

**THE BLOOD HARDENED  
 AND THE BLOOD RUNNING:  
 THE CHARACTER OF ORVILLE IN  
**BLOOD TIES****

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A cursory reading of David Adams Richards' *Blood Ties* will leave the reader with two major impressions: first, that the males in the novel destroy the community with their drinking, their inability to communicate, and their attempts to conform to a standard of male behavior that produces, in fact demands, emotional sterility; and the second, that the women are left to pick up the pieces as best they can, or leave. Even the "successful" marriages presented in the novel leave much to be desired, by most people's standards. A closer reading of this highly poetic novel reveals that the only hope for the community (as it is presented) lies with Orville. There is hope in his discovery of himself, of his place, and of his true feelings, and most of all, in his discovery of the importance of blood ties, which is really what the novel is about.

In Orville's character the thematic conflicts of *Blood Ties* are most sharply delineated. His body and soul become the battlegrounds for antithetical forces of "maleness" and "femaleness," love and sex, true religion and organized religion, temporal isolation and continuation, and, ultimately, good and evil. Other characters may embody certain themes more fully but none approach the symbolic scope of Orville's character. It is significant that the novel begins and ends with memorable descriptions of Orville. In the beginning we see him walking alone from church, isolated from his family who are riding in a car. On the final page we see him crying after standing up for his sister and trying to throw John out of his home. Orville functions in the novel as what one might call a symbolic battleground. The forces which struggle for his soul are the male forces represented by Mallory, John, Cecil and Father Lacey, and the female forces represented by Irene, Leah and Cathy.

The character Mallory, one can safely say, represents evil in the broadest sense of the word. To sum him up by calling him the devil,

in the traditional sense, would not be inaccurate. He is strongly associated with disfigurement, fire, and blackness. As Lorne says: "He was in the fire . . . The fire coming up around him that way doing nothing to him. When Lorne saw him black smoke came from his mouth."<sup>1</sup> The spirit of Mallory is everywhere and nowhere, lurking unseen, but felt, throughout the novel. He is universal, living in Toronto and Hong Kong as well as Newcastle. His spirit can never be escaped.

The character most closely associated, in fact fused, with Mallory, is John, the local version of the embodiment of complete evil. That Mallory might take a different form in Toronto or Hong Kong is suggested when Orville tells Kathy that Mallory will show up in these places. There is something of John in everyone, or vice versa, as Cathy notes: "For an instant it was as if she could see every human in his mouth and jaw, every person she knew in the small dark beard that was starting here and there" (p. 250). John is in his natural environment in fire or in underwater blackness. John's dreams (in Chapter seven of part three) describe his character and its effect. In his recurring dream, he sees himself witnessing a great fire:

from atop the bank, all the people running and screaming turned to reptiles and slithered into the water, which was boiling now because of the heat of the fire. And all this was natural and not strange as he watched it . . . There was a smoke choke-black when he surfaced. (p. 202)

The underwater blackness of the dream parallels the dive he made off the pier to impress Cathy (p. 66). His other dream clearly comes down to John's refusing to help John save John from suffocation. John is, however, more than simply self-destructive; he is human poison. Given the chance, he would do to anyone what he does to himself in playing the game with the cigarette:

"Ya always lose the fuckin' game" he said.  
 "What game?"  
 "With the cigarette, Christ." (p. 276)

(The game involves, as it is seen in Richards' *The Coming of Winter*, trying to burn a hole through a ten dollar bill placed on one's hand. It is indeed a game which cannot be won.)

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<sup>1</sup>David Adams Richards, *Blood Ties* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1976), 72, 76. Further references will be to this edition.

John is the embodiment of the Mallory's spirit toward women and sex. He feels nothing for Cathy, thinking perhaps that she can, like him, feel only pain. He is only happy when he is scaring or hurting her. Even making love, which should be the most complete expression of all that is good between a man and a woman, he tinges with the threat of disease. He manages to stain Cathy's life with the threat of this disease.

John can be described then as the epitome of all that is evil in the male: the drinking and cursing, the contempt for women, the general sterility of emotion. These are the dangers of the spirit of Mallory pushed to the limit. Orville's refutation of John and all that he stands for is the novel's greatest note of optimism.

Cecil is a casualty of the spirit that Orville overcomes. His life's disintegration is tragic because he was, at one time, a likeable enough character. As Cathy says,

"He used to be real nice . . . He looked real good before the stove blew up that time and when he was married he looked real good. He just got like this after the stove blew." (p. 54)

The stove did all at once what this decaying spirit did over the years. The scars on his body are correlatives to the scars on his soul and the physical manifestation of Mallory's evil spirit (fire) is also analogous to the blackening of Cecil's soul.

