: a new ring to his voice, a new light in his eye. There was a word or two of precise direction — no question, now, no whine of fear: then the skipper ran aft to the wheel. (301)

But Dannie's words as he steers the ship towards the rocks (at a point from which his men may clamber ashore from the rigging) betray his real feelings. The crew hears him singing about "a heart that faints" and about "some wonderful fine harbour he's bound to." His soul "seeketh its rest." His last words indicate, not only relief that he will soon be out of danger, but also fear of the shame should he fail in his duty:

"Hold Thou me not now back from the long shelter o' that place, O Lard," was the last word they heard from the man at the wheel, "lest the waters o' great shame cover me!" (302)

Duncan soon intrudes his own narrative voice to tell us that Skipper Dan is now in harbour. He has left the "Toil and strife and the haunting fear" of life and has

found his true refuge in death (303-4). The other sailors save themselves; they struggle on with life despite its dangers. Dannie, however, shows the relief which comes only when the weight of a struggle is lifted from his shoulders. In effect he has given up, partly to avoid further anguish, and partly to save himself and his family from the disgrace which he feels will inevitably come upon him.

The final scene in the story is a summary in which many of the themes are tied together and an ultimate cause suggested. The clock still marks the passage of time; life goes on despite the death of one individual. Dannie’s mother, however, has stopped knitting:

In a lull of the gale, tick, tock! tick, tock! tick, tock! went the little clock; but the busy click, click, click! of the knitting-needles had ceased. (304-5)

The clicking needles, once an image of regularity and security in Dannie’s boyhood, now suggest not only his death but also the theme of his fate. The Fates in Greek mythology spin the web of life, giving to man at his birth both evil and good; they assign him his destiny and cut the thread at his death. In this story the idea of fate may be interpreted as the elements of a man’s life over which he has relatively little control. The unfortunate combination of Dannie’s temperament and the circumstances into which he is born seems predestined to bring him to an inevitable disaster as if by the hand of some unsympathetic god. Indeed, in the opening paragraph of the story we are told that “a madcap gust clanged the church bell three times” on the third day of the ferocious gale blowing at the time of Dannie’s birth; and this is taken as sign that the “Lord God Almighty” intends some disaster. The idea is developed in the story by Thomas Crew’s frequent premonitions that Dannie is marked for failure. In the closing scene Thomas is relieved that Dannie died with at least the appearance of being a brave man, although he is puzzled not only as to why this has happened but by the ways of the world in general:

“He died brave,” Skipper Thomas whispered. “They says he did!”

“Ay,” [Janet Crew] answered. “He was a brave lad — was our Dannie.”

“ ’Twas kind o’ the Lord t’ take un — that way. They’s something wrong with the world,” the old man added, running his hand through his hair, “but I isn’t sure just what.”

(305)

What is ultimately wrong with the world is suggested by part of the earlier conversation in which Thomas tells his son that “a man must cotch his own fish an’ make his own boots.” It is not the way of the world to give a living to a man for playing with words or writing songs; Dannie in fact thinks that only he and his father are aware of “the fun o’ playin’ with words.” He thinks they are the only two people “o’ all the world” who do so. What is “wrong with the world” of Ragged Harbour is that it is *not* “all the world”; it is culturally as well as geographically an isolated corner of the globe. The characters in the story do not realise that there are places in the world where song-writing, boot-making,

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and artistic creativity are viable alternatives as a means of earning a living. It seems a cruel fate that Dannie was born in his particular time and place.

In its surface detail "A Beat t' Harbour" is capable of appealing to the casual reader as a straight adventure yarn. Yet this might be considered an aspect of the story's success, since Duncan is documenting a brutal, physical existence where men succeed or fail in a muscular contest with weather and sea. The authentic-sounding dialogue, with its picturesque idiom and expressive simplicity, adds to the realistic impression of a world where actions have more immediate and relevant consequences than ideas. As a reflective and educated observer of this society, however, Duncan is, on a deeper level, concerned primarily with the human element, the pattern of thoughts, feelings, and values by which men interact with each other and with the adversity of the environment. This is a more complex subject, requiring a more complex and carefully constructed work than a straightforward action story.

By carefully dissecting the story into its component images, examining the image patterns, discovering the themes, and then reassembling these into the original framework, the reader becomes aware of the artistry of Duncan. The background of danger, Dannie's imaginative sensibility, the ethical requirements of his social background, his fear, and his internal losing battle with this fear are the principal themes of the story. Add to these the themes of the passage of time and the idea of a man's fate being beyond his control, and it becomes apparent that Duncan has successfully given the impression of compressing the major facts of one man's entire life into a few pages. Duncan's ability to organize his images into a complex and carefully constructed unity, and to present them as simple scenes from life, might lead one to compare him favourably with a master of the short story form such as Chekhov.

But whereas a writer like Chekhov was restrained enough to allow his characters to speak for themselves, Duncan has a habit of intruding his own voice into the narrative, a voice whose extravagant tone clashes with the rest of the story's style. An example may be taken from the interlude of part II. Describing Dannie's youthful dreaminess, Duncan says:

By the magic of sunshine and blue day, lads may flit away on silver wings, to wander, as they will in the places of quiet delight which lie beyond the curtain of mist. But, O little Dreamer of the Wistful Heart, the dream is of the moment! The silver wings are given, and taken away; the quiet gardens and the palace vanish, as at the waving of a wand. (273)

It might be argued that Dannie is in fact a dreamer and can think in such terms; but the words are unmistakably Duncan's, not those of an unschooled outport song-writer. Language like this tends to give the story a melodramatic touch. The last paragraph of part VI has a similar tone. A poetic voice that is obviously Duncan's describes the peace of death:

Sheltered waters — morning mists aglow — tinkling bells on the hills — blue noon and the drowsy shade — sinking sun and the glory of the cloud of gold — hymns wandering in the

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twilight shadows — night and the sleep o' night! My God, where's Skipper Dan? In harbour! (304)

If one thing can be said in favour of such verbal excess, it is that it gives Duncan's work a personal flavour all its own, reflecting his own romantic interpretation of the adventurous and exotic elements in Newfoundland life. At the same time Duncan authentically expresses the realities of the hardship, suffering, and danger which were an integral part of this life. It may be that his ultimate intention in *The Way of the Sea* was to raise the daily life of the ordinary Newfoundlander to mythic proportions, and in this he certainly succeeded. In the final analysis this story, along with the others in the collection, is a great success and a pleasant surprise to any reader who opens Duncan's book for the first time.

Reference

Duncan, Norman. *The Way of the Sea* (1903). Rpr. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1982.