

LITERATURE

WARREN'S *MEET ME IN THE GREEN GLEN*: AN INTERPRETATION

TERESA BALAZY

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

“Your business as a writer is not to illustrate virtue but to show how a fellow may move toward it — or away from it” (Longley 1965: 44). This famous statement of Robert Penn Warren contains the best tool for analyzing his fiction. Each of Warren’s novels may be viewed in terms of some dominant virtue and the characters’ effort to achieve it. A particular virtue provides a continuous point of reference for the actions of the characters and determines a final success or failure in their lives. Since the essential philosophical problem of Warren’s fiction is man’s struggle to define himself, it is virtually in this movement toward or away from virtue that characters can obtain self-realization. However, the most important criterion here is a character’s ability to act human, to either show or understand such human values which would allow him to participate in the joys and miseries of human communion.

Thus, Percy Munn in the *Night rider* must realize his need to have a communion with others. Sue Murdock, Jerry Calhoun, and Slim Sarrett of *At heavens gate* cannot come to terms with themselves because they lack humility, which comes from a modest acceptance of human warmth from others. In *All the king’s men* Jack Burden eventually has to understand the truth about life which is similar to a web, the life in which every human act must be paid for. Jerry Beaumont’s failure in *World enough and time* is due to the pride which mars his notion of justice. In the *Band of angels* Amantha Starr must rid herself of excessive self-pity motivating her image of herself as a continuous victim. Adam Rosenzweig of the *Wilderness* experiences the union with people in war, and their equality, only when he learns the all-embracing value of human compassion. The various protagonists of the *Cave* are not allowed to define themselves until they have seen the depth of selfishness behind their apparent sympathy for Jasper. In *Flood*, the most contemporary of all his novels “of our time”, it is again an unselfish understanding of others that Brad Tolliver needs but cannot show. It follows from these examples

that the basic plight of each character becomes a test of his humanness. If he fails it is always because he is too self-centered to experience community with his fellow men. In the words of J. L. Stewart (1965 : 517):

Cut off by their inadequacy from the human communion, the characters lack identity, which, as Jack Burden comes to understand, is defined in terms of one's actions toward others. But they cannot even begin to seek it in any meaningful way until they are ready to accept the risks and burdens of adult behavior.

The maturity, which self-definition requires, comes in when a character can see himself for what he is. To do it, he must recognize the burden of responsibility for all his past and present actions, for the whole of his experience. Experience and responsibility become, thus, conditioning factors for a character's future. If he does not assume his share of responsibility for the past, he cannot live the present, and, without the present, he cannot hope for the future. It ought to be noted here that characters who enter the redeeming state of self-knowledge either die, or, in more recent novels, enter a state of numbness and meaninglessness of being, which equals spiritual death. The first is true of Percy Munn, Sue Murdock, Willie Stark; the second is most obvious in Slim Sarrett, Ike Sumpter, and, at least partly, in Brad Tolliver.

As Warren explains in *Knowledge and the image of man*, man can most fully define himself in a twofold way: through others and in separation from others. Experience (the past) and recognition of responsibility (its impact on the present) are, as defining factors, conditioned by a whole of man's relations and interactions with other people. Therefore, both these factors have a great function in getting knowledge about the self through others, within a human community. The image of himself that man thus creates is subject to changes:

for man is in the world... with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable ostosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values — that is, a new self — ... (Longley 1965 : 241)

However, what Warren calls here "a new self" also means an image that is shaped in separateness, in "the pain of isolation". For in solitude, man is able to look at himself critically, to view himself in contrast with certain ideals of perfection. He pursues some virtue, and this pursuit determines the process of self-definition. Therefore, out of a human need for perfection and through "the pain of self-criticism" man develops "the image of his destiny, the mask he stares at" (Longley 1965: 242), and strives to reach it. In this way man creates a complete and unified image of himself: the image of what he is and the image of his destiny. With such an image, self-knowledge reaches its fullest importance in man's life: it allows him to establish positively the value of his

life. This is done both through self-acceptance and through a discovery of a sense of destiny, without which human existence is meaningless. It is significant that in all these novels the process of self-definition puts much more emphasis on the role of past experience and the consequent acceptance of the responsibility towards it. This is probably because this pattern of self-discovery is a suitable theme for the typical Southern obsession with the past. Warren shows it, for instance, in an almost constant repetition of the Billie Potts theme of the tragic impossibility of a return home, or the symbol of a spider web, signifying the inescapable quality of the past.

