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EMPTINESS OF MODERN LIFE IN THE POEMS OF SHEL SILVERSTEIN

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ABSTRACT

Reading the poems of Shel Silverstein is really a mesmerizing experience as it drags oneself into nostalgic period of childhood when one lives in perfect harmony with nature. Childhood is considered to be a period without any worries and leading a joyful carefree life with an optimistic view about life. When he grows up, he realizes the painful realistic experiences of life and begins to lose wonder and innocence from his life which ultimately leads to emptiness or bareness in his life. In some of his well known poems Silverstein states that there is an intangible cord between man and the natural environment in which he lives, when he tries to move away from Nature this bond diminishes and further collapses. Although we have attained much materialistic and technological advancement in the last half century, our increased material wealth has not made us any happier, and many people are searching for more meaning in their lives. When one enters to his adulthood one hardly finds time to listen to Nature or to hear the lamentation of our fellow beings. So as to attain happiness one has to return to Nature. Being around nature is one of the great pleasures in life, and provides us with a range of benefits for our well-being. The enjoyment we gain from this experience may be partly due to our appreciation of natural beauty and the wonder of the world around us. Secondly, in nature one finds a sense of peace and a sense of perspective away from the noise and clutter of modern life. The quality of our relationships with other people is one of the most important factors contributing to our well-being – if not the most important. Loneliness and isolation can be bad for our physical and mental health, so it is important to know how to build a sense of connection with other people.

Key words: Childhood; Nature; Intangible cord; Adulthood

Introduction

Among all the famous contemporary children's poets, Shel Silverstein is hailed as one of the most popular authors of children's books in the twentieth century and is dubbed "Poet laureate of kids" by the critic Megan Rosenfeld. His poems are not only embraced by children but by people of all ages; one of the solid proof is that they have been translated into over 30 languages and some of them have been adopted for animations. In some of his reputed poems he depicted the alienation of man from Nature as well as fellow beings. Our relationships have become more centered on money and individual self-interest. So, the individual's growing isolation in a material environment is compounded by dominant society's ever-expanding

rules. Through his poems he suggests that the only remedy to attain a blissful life is to live in accord with our fellow being along with our Mother Nature.

The themes of his poems reflect the life experiences of children and are written in simple and memorable lines with vivid illustration and humorous narrative. With its vivacious rhythm and rhyme; lively imagery; personification and word play he became the favorite poet for children all over the world. His poems are very much appealing to children and adults as it can be read as children's poems as well as poems depicting the serious issues of modern life.

In this paper I tried to analyze the theme of emptiness of modern life in some of the reputed poems of Silverstein like "Where the Side Walk Ends", "Forgotten Language", "A Giving Tree", "Cloony the Clown" and "Sick". However advancement man attained, he is not satisfied or happy with what he had. Yet he is running behind something in pursuit of happiness. Although he has attained many worldly pleasures, there is only darkness in his soul because the modern society has become much alienated from Nature and his fellow being.

"WHERE THE SIDE WALK ENDS" Published in 1974 as a part of a poetry collection with the same title, "Where the Sidewalk Ends" is definitely one of Silverstein's greats. He captures the child in all of us and invites us on an adventure of the imagination. The author has used literary devices in a number of ways. The author uses rhyming patterns throughout the stanza, creating a better flow for the poem. Also, rhyming poems are more pleasurable to read than others. Repetition is another frequently used literary device using the line "Where the Sidewalk Ends". This stresses the meaning of his poem to readers and also the theme. The last literary device I noticed was the imagery and words used. He is very descriptive in how he describes the sun, grass and wind. His evocative words make his imagery clearer while reading the poem, which allow the audience to understand and grasp his concepts.

In this poem he expresses his frustration to lead his life too far away from Nature in the midst of people who do not have a little time to spend for their fellow beings. He resides in a highly polluted township where smoke blow black. In his poem he states "Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black / And the dark street winds and bends" (7-8). Silverstein is describing a moment in time that is dark and dreary. The colour black symbolizes lifelessness or death. He is really fed up with his life there and longs to return to his Mother Nature as all humans wish to love and to be loved. We are social animals and need to feel that we "belong" to others and feel connected to one another. Nature really consoles us whenever we have any problem in our life, the one and only thing that we have to do is to return to the lap of Nature. She will receive us wholeheartedly and regains strength in our life. In this poem the poet exhorts his fellow being to look back into the nature and to lead a healthy life.

Modern lifestyles and societies present a particular set of challenges to our mental health. But perhaps the most profound pleasure of all that results from a trip into natural surroundings is the simple experience of just living, and sitting quietly within an environment where hundreds of other creatures and plants are doing the same – going through the various physical processes that constitute being alive. This helps us to realise that, whatever worries, complexities or troubles exist in our hectic human lives and the modern world, ultimately our lives (both as individuals and as a species) are just another part of this natural show playing out around us as we sit in the countryside. When we see ourselves like this, life really becomes quite simple, and this can bring us a profound sense of calm and a reduction in stress.

