

A Study of Hunting in the Select Poems of Galway Kinnell

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Abstract

This paper studies Kinnell's love for animals and birds. He is against the violent act of hunting. Kinnell is mainly concerned with the world and its living beings. To realize the sufferings of animals, Kinnell demonstrates animals' pain by transforming humans into animals. The poem "The Bear," "The Porcupine," and "To Christ Our Lord" describes the violent act of human by hunting these innocent creatures. Thus, in his poems, Kinnell conveys the message of love for animals and birds.

Keywords: Zoomorphism, New historicism, Shamanism, Avesta, Christmas

I. INTRODUCTION

Galway Kinnell was born to Irish and Scottish immigrants on February 1, Providence, the capital city of the U.S. state of Rhode Island. During his childhood, Kinnell was an introvert. He has no interest in going to school, and he spends much of his childhood wandering through the nearby Seekonk woods. He emerges as a poet by reading the hypnotic poems of Edgar Allan Poe.

He has written 11 collections of poetry containing 257 poems. Kinnell also wrote the novel *Black Light* in 1966 and the children's book *How Alligator Missed their Breakfast* in 1982. In addition, Kinnell edited *The Essential Whitman* (1987) and translated *The Essential Rilke* in 1999 with Hannah Liebman. He also penned many essays, which include "The Poetics of Physical World" (1969), and "Thoughts Occasioned by the Most Significant Of Human Events" (1982).

Kinnell was honoured with several prestigious awards. He was awarded both Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for his Selected Poems in 1983. In addition, Kinnell has received the Shelley Prize from the Poetry Society of America and the Medal of Merit

from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He was also recognized as the state poet of Vermont.

II. ZOOMORPHISM

Kinnell loved animals and birds, and he was against the cruel act toward them. Therefore, his poems study the subject of animals. Kinnell's animal poems examine violence and a human taking a form of an animal. Therefore, the subject of animals used in any art form is Zoomorphism. It defines animal attributes as imposed upon non-animal objects like a person, event, or a deity. Especially in poetry, the zoomorphism technique compares human to animal quality.

III. REFLECTION ON NEW HISTORICISM

The poems "The Bear," "The Porcupine," and "To Christ Our Lord" resembles the primitive hunting styles. These three poems describe the violent act of a human being toward innocent beings. Kinnell is against killing animals and birds. The poem "The Bear" is a dramatic picture between the hunter and the bear. The hunter tries every possible way to trap the bear. The bear runs to save his own life. The poet projects the hunter as vicious and malicious.

The hunter tracks the bear without any regrets. The hunting characters of a hunter resemble the primitive hunters. In his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pramod K. Nayar says that the New Historicism theory was revealed by Michael Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt in which they say:

New Historicism adapts a view of history where all events of the past are available to us only in the form of texts. This textuality of history is implicated in the institutional and social power relations that determine what narratives can get written and what forms the narratives must take. There is no such thing as objective history because narratives are, like language, produced in a context and are governed by social, economic and political interests of the dominant groups/institutions. (203)

In the above reference, Foucault and Greenblatt describe history as the form of text. It passes on from generation to generation with the help of text. They said that there is no such thing as objective history because history is like stories and language produced accordingly and governed by the society, economic, and political interests of the particular groups or institutions. For example, during the primitive history of an early man, people hunt innocent animals for their livelihood. Kinnell's hunter reminiscences the primitive age, where early men used stones and wolf ribs for their hunting. They even roast them in the fire. Another two poems, "The Porcupine" and "To Christ Our Lord" also resembles the mind of primitive hunters. In "The Porcupine," the farmer shoots a porcupine and chases after him. The arrow struck the porcupine that made him fall from the trees. He ran to rescue himself. The word "arrow," "coil," and "stabbing" are the evidence of primitive hunting weapons.

Kinnell exposes human hunting and reveals how they killed and consumed their flesh. In "To Christ Our Lord," a boy kills an innocent bird. He killed and cooked it in the fire. He was happy to "kill and eat" (25) rather than realise the pain of a bird.