The scars on his soul are all the years of drinking, fighting and cursing which have made him incapable of any other response to any situation. This code of behavior may have worked when he was beating up Niles, or courting Leah, but when he must communicate real feelings, Cecil is lost. When Leah tells him she is leaving, he can think only that "hurting her was the answer to what she was doing . . . hurting her that way was the answer . . ." (p. 136). When he is in the car accident, the feeling that hits him is:

something comic, he felt at first like laughing and slapping Shelby and saying "Shelby, ya son of a whore; Shelby let's get out and beat that bastard." (p.239)

Cecil and Leah's marriage cannot escape the decay; even when he works, he becomes black in the underground mine; even when she sings, it is of a "ring of fire" or getting "married in a fever."

Both Orville and Cecil have physical deformities which represent conditions of their psyches. Orville's bad eye represents his "true" self, the religious and loving part of his soul that he must hide, as he hides his bad eye from a society that will allow neither to be exposed. Considering what Cecil becomes, the following lines have a wide thematic significance:

I'll take him Irene, cause I'm goin' so I'll take him: and then he felt bad and didn't want to go with Cecil . . . and he didn't want to fish any more and the water was grey-black and rough . . . .  
(p. 159)

The water is an image of John. Orville here calls out to what saves him, to the natural goodness that is in him and to his blood ties: "Oh God help me, oh Mom help me" (p.159). Orville is such an unhappy character because the things he feels and values are exactly what the males of the community regard as weak and unmanly.

The second major evil force against which Orville must struggle is the Church, which, through Father Lacey, does much more to repress and pervert religious feeling than it does to enhance it. Even the actual building and its construction point to an essential lack of true religious purpose:

The church stood with the cross pointing to the sky and nothing . . . The sun was glinting upon the church, making its glare white, making the dark stained-glass windows shine in an unintelligible pattern. They said the foundation was hard stone and it took a year to dig under it deep enough to lay it out, where the charred bones of Indians were found, that the workers threw up with the stone and dirt and shale, the bone no more a part of anything but the dirt itself . . . And the priest then . . . blessed the workers as they dug, yet blessed nothing of the bone because the bone was more shale and dirt . . . "Yet it was their sorta church before it was our church" Leah said. (p.84)

The contrast between the nothingness of the sky and the ignored profundity of the sacred earth is important, as is Leah's observation concerning the precedence of the Indian "sorta church."

Leah is Orville's female counterpart in the novel's religious development. Her encounter with the nun strongly parallels Orville's run-in with Father Lacey. Each is slapped by the religious person and each is viewed condescendingly, by Betty and Lorne respectively (Lorne p.192, Betty p.265). It is Leah who realizes the fine line

between love and hate, the line Orville struggles to cross in the novel (p. 232). Leah's wish for silence and stillness (p. 223) is much like Orville's pursuit of "a pocket of emptiness" (p. 70). Though the two characters have little interaction in the course of the novel, they are linked. The major difference between them is that Leah is driven away by Cecil and Orville stays to drive John away.

A link between the Church and the male role-playing is apparent in one description of the death of Josiah Murphy during the building's construction. His "tough-guy" reaction to his own death is a good example of the symbolic, nearly emblematic style of description Richards is fond of:

All the workers were looking at him and he was in his own blood. He said "Christ I'm alright" and all the workers knew he was dead but were looking at him in his own blood that kept flowing from him, his face shattered in. "Christ, I'm alright." Yet everyone knew he was dead. (p. 166)

If a character *could* act like this in death, it is how John or Cecil would act.

The priest, Father Lacey, is even more obviously evil than the building. Apart from the disgusting physical picture that is painted of him, his actions are as petty, unforgiving and as un-Christian as they can be. His true nature is revealed when he tries to swallow the Host: "his old mouth chewing on something white, and trying to stop from choking" (p. 159). When Father Lacey finds that Orville has been taking candles he hits him and insults his parents. Orville, "surprised" at his own inner resources, defends his parents, especially Irene. Irene is established in Chapter One of the novel as a truly Christian figure in her devotion to Annie. She cares for her mother and sits with her, asking, and getting, nothing in return. At this point then, Orville is defending simultaneously his religious feelings and his blood ties.

Orville can feel the natural goodness in himself only when the forces of organized religion and "macho" society are left behind. He feels it when he is alone in the church vestry: "the warmth and smell of wood and closeted space, a certain perfection of stillness that he experienced only here" (p. 157). He feels it most, however, when he is alone in the woods. He goes there to find "a pocket of emptiness," looking for a chance to get in touch with himself. (This

is also why he stays in his room with the church candles). It is the true, natural God that eventually comes to Orville as he walks in the woods:

Now in the evening something strange filled him. As he walked in the woods, the branches drooping below the black sky [walking on the same ground which holds the Indians' sacred bones, below the same black, empty sky the church's cross pointed to], it was as if he wished to be part of it forever. It was as if all this was the church wax he had used in his room one dark night to get that feeling of removal that he could never explain to anyone. (p. 245)

The feeling of being part of infinity, of wanting to be "part of it forever," is the essential value of blood ties. Among the women characters, with whom Orville eventually sides, this familial continuity is represented by the white mole above the eyelids of Annie, Irene and Leah, whose actions throughout the book (especially Irene's) point to their familial commitments.