This poem is very inspiring as it explains to the reader that outside of all the hard times, there are good times. Silverstein says "For the children, they mark, and the children, they know the place where the sidewalk ends" (15-16). This line explains to us how the children know where this place is because children are always associated with Nature and spent much time with her. Most of the time, children are free of worries and all they do is focus on enjoying themselves. With little stress and effortless fun, children are happy as can be. This can relate to adults and how they should be more like children who are free-spirited and full of optimism. Adults have much more pressure and also have a lot more to worry about, the poem explains they should stop and take time from their schedules to enjoy life and all of the little things that come along with it.

This beautiful poem of Silverstein reminds us of the poems of William Wordsworth, the famous Nature poet. Being a pantheist he worshipped nature and believed in the healing power of Nature. Having a sensible heart Wordsworth cannot think of a life without having time to enjoy the cares of Nature. Similarly Silverstein is fed up with the polluted life in metropolitan cities and longs for a pure and simple life in a country side in order to relieve all the stress and complexities of modern life.

“FORGOTTEN LANGUAGE”: In this poem we can see the sad plight of the man who is sinking in the problems of Modern life that he completely forgotten the language of Nature which he was fully aware during his childhood. Child is initially innocent but liable to lose innocence under the impact of stress or psychological trauma in his life. During infancy one really listens to nature, enjoys its beauty, sings with birds, dances with flowers, playing with squirrels and so on. But with the passage of time he loses all his soft feeling and gradually forgets the language well known to him.

Childhood is always associated with Nature and learns a lot of things from it. A child being innocent can understand the language of Nature. The poem FL begins like this: “Once I spoke the language of the flowers,/ Once I understood each word the caterpillar said” (1-2). But when he become grown up and realistic; when he become more educated and busy he cannot remember language once well known for him. During his juvenility, he experienced blissful joy in the lap of nature because he had an intangible chord with the Mother Nature whereas now he is grown up and become busier therefore lacks sufficient time to be with nature resulted in a wide range of behavioral problems resulted in bareness in his life.

In his poem *Forgotten Language* Shel Silverstein laments upon his lost childhood. While reading the poem one really recognizes that he had a very happy childhood which shaped his present behavior. Through his poems he states that children are superior to men in many respects. William Wordsworth idealized picture of child-life in the ‘Prelude’ and the famous ode on the “Intimations of Immortality”. The coarser pleasure of child life is referred to in the poem, “Tintern Abbey” as in many other poems. In “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” and, “Tintern Abbey”, we find a deep relation between child and Nature. In his epilogue for his ode “Intimations of Immortality” he expressed the idea that “A child is the father of the Man”. Wordsworth believes, it is in the period of childhood that we find a divine touch in every object of Nature. Thus Wordsworth has drawn the picture of a child-life in nature in its mystical and philosophical aspect.

He describes the forgotten language as something that he once had but lost). Silverstein writes about how he didn't want to lose this special language but somehow it got away. The poet says that he himself do not know how he lost the language of Nature. Childhood is something one doesn't realize is slipping away, until it is gone forever. During early days one possesses love, care, compassion, innocence and all such soft but powerful emotions. But with the passage of time all these values lose from us due to the stress and psychological trauma which we face in our life. Once childhood is gone, there is always a want to go back to being a child.

“The Giving Tree”: “The Giving Tree” is a narrative poem which tells the relation between man and nature. This poem can be viewed as the relationship between selfishness of man who takes away everything from nature and unselfishness of nature who gives away everything to nature man. The poet gives us the idea that there should be a balancing between giving and taking in order to maintain an ecological balance. Another meaning that can be taken from “The Giving Tree” is the portrayal of a mother and a son. Here the tree who is ready to give everything for the well being of man acts as mother and the man who takes everything from her acts as child. Here The Giving Tree is personified as a mother who sacrifices all her happiness for the well being of her children.

“The Giving Tree” narrates the relationship between a boy and a tree. When the boy was young he and the tree became really good friends. The tree is sort of provider for the boy and always gives him what he needs, such as vines to swing from, shade to sit in, apples to eat, branches to build a house, a trunk to build a boat and a stump to sit on. As the boy got older the tree gave more, as the boy wanted more from her and because the tree loves the boy a lot she gives him everything she can to make him happy. But he had seen it only as a source to attain progress as well as materialistic gain and moves away from the tree. Finally after a lot of set back from the life he realizes that the real happiness and peace he enjoyed in life is only in the

presence of his mother nature and returns to her and he says: "I don't need very much now," said the boy./'just a quiet place to sit and rest./I am very tired".

