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A DETAILED STUDY OF JUDITH WRIGHT'S "LEGEND"

P. SUNEETHA

Assistant Professor, BVRIT
Narsapur, Medak Dist, Telangana, India
sunithaenglish@gmail.com



P. SUNEETHA

ABSTRACT

This Paper deals with Judith Wright's Legend. It introduces the biographical introduction to Judith Wright and her works. Also, critical analysis of the poem Legend. The title of the poem offered for study itself is very thought provoking. Legend suggests the evocation of "celebrity", or a fable. The protagonist with a vision and dream in his eye overcomes all kinds of dangers and hindrances to finally taste success. This poem is about a poor blacksmith's boy, who belongs to labour class. The poem ends on the victory note of the blacksmith's boy who "went home as easy as could be/ with the swinging rainbow on his shoulder."

Keywords: Commonwealth, Poetry, evocation, emigrated, hindrances, culture

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BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION TO JUDITH WRIGHT (1915-2000)

The prolific poetess, conservationist and a campaigner for aboriginal rights in New South Wales is Judith Arundell Wright. She was an introvert and a solitary child; Judith's only solace lay in her creative skills. She herself remarked, "only thing I had to treasure was poetry and the knowledge that I was going to be a poet." During the second World War, the Australians reeled under the fear of Japanese invasion. The love towards the land made her to describe her emotions in the following words:

"As the train panted up the foothills of the Moonbis and the haze of dust and eucalypt vapour dimmed the drought-stricken landscape, I found myself suddenly and sharply aware of it as 'my country'. These hills and valleys were not mine, but me; the threat of Japanese invasion hung over them as over me; I felt it under my own ribs. Whatever other blood I held, this was the country I loved and knew." We can sense this feeling of identification with the land in her poetry. It invested her pieces with an intimate and personal feeling.

The experience of second World-War was full of anguish. It raised several questions in her mind the sheer waste of war. Why at all do people have to fight wars? Judith Wright too turned inwards for finding an answer to it. In one of her poems, Christmas Ballad she expressed her fear.

Besides this emotional turmoil, she was rapidly turning deaf. But according to Julian Croft, an academician, made her sensibilities even sharper and more expressive in language. He said, "Her deafness gave her poetry readings a directness and force any poet would envy." She met her philosopher J.P. McKinney and they later married.

Judith began publishing her poems in 1930s in literary journals. Her technical skills were established and poems revolved round the 'wartime', for example *The Trains*, the threat of the war in the Pacific is the subject. A female perspective established her as a poet of international fame.

She wrote some essays on Australian poetry like *The Gateway*, *Two Fires* (with the haunting *At Cooloolah*), *Birds*, *Five Senses* and *The Other Half*. *Shadow*. She begins to tackle some of the issues of the day, mainly the Vietnam War. It exhibited her move, from "isolated sensibility, the lone poet ... exploring inwards towards an impossible peace" to "a rage against destructiveness and blind obedience." In her next work, *Alive* she still moved farther. No more Vietnam war, now it was contemplation on society and the forces that acted on people. Her *Tableau* was a story of a man overtaken by panic and despair, being ignored by the passing crowd. Wright beautifully phrases her reactions and her fight against the dehumanized society that goes to his aid:

Holding him up as he asked till the ambulance came,
among the sudden curious crowd, I knew
his plunging animal heart,
against my flesh the shapes of his too-young bone,
the heaving pattern of his ribs. As still I do.

Her interest in conservation and wildlife preservation also began growing. And this can be seen in her poetry too- for instance, in *Birds* (1961), *Australia* 1970, *The Coral Battleground*.

Soon in her life she became an active campaigner for environmental issues and against nuclear war. In 1966 she lost her husband. With him she lost her inspiration to write and she abandoned writing poetry.

Judith Wright's received *Grace Leven Prize* (1950), *Australia-Britannica Award* (1964), *Robert Frost Memorial Award* (1977), *Australian World Prize* (1984), *Queen's Medal for Poetry* (1992). In 1973-74 she was also made a member of the *Australia Council*. So far, only two Australian poets have been considered for the *Nobel Prize in Literature*. One was A.D. Hope, the second to be considered for the award was Judith Wright

She had been a prolific writer with more than fifty publication to her credit when she died. John Tranter, one of Australia's leading poets expressed his admiration in words:

"What she has left us is a spirited body of writing and a model for a humane and committed concern for the future of the human race."