It is only in his latest novel *Meet me in the Green Glen* that Warren emphasizes the realization of destiny and makes it the dominant factor for self-recognition. Here, he concentrates much more on the impact of the present (though undoubtedly conditioned by the past) upon the future of each character. He somehow shows the reader every step of the way, which each of the four main protagonists has to cover to discover his destiny; and, consequently how each defines his self. The problem of responsibility for the past is, it seems, left aside, though the past experience of the characters is briefly recapitulated as it throws the light on the present. Therefore, the protagonists are allowed to give so much consideration to their present situation. They always muse upon the quality of the present moment; they wrap themselves in the present being and, like Murray or Angelo, fear the future. However, in this struggle to live only the life of now they realize that such life is impossible, that it is, simply, an illusion. Set against the background of an almost desolate, God and people forsaken Tennessee valley, they have to find themselves in some sort of reality which this dream-like, sleepy landscape cannot provide. It signifies their lethargy of heart. They feel "dark inner nothingness" or "blankness of being" which accounts for the constant awareness they have of their lives being something unreal. They live as if in a dream and since this dream provides security, they develop a fear of the real. They protect their illusory existence but, sooner or later, they have to discover the inevitability of the real.

For Cassie Spottwood, an aging woman, obediently but indifferently devoted to her unloved husband, life is an uneventful "going away" of time and people, starting with Cy's and ironically culminating in Angelo's final departure. But not until she has accepted this "goingawayness" for something unchangeable, for her destiny can she begin her movement into self-knowledge:

She was the fixed point from which there was forever the goingaway. She stood there and experienced the pure joy that comes only with the full, free recognition of destiny, which is the recognition of the self. (Warren 1972: 94)

For Angelo Passetto, a young Italian straight from the penitentiary, life has once been like "a bowl of cherries" (Warren 1972: 12) to be taken

freely and enjoyed, or as "flickering lights in the dance hall" which signify "a bright whirling and swaying, a hunting for something, a running after something, a going and coming and not knowing why" (Warren 1972: 117). Therefore he plunges into various forms of city entertainment only to recognize, through the senselessness of his penitentiary experience how great an illusion this way of life has been. He has never felt the sense of destiny. The lack of it makes him hide in the absence of reality, in a remote house where his dream of nothingness cannot be disturbed, where he himself is a nobody. His preoccupation with farm work protects him from leaving the life of now, the present being which is the only one that counts in his apparent reality of a dream. Coming back to Cassie after his moment of the reality he has experienced with Charlene, he knows that "It would be OK if he could just learn not to think of what had ever happened, and not to think of what would happen" (Warren 1972: 195). In this way he further protects the self that fits this illusory world, but this self, like the world, amounts to nothing. This is made quite obviously symbolic in the scene when he muses upon his own reflection in the mirror, and with a subsequent blowing out of a candle, he experiences the unity with the enveloping darkness which is himself and into which his image is sunk.

Cy Grinder, once Cassie's idealist sweetheart, later drowned in a dullness and emptiness of marriage with a woman he never loved, discovers that however hard he tries he will never be able to live merely the present moment. Because he feels the "anguish" of the inevitable destiny Cy is the only one to survive with some hope for a meaningful future:

If you could just live *now*, no backwards and no forwards, you could live through anything. But a man can't. He was finding out that a man can't. For something was like a big hand reaching through his ribs... tearing his heart out by the roots while he stood there trapped in that atrocity of anguish and could not breathe. (Warren 1972: 324 - 325)

The last of the four main protagonists, Murray Guilfort, a successful but disillusioned small town lawyer, finds refuge in the thought that life might be just "a cat asleep in a rocker, and outside... the blue beauty of the autumn sky, and your heart steady and slow in your bosom" (Warren 1972: 43). Troubled by a sense of his inadequacy to develop meaningful contacts with others, aware of sinister motives of vindication and vanity behind his apparently benevolent attachment to the Spottwoods, he hopes for the blissful uninvolvedness of a cat, which is innocent of the brutal, corrupting forces which the overpowering presence of Spottwood implies. Murray fails completely at self-definition, because he continuously repudiates the past which is inescapable, and so he cannot see himself in the context of the present. Yet, what is even more destructive, he is not able to conceive the future: "Why did a man have

to know ahead of time? Why wasn't last knowing, when things finally came true, enough for a man to have to endure?" (Warren 1972: 33). Completely self-centered, with no values to guide him but his own selfishness, he still longs for self-discovery. But because using others is his only way of living he will not obtain it. He strives to earn an entrance into human unforgetfulness through his ambition to become a public figure, rich, influential and famous. Even his Chicago sexual adventures, however shameful, serve his ends, for they give him an illusion of notoriety, which guarantees human, helpful awareness of being remembered in the minds and hearts of others. But he will not have it because he has thwarted the love of the only person who truly loved him, his wife. Upon realizing how the basis for their love has been her failure to find somebody else and his failure to achieve his position through a means other than her social and financial status, he rejects her and himself by committing suicide. Similarly, the two other loveless marriages, that of Cy and Gladys and that of Cassie and Spottwood are not fulfilling because of the same neglect of love in the partner.