IV. THE BEAR AND ITS REFLECTION ON SHAMANISM

In the poem "The Bear," the hunter coils a sharpened the wolf's rib and froze it in fat. If the bear swallows the bait, the fat will melt, and the bone will pierce his gut. In the article "Galway Kinnell's 'The Bear': Dream and Technique," John Hobbs states that the "verb sequence – "take," "whittle," "coil," "freeze," and "place" are used to show us Eskimo technique of hunting bears which might be primitive, but the weapon and intention to kill the bear defines the relationship between the hunter and the prey." (242) When the bait disappears, the hunter keep searching until he finds the bear's blood staining snow. The hunter then follows the track of the blood trail "I take a wolf's rib and whittle / it sharp at both ends" (9-10). Later in stanzas 3 and 4, the hunter adopts the beast's behaviour which indicates the transformation of the hunter into a bear:

*at a turd sopped in blood,
and hesitate, and pick it up,
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it
down,
and rise
and go running
On the seventh day,
living by now on blood alone. (31-37)*

The above reference tells that the poet lived by bear blood alone. Then, the poet became hungry and thirsted for blood. These descriptions evoke the images of the hunter transforming into a bear.

In *Myths and Text*, Snyder calls "an immersion of the human body in the demanding physical environment which provokes a 'thirst for cold snow', thereby leading to the 'blind flicker of nerve' (37). Animal shaman figures appear in

Myths and Texts, which describe shamanism originating from hunting and gathering cultures. Therefore, the hunter became a shaman who later transformed into the bear's role. Snyder associates the healing function of the shaman with a poet's role "The poet as the - handler - healer is also speaking as a voice / for another place" (172). According to Snyder, the shaman's function is similar to the poet, who handles and heals others. Kinnell shows a deep interest in animal vitality and the need for a spiritual and mental relationship with the world. Shamanism corresponds to this a highly attractive fashion. In it, the animals are viewed as more powerful and spiritual beings when compared to a man since they live purely instinctive, primitive life. In her work, *Death in the Works of Galway Kinnell*, Malecka states that the shaman is "one ancestor of the bard, the powerful figure combining the functions of priest, genealogist, historian, prophet, visionary and poet so important in Celtic culture and, imaginatively, to Romantic literature." (263) Therefore, Kinnell became a shaman in the modern sense who becomes one with the natural world

In Ling Chung's "Gary Snyder's American-Asian Shamanism," Snyder says shamanism is essential for Native American tribes and tribes in South Asia and Africa. It may be defined "as a system of practices ministered by a shaman or shamaness who functions as the healer, prophet, or controller of spirits and as a sorcerer for his or her community" (39). The poem "The Bear" ends with the transformation of a bear into a human again:

*and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
blows over me, blows off
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear
blood
and rotted stomach
and the ordinary, wretched odor of
blood. (69-73)*

The above climax lines tell the transformation from bear to human, and the hunter realizes the

ill-digested bear blood, his rotten stomach, and an odour of bear blood. Thus, it concludes with the hunter's transformation into a normal being.

V. THE HUNTING OF THE PORCUPINE AND THE PUNISHMENT IN AVESTA

Another poem, "The Porcupine," can be read as a sequel to "The Bear." Kinnell describes a farmer shooting a porcupine asleep in a tree. The poem suggests that the human and porcupine share a series of similar character traits:

*In character
he resembles us in seven ways:
he puts his marks on outhouses,
he alchemizes by moonlight,
he shits on the run,
he uses his tail for climbing,
he chuckles softly to himself when scared,
he's overcrowded if there's more than one
of him per five acres,
his eyes have their own inner redness.
(9-17)*

The reference mentioned above says that the porcupine resembles a human being in seven ways: the porcupine puts his marks in a shed or barn, he admires moonlight, he shits, the porcupine uses the tail to climb like a human using its legs, chuckles in scared, he like solitude, and his eyes has also got redness. A farmer tries to kill the porcupine. He shot a porcupine "three times." (45)