As a force antithetical to the spirit of Mallory in the novel, Orville is also John's opposite. Richards carefully contrasts Cathy's relationship to each of them. At the picnic, Cathy's attention is symbolically divided between the two and, though John prevails this time, she "kept glancing up for Orville" (p. 88). This incident is sandwiched between events which clearly draw the lines between Orville and John. Soon after Mallory's first appearance, when Cathy searches for Orville in the woods, he hides and frightens her to tears. (The males frighten the females to hide their own insecurity and to prove how "strong" they are). Though she knows it is Orville, she is terrified by the spirit she sees (Mallory) manifested in him:

When he swung out of the air she knew it was him, as if instinct told her before fear who it was. Yet it was as if something went blind inside her and she had to grab at him and start screaming. (p. 77)

We find later, however, that Orville wanted at the time "to hold her—to stop her from shaking but then he hated her for shaking and had to turn away" (p. 113). To reveal his love for Cathy would be a violation of the local code of "manliness." John, on the other hand, scares Cathy because it makes him feel good: "He kept laughing because she was scared, because he knew he was making her frightened. It was something inside him" (p. 97).

Orville can see from the beginning that John pursues Cathy for selfish ends, and it hurts him to think that Cathy could end up like Leah, married to a self-destructive, bitter man:

he could punch her because he thought: her hair at her neck and her blouse tucked that way because she thought that John came down here only when he was drunk and she didn't know . . . (p. 109)

Orville senses all along what it takes Cathy months of abuse and, finally, the threat of a "staining" disease to realize.

The incident with the snared rabbits also illustrates the ambivalence of Orville's feelings. There are elements of both the Mallory spirit, and of kindness, in Orville. He wants to let the rabbit go, he thinks he is going to let the rabbit go, then "the knife shoved in its throat as if through no movement of his own, not the power of his own hands" (p. 111). The conflict between the life-giving Orville and the killing Orville parallels the conflicts between holding the scaring Cathy, between the sacred earth and the dark sky, between "the blood hardened and the blood running" (p. 110).

When Orville becomes lost in the fields at night, images of his religious faith and his love for his family are fused. Orville's stream of consciousness reveals images of home, Mallory, comfort and security, and his cruelty to Cathy, and these are punctuated by pleas to, and castigations of, Christ. After making nine references to Christ (in the final two pages of Chapter One of Part Two), Orville escapes the darkness and finds that he had circled "into the wrong field." (p. 119) He seems to be calling to Christ to help purge him of those impulses he feels which destroy the love he has in him. (He is not just swearing; the book provides many other words he could have used.) Had organized religion provided an encouraging outlet for these feelings, Orville would have had a strong ally in his battle with the spirit of Mallory, instead of another manifestation of it to transcend.

His subsequent actions give us reason to view this coming in from the cold and dark as symbolic. His moment of epiphany occurs after he is teased by Rance, "in a black voice laughing into the black air":

Then in an instant he realized Rance knew nothing and that he knew everything—about the water and the spring air . . . That Rance didn't understand that whatever he did was done by that

moving forever in hotel rooms ["infinity" as defined earlier in the novel]. And yet he knew it himself—when the smoke curled in the room and the rain beat on the window and no one, only Cathy perhaps, was inside. (p. 245)

It is in this spirit that Orville translates his insights into positive action, driving John, the embodiment of the spirit of Mallory, out of his home, and out of his sister's life. His love for Cathy, his home and his blood ties, is affirmed. That that "side" of Orville's personality has won the battle is illustrated not only by his actions, but also by the tears he sheds at the novel's end. In revealing his soul by standing up for his sister and by crying, Orville is, in effect, removing the black patch and allowing his vulnerability to be seen.

It is clear that Orville has a sensitive personality in the tradition of such Bildungsroman protagonists as David Canaan, Eugene Grant, and "G" of *In the Castle of My Skin*. Unlike these characters, however, Orville has no verbal dexterity or inclination towards learning (in the academic sense). He must express his "goodness" through actions. Orville's circumstances point to his remaining in the community, where one hopes he can pass on to others what he has learned: the value of a loving heart and a home of strong blood ties. With men like Orville in the community, women like Cathy would be much less likely to be forced out.

The character of Orville is a subtly developed force of bright optimism against an overwhelmingly bleak background. The power with which the forces that oppose him are developed point to Richards' realization that these forces currently dominate in the community. Yet Richards also shows that the power and beauty of blood ties can survive in the worst of environments. This is an affirmation of the author's faith in his home. Like Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Buckler, and George Lamming, Richards does not hesitate to point out the shortcomings of his home; in fact he exceeds all three in doing so. Unlike these three, however, Richards leaves an important character in the community, someone who might be able to change things.

Orville is not an artist or a writer, he is a simple person; yet a character like Orville, who develops a strong heart, if he stays in his community, may well be worth more to it than one hundred artists or writers who decide they must leave.