What these three marriages try to illustrate and what accounts for Murray's suicide is the real message of this novel: the only way of life for man leads through love in all its forms and manifestations. Love is the redeeming virtue which makes man find his destiny among the various paths of the "great charade of the world". Love must stand at the center of all man's relationships so that he may eventually discover his only destiny which is to participate through love in the human communion. In short, with love as the all-enclosing virtue this particular novel constitutes a summary of the plight of all of Warrenian characters. They can reach self-recognition only if they develop a capacity for disinterested love, for seeing their fellow men as equal members of a human community. As Warren himself puts it:

Let us try, therefore, to create a society in which each man may develop as far as possible those capacities that distinguish his manhood, and in which each man will accept his responsibility for trying to realize his common humanity at its highest. (Longley 1965: 238 - 239)

More important, however, are the other relations between the characters in the novel, those of Cassie and Angelo, Angelo and Charlene, Cassie and Cy, and Leroy Lancaster and his wife Corinne. Each of them attempts to show how man may, through love, manifest his humanness. The love of Angelo and Cassie is here the point of focus for all the other characters. It acts thus as a catalyst for self-recognition. Perhaps because of the incompleteness of this love, that at least Angelo realizes, both lovers can concentrate so much on the active participation in it. Angelo's desperate efforts to make Cassie look young and beautiful reflect his fear of the real, his concentration on the illusory dreaming of a secure life. Nonetheless, they give this love a touch of the sublime, mark it with a uniqueness which paradoxically makes Cassie

strive to experience it as complete and real. Above all, by virtue of her willful acceptance of the relationship, by her unflagging effort to really feel the happiness of being with the lover, she is permitted to define herself. After all the years of boring and unloving devotion she can reach the stage of tenderness that makes her unselfishly understand Angelo's need for freedom and his departure. However, this loving relation can only be reached with their recognition of each other as human beings. As long as Cassie is an object of mere lust she does not feel that brightness of rebirth which comes over her after the relation has transcended the coldness of sex and assumed all the rights of a human relationship. An illusion for Angelo, it becomes the only reality acceptable for Cassie. Therefore, she cannot admit the terrible truth of Angelo's death as it would destroy her realization of destiny without which human life is meaningless.

In contrast to this stands the love of Angelo and the girl Charlene. Through his commitment in it Angelo achieves his own sense of the real: "it was like a dream, but at the same time, it was the only thing real... It was still happening" (Warren 1972: 192). What is actually happening between the two young lovers is their mutual belief in the truth of love which needs no illusion, which is real for both. Even if it is doomed to destruction it is not doomed to failure. It is about their love, symbolically presented as a rose, that Charlene says: "I don't care how sad it is — it's beautiful" (Warren 1972: 194). And little though the reader may learn of the experience this love means for Charlene, he can believe in her despair after Angelo's death resulting in her drug addiction.

The truth of love, what it leads to if destroyed is also exemplified by the adolescent love of Cassie and Cy. However, here the relationship fails because one of the lovers believes in a truth, greater than love itself: "And as she saw the door close behind him she thought: *He loves something else better than me*" (Warren 1972: 79). In his search for books and position he sets aside the truth of Cassie's passion. In his idealism he resembles great Gatsby. Consequently, the truth by which he tries to discover his new self, to transform his life to be worthy of Cassie's love, later proves a mere illusion. When he learns that love can only be answered with love, the recognition of the mistake comes, with him as with others, only too late.

Virtually, all lovers except Angelo lack the victorious power of creative love. Cy rejects love at first for fascination with knowledge and social status; later he cannot protect it against Mrs Killigrew's snobbery and petty prejudice. Leroy feels the inadequacy of his love, as contrasted with his lack of professional success. He does not see how much value lies in the pity and loving understanding that Corinne feels for him. Even Cassie fails at a complete love: if her lovers leave her it is because she is too passive and too demanding to make them stay. Her subsequent acts of helpless vengeance: marriage

to Spottwood and accusation of Angelo, merely mark her fatal conviction that the reality of love may only exist as an illusion, so that, eventually she believes in her madness that she granted Angelo freedom and happiness by allowing him to escape with the girl.