OTHER MAJOR WORKS BY JUDITH WRIGHT

The Moving Image, *Woman to Man*, *Bullocky*, *The Maker*, *Notes at Edge*, *Half a Time*, *Because I was Invited*, *Half a Lifetime*, *Australian Bird Poems* (1940), *The Gateway*(1955), *William Baylebridge and the Modern Problem* (1955), *Kings of the Dinges* (1958), *The Generations of Men* (1959), *The Day the Mountains Played*(1960), *Australian Bird Poems* (1961), *Birds* 1961, *Range the Mountains High* (1962), *Charles Harpur*(1963), *Country Town*(1963), *Five Senses*(1963), *The Other Half*(1966), *The Nature of Love*(1966), *The River and the Road*(1966), *Alive*(1973), *Because I Was Invited*(1975), *Half Dream*(1975), *Fourth Quarter, and Other Poems*(1976), *Boundaries*(1976), *The Coral Battleground* (1977), *The Double Tree*(1978), *Reef, Rainforest, Mangroves, Man*(1980), *The Cry for the Dead*(1981), *Journeys*(1982), *We Call for a Treaty*(1985), *Phantom Dwelling*(1985), *Many Roads Meet Her*(1985), *Rainforest*(1987), *Through Broken Glass*(1992), *The Flame Tree* (1994), *Going on Talking: Tales of a Great Aunt*(1998)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

Judith Wright's poetry found its inspiration in the objects around her. It was inspired by the various places where she had lived: New England, New South Wales, the subtropical rainforests of Tambourine Mountain, Queensland, and the plains of the southern highlands near Braidwood.

Her sources of inspiration were just not the trees, nature, animals inhabiting her country, the aboriginal culture but also her husband. She produced great poems while addressing her love poems to him.

The title of the poem offered for study itself is very thought provoking. Legend suggests the evocation of "celebrity", or a fable. The protagonist with a vision and dream in his eye overcomes all kinds of dangers and hindrances to finally taste success. They ooze with confidence in their abilities and the spirit vibrant and indomitable, which characterizes the image of the fathers of modern Australia, symbolized through the image of a boy in the poem.

This poem is about a poor blacksmith's boy, who belongs to labour class.

The first stanza opens:

The blacksmith's boy went out with a rifle
and a black dog running behind.

The blacksmith's boy begins his sojourn alone with just a rifle and a dog following him. When she composed the poem, she was pregnant with his child. She devoted this poem to her husband. The poem depicted the process of conception and a woman's response and feeling to the knowledge of a growing child of love within her.

The following lines try to depict the hindrances in his path:

Cobwebs snatched at his feet,
rivers hindered him,
thorn branches caught at his eyes to make him blind
and the sky turned into an unlucky opal,

The 'cobwebs' of past routine and tradition, the temptations of leading a life of comfort, settlement and security try to come in his way and try to hinder his progressing steps, the cobwebs try to 'snatch' at his feet, even the river hinders him, and the thorn branches try to strike his eyes and turn him blind, the sky acquires the ominous opal hue, portending storm and thus trying to dissuade him from moving further. But the young boy does not seem to mind it all. He says confidently:

I can break branches, I can swim rivers, I
can stare out any spider I meet,
said he to his dog and his rifle.

The continuous repetition of "I can" show his faith in his abilities. However, now the boy addresses these confident words to "his dog and his rifle" the only two of his items and possessions. The poetess repeats "his" to emphasize his poverty of possessions and belongings and yet the confidence of the young boy. The second stanza of the poem begins with the depiction of felicity and speed with which the boy moves forward letting nothing block his way in his old black hat:

The blacksmith's boy went over the paddocks
with his old black hat on his head.

It seems every element has transpired to discourage his progress. The stanza delineates the different forms in which physical adversities beleaguer him, appearing suddenly without any warning and in the most unexpected manner:

Mountains jumped in his way,
rocks rolled down on him,
and the old crow cried, You'll soon be dead.
And the rain came down like mattocks.

The mountain appears to block his way, rocks try to roll over him and the rain lashes him in the cruelest manner, in the style of a mattock. However, the physical harms don't dissuade him, nor does the psychological one when the crow tries to stop him by raising fears of death in his mind by crowing ominous words-"You'll soon be dead", but these words too cannot stop. His spirit is indomitable and

But he only said, I can climb mountains, I can dodge rocks,
I can shoot an old crow any day, and he went on over the paddocks.

The stumbling blocks only succeed in making the young boy more determined and confident in his capabilities. He is confident of climbing the mountain or getting over the rocks or even shooting down the

crow trying to instill fear in him. His adventurous spirit is undeterred and he continues on his way undaunted.