*A farmer shot a porcupine three times
as it dozed on a tree limb. On the way
down it tore open its belly
on a broken branch, hooked its gut,
and went on falling...
Branch (45-51)*

The reference above reveals that the porcupine falls from the tree that tore "its belly / On a broken / Branch" (49-51). A farmer blinds the suffering of the porcupine. Kinnell personified the character of a man as a porcupine. The

porcupine is unaware of his injury and runs through a field of goldenrod to rescue himself from his death. Kinnell uses the porcupine to survive as a sign to a man who always struggles to save himself. In the parallel passage, a persona who has in the course of the poem, come to be transformed into a porcupine himself falls from a high place and flees through a field of goldenrod. He says:

*terrified, seeking home,
and among flowers
I have come to myself empty, the rope
strung out behind me
in the fall sun
suddenly glorified with all my blood.
(86-91)*

The reference mentioned above says the porcupine seeking shelter is similar to the persona seeking a home to survive. The porcupine undergoes hideous torments by the farmer's arrow. He dies like a "Saint Sebastian of the sacred heart" (78) who had been on a deathbed like the "bare snout" (81). Kinnell defines the persona in the image of both the porcupine and the poet himself. He explores persona through his experience of struggle to live and the emptiness of life. Kinnell cut "the rope" (88) that connects him to life. The poet overcomes his emptiness and creates meaning through his creative writing that glorifies him. Kinnell warns the porcupine killers that the Avesta puts the porcupine killers for nine generations in hell:

*The Avesta
puts porcupine killers
into hell for nine generations, sentencing
them
to gnaw out
each other's hearts for the
salts of desire. (57-62)*

The Avesta or Zend-Avesta is a sacred book of Zoroastrianism containing science studies that deal with laws, the origin of the universe and the solar system, and traditional public worship

performed by religious groups. It is the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Therefore, "The Bear," "The Porcupine," and "To Christ Our Lord" reflects the theory of New Historicism with the historical features of primitive hunting and the Bible.

VI. THE HUNTING OF AN INNOCENT BIRD FOR THE SAKE OF A RELIGION

Besides animals, Kinnell also explores the violent act of killing an innocent bird by a human. The poem "To Christ Our Lord" describes a boy who mercilessly killed a bird to celebrate his "Christmas meal. The Christmas grace chilled / The cooked bird, being long-winded and the cold room" (7-8). While killing a bird, a boy's state of mind is both conscious and unconscious.

Finally, he killed a bird "Froze in his gloves, and he wondered, / Famishing, could he fire? Then he fired" (19-20). The climax of the poem reveals the satisfying appetite of a boy with wonder "The bird on the plate / Stared at his stricken appetite" (22-23) because he has no choice "There had been nothing to do but surrender, / To kill and to eat; he ate as he had killed, with wonder" (24-25). A boy is Christian, and he feels that killing an innocent bird for his Christmas meal is surrendering to Christ.

The title "To Christ Our Lord" itself suggested surrendering for Christ. Through him, Kinnell exemplifies the Christians trending culture of killing innocent creatures for a Christmas feast. For Christians, Christmas is the biggest celebration. They celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on December 25. Since time immemorial, maximum Christians lavishly ate and celebrated Christmas as a token of happiness. They get together to feast with friends, Church members, and society. The poem "To Christ Our Lord" is also a sub-title of the poem "The Windhover" which Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. The poem describes the bird's ability to hover in mid-air while hunting prey. The poet admires the bird as it hovers in the air, suggesting it controls the

wind as a man may control the horse. The windhover is a kind of hawk or a falcon that has a tendency to hover in the wind as much as Christ can rule over the universe. Hopkins's bird is energetic compared to Kinnell's bird that is meek and has to surrender for Christ.

Kinnell's idea of opposing the destroying of nature is relatable to Aldo Leopold's view. In his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold says humans exploit water, plants, animals, and soil because they consider them property, like Odysseus's slave girls who do not gain respect.

VII. CONCLUSION

Therefore Kinnell's poetry conveys the message of love and protection toward the animals and birds. He also suggests that these living creatures make the world beautiful, and we must let them live freely without any interference.

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