Thus, Angelo is the only one who believes and defines himself in the reality of love. His love is always more a giving than a taking. His male beauty incites passion just as his Sicilian exile's background allows him to transcend mere sex and reach a stage of loving understanding of the partner. In his death cell he is still able to assure Cassie of his love and gratefulness for having tried to save him, even if she has caused his imprisonment and conviction. He can act this way because he realizes the sense of his destiny, because he knows that his participation in love has been the fulfillment of it. This is what Murray cannot, to his very end, understand. But because Angelo is so totally a male principle of this novel, he becomes a victim in the love hungry and love jealous world of the grey suit society where, as Leroy feels, even law conquers justice and stands against love:

The fool: to call out to her, to stand there in the sight of all, bemused in the full shining of the woman's face... To invite the hard, targeting eyes of all those people who, like the hill man in the jury box, stared unforgiving at him from the thorny shadow of their own deprivations, yearnings, and envies, as from a thicket. (Warren 1972: 275)

Does Angelo's victimized death carry thus Warren's irrevocably pessimistic sentence on this world? It is true that this society is dominated by Murray Guilforts (Murray being the one who so symbolically wears a grey suit), totally incapable of love because of their egoism. Yet, it is also true that Murray continually strives to kill the awareness of his inadequacy. This adds at least some dignity to his plight so that, finally he, too, reaches his blaze of truth, even though it is not redeeming. Still, the only effect of his human attachments is corruption: the successful conviction of Angelo drives Cassie to madness and Charlene to taking dope; the love of which these two women are most capable is in both cases destroyed. Murray cannot, like Leroy and Cy accept his marriage for a simple human need to understand and be understood, to pity and be pitied, simply to feel a common human need for another. He cannot even interpret Angelo and Cassie's love otherwise than as an illusion they both dream, cheap, disgusting, and degrading. The realization of his mistake costs him his life:

For the thought, like the sound of a slow bell, came into his head: *The dream is a lie, but the dreaming is truth.* He stood there, absorbed numbly in that thought, trying to feel what it meant, not knowing what it meant, but thinking that, if so many people moved across the world as though they knew what it meant, it must mean something.

So he cried out in his heart: *But nobody told me — nobody told me!* (Warren 1972: 370)

It seems that Warren could not have found a better illustration for Murray's final enlightenment than the love of Angelo and Cassie. But Murray cannot learn the truth of this love because his corrupt, selfish view of human nature comes from his envious admiration of Sunderland Spottwood, a character even more completely devoid of any human emotions. Sunder's inhuman quality has the power of changing his environment in the direction of brutality. He makes Cassie's life an unreal, senseless, animal vegetation. He makes Murray recognize the emotional barrenness of his life. After each confrontation with Sunder all Murray can think of is helpless animal envy: *There are beggars and buyers and stealers and pickers of remnants and you are among them. Then: There are seizers and takers, and you are not among them* (Warren 1972: 146). Significantly enough, Murray never realizes the corrupting influence of Spottwood. Himself corrupt, he can only consider himself inferior to one who undutifully excels him. Finally, Sunder's brutal powers find their climax in making Cassie gather hate enough to kill him in a cold-blooded way. Sunder's natural brutality assumes, in his paralysed state, a symbolic meaning of hate, driven by his animal instincts which are centered in the only part of him left alive — his eyes. Those who, like Angelo, penetrate them, shudder from a possible recognition of similar hateful forces within their own selves. It ought to be stressed here that only after he has been confronted by Sunder does Cassie utter her statement of love to Angelo, taking him for all he means to her, giving him his identity through pronouncing his name. For it is only in the context of Sunder that she fully grasps the redemption of Angelo's love.

The redeeming quality of love manifests itself best for those who, although capable of it, are too weak to abide solely by it: Leroy Lancaster and Cy. In the horror of a discovery that he might be among those who, out of jealousy, wish for Angelo's death, Leroy finds the needed satisfaction with Corinne's love. He is no longer troubled by the charity which, according to him motivates her love. It only seems made unnecessarily obvious that his involvement in Angelo's case should assure him a success, the lack of which has always marred his marriage. Cy's concluding enlightenment and transformation bear a more universal significance. The abundance of love he can feel for his daughter transforms his attitude towards his wife whose humanness he has always ignored. He perceives his guilt towards her. He understands that any truly meaningful human relationship cannot afford to neglect the thoughts and emotions of those who participate in it. If love is the most human of emotions, all the forms by which it is realized constitute the only reality for man to exist in. In this statement *Meet me in the Green Glen* acquires the right to pronounce the truth of self-knowledge for its characters.

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