The next or the third stanza is another that depicts the fury of nature against him. In this battle even two 'belongings' that he had, also fail him. The poetess tries to delineate it in the following words:

When he came to the end of the day, the sun began falling, Up came the night ready to swallow him, like the barrel of a gun, like an old black hat, like a black dog hungry to follow him. Then the pigeon, the magpie and the dove began wailing and the grass lay down to pillow him.

After the heavy rain, soon the night spreads swallowing the sun. Darkness makes his own belongings to rebel against him and fail him when he needs them the most. This tone is set when it is compared to that of the barrel of a gun (his rifle) or like an old black hat (on his head) and like a black dog hungry to follow him. The repetition of black is significant to show the disloyalty of his belongings and their failing him in the moment of need. These images suggest violence and death. The wailing of gentle creatures like pigeon, magpie and dove portends death. Even the grass seems to get ready to receive his body after the suggested violence in the preceding lines of darkness and night. Not surprisingly in the darkness of the night everything and everybody fails him:

His rifle broke, his hat blew away and his dog was gone and the sun was falling.

The boy is alone with a broken rifle, a blown away hat, a missing dog and dipping sun; but he is still undeterred. The pliant acceptance of a malignant fate is not in him, he is made of a clay that does not understand failures but only 'struggle'. He is still ready to chase his dream and vision with the old fire. The penultimate stanza takes him to his dream, hard realised. He is like a knight in old fables who has been able to conquer all. His hardships and labour are duly rewarded:

But in front of the night, the rainbow stood on the mountain, just as his heart foretold.

The 'rainbow on the mountain', the achievement, corresponds to the dream that he had been cherishing in his heart, "just as his heart foretold". "Just as his heart [had] foretold", he sees the rainbow cresting the mountain, appearing "in front of the night". It holds back the forces of darkness behind itself. All this while, it was the sheer desire to realise his dream that had spurred his steps forward, but now when the object was present in front of him, the reward of his toil and perseverance, in all its glory on the mountain, nothing could make him wait longer. His faith in himself was vindicated.

He ran like a hare, he climbed like a fox; And with nimble steps, fleet foot and dexterity of movement

he caught it in his hands, the colours and the cold -like

a bar of ice, like the column of a fountain, like a ring of gold.

In picturesque similes the poetess draws the beauty of the moment and the object. However, the rainbow is surprisingly both full of colours and at the same time "cold"; like a "bar of ice" and a "ring of gold"- with its share of mixed blessings. The old wail of the soft pessimistic creatures is now replaced by their flight of rapture and celebration:

The pigeon, the magpie and the dove flew up to stare,

Even the grass, which in the previous stanza was, lay itself down to receive his body "stood up again on the mountain." The black colour and the associated darkness that dominates the first three stanzas disappears to be replaced with the new radiance of the multicoloured rainbow that holds back the night. The last or the fifth stanza is a celebration of Australian grit and glory symbolized through the blacksmith's boy. The boy surmounting all the deterring forces emerges victorious. He proudly hangs the prize on his shoulder:

The blacksmith's boy hung the rainbow on his shoulder instead of his broken gun.

In the beginning we had seen him carry a broken rifle but now it is the triumphant souvenir of the hunt - his dream realised - the rainbow. As long as was not rewarded, everything came in his way of progress, trying to stop him from pursuing his vision. But later when his mission is accomplished and he marches proudly and joyously, everything beginning from a lizard and snake to the whole world mysteriously makes way for him; even adores him:

Lizards ran out to see, snakes made way for him,

and the rainbow shone as brightly as the sun.
All the world said, Nobody is braver, nobody is bolder,
nobody else has done
anything equal to it. He went home as easy as could be
with the swinging rainbow on his shoulder.

The boy is presented as a conqueror or a hunter with his trophy. In this stanza the indomitable spirit of the Australian, their determination to create a nation overcoming all varieties of hurdles of alien landscape and climate.

All the world said, Nobody is braver, nobody is bolder, nobody else has done anything equal to it. It is a tribute to the creative and robust determination of the first settlers of Australia, the land of opportunity. The poem ends on the victory note of the blacksmith's boy who "went home as easy as could be/ with the swinging rainbow on his shoulder."

SELECT LITERARY CRITICISM

Judith Wright's biographer Veronica Brady felt that Wright was a major poet almost in the "Russian way", because of the political impact that her poems made on the reader. She further added, "I think that Judith Wright's poetry speaks a sense of sacredness in the land, the sacredness of simple things like animals and plants, and the violation of that sacredness. She has a feeling not only for the land but also for the Aboriginal people."

Judith Wright through her life went through many historical Australian events, which seem to be documented in her poetry. These many events include, depression, World War two, living on a farm, which is why...Judith's poetry is worthwhile to be studied by Australian students."

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