The lines "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches" (17-18, 31-32) and "And the tree was happy" (12, 28, 42, 52, and 62) act as refrain in the poem so as to emphasize a point that like a mother who is least bothered about her comforts than the happiness of her children this tree finds happiness in giving everything to her child. He was likely pushing a point that a person who gives is happier than a person who is always receiving, because the person who always takes always needs more.

Here the poet narrates the importance of connectivity with nature. During one's childhood he takes comfort in the solace of Nature and had a happy life. When he begins to back off from her he was not at all satisfied with what he had and begins to run behind the materialistic gains. Yet she gives us everything she has. But being selfish we are not satisfied with that we had and exploit her to the maximum. Finally he realizes that happiness cannot be attained by wealth and returns to the lap of Nature.

Disconnection from Nature is a societal trend that should perhaps be categorized as an epidemic. Author Richard Louv, and his book "Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder," have touched a nerve in America and abroad. The book pulls together a host of studies that indicate alienation from nature has profound human costs, including diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.

Louv submits that the benefits that access to nature provides are subtle but very important. Effects of attention-deficit disorder are reduced when children have regular access to the out-of-doors. Free play in and with nature enhances children's problem-solving ability, creativity, self-esteem, and self-discipline. Merely playing organized sports outdoors does not have the same conditioning and reflective attributes as experiential observation of how nature works.

"Cloony the Clown" by Silverstein is a light simple poem that any child could read and appreciate. As the title of the poem suggests, the poem is about the Cloony the Clown as told by the narrator to the reader. Here Silverstein describes the loneliness of a clown who really wants someone to share his problems with some one. There is no one to care for him; no one to listen to him; no one to understand or to realize him. Few of them are ready to listen to him and every one of them laughed on hearing the sad story of the clown. Now – a -days people are concerned only about their own personal affairs, the problems of their fellow beings are neglected or considered silly.

The poem begins with the appearance of the clown with extremely big shoes, small hat, trombone, green dog and thousand balloons in his skinny and tall body. Although this appearance very well suits for a clown, people do not find accept him as funny. This might be due to the tendency of the society to find fault with others. The clown did his best to make them happy but he could not satisfy his audience.

At last he decided to tell the reason for his grief or the events that created darkness in his soul. The revelation of the story made the rest of the people burst in their laughter. The frustrated artist went to the circus tent a cried for a long time. Here circus tent acts as a symbol which separates the clown from the rest of the world. In this poem we can see the modern man's inability to sympathize with the fellow beings. This poem can be viewed in two ways: one as a simple poem which appeals to the children to a great extend, second as a poem which exposes the tendency of the society to find fault with others or as the inability to sympathize with the fellow being.

In the poem, "Sick", the poet wrote from the perspective of an imaginary girl child who is a little reluctant to go to school. She is telling her parent or guardian so many reasons why she is unable to attend school; she has measles, mumps, chicken pox and so many other diseases. She would much rather stay home in bed than go to school, but then she is told that it is Saturday, and her perspective changes completely. She magically loses all of her dreadful symptoms and leaves to go out and play.

This poem can be viewed in two ways. Firstly it can be comprehended as a simple poem describing the languor of a child to go to school. Like every typical child she too does not want to be in the restrain of a school instead wants to play outside and have a pleasant time there. Secondly it can be interpreted as a poem which describes the temptation of man to rationalize oneself for his shortcomings by saying he is unwell. If one

is sick, he would get exemption from all his duties and obligations. Man is not ready to accept his deficiency instead says it is due to his illness.

Conclusion

Silverstein, a reputed children's poet, marked not only the innocent and exultant characteristic of a child but also his mystical and philosophical nature. Through his poems he states that an estrangement from Nature and fellow beings create an emptiness or bareness in one's life. The poet has idealized the picture of a child life from his own experience as a child by portraying the intense relation he had with nature. Under the benign influence of nature a child can develop the spirit of love, sympathy and fellow being. A child is initially innocent and his mind is like a clean slate and viewed everything with admiration and sanguinity. The poet says that he himself do not know how all these soft feelings had vanished from him. Those moments of one's identity with the Nature will not come back when he realizes the bleak realities of life. Intense stress and psychological trauma of life compels one to deviate from Nature in pursuit of new comforts and pleasures. Later he becomes hectic and self centered that he is not ready even to hear the problems of his fellow beings. He finds fault with others but justify himself for his misdeeds. This alienation ultimately leads to emptiness and meaninglessness in one's life. This can be evidently seen the poems "where the Side Walk Ends", "Forgotten Language", "The Giving Tree", "Cloony the Clown" and "Sick". The materialistic and technological advancement of man could not bring him real happiness. Modern life style isolated him from Nature as well as his fellow beings and created certain behavioral changes in him and made him lonely in his life. According to the poet a child brought up in the midst of nature can become perfect in all respect because nature acts as a mother, teacher, friend, philosopher and guide. Although modern society demands changes one should live in perfect harmony with Nature and fellow beings.

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