

WILLIAM COWPER'S *THE CASTAWAY*: "STRUGGLE FROM SELF" AN ANALYSIS

Dr. Richa Tiwari
Jabalpur M. P.

Abstract

There is no more pathetic life-story in English literature than that of William Cowper. He has a history of shy and timid child science his childhood who found the world of men too rough and who withdrew to nature like a wounded animal. From childhood to adulthood he was a shy and sensitive man. He suffered a lot in his life, with these up and down of life he published his poetic volumes one by one. The last year of his life were a long battle with insanity, until death came to him in 1800. His last poem *The Castaway* is a cry of disappointment. In this poem he, under the guise of a man washed overboard in a storm, describes himself perishing in the sight of friend who is powerless to help. Poem *The Castaway* (1799) is inspired by an incident in *Lord Alison's Voyage Round the World*. This was the Cowper's last poem. It is religiously self-revealing. Believing his soul to be doomed forever, Cowper compares his spiritual disaster to that of a sailor swept overboard in a storm. This paper present Cowper's exploration of his own life with the inner struggle of his suffering.

Keywords: insanity, suffer, death, life

William Cowper was one of the most popular poets of his time. He changed the way of writing poetry. He presents the picture of day to day life in his poetry nature and religion plays an important role in his life. The works of Cowper is a foretaste of the coming change in literature. He was a blend of the old and the new, with much of the form of the old and something of the spirit of the new. The chief element of his poetry are a love of nature and a faithful description of her, a strong sympathy with animals and with the weak and oppressed among mankind, playful, honors and tender pathos.

The Castaway is Cowper's last poem. It may, therefore be called his Swan-Song. It was written in 1799 and is based upon an incident in *Lord Anson's Voyage Round The World*. Anson (1697-1762), who become the first lord of admiralty, made his famous voyage round the world in 1740-44. The picture and emotion of the Anson presents and published for the readers in 1748. It is stirring narrative of the sea. The seven vessels of Anson's squadron were reduced to there by storm. After completion of the voyage Anson finally reached home with single ship. Cowper must have read this narrative and one incident in it seems to have so caught his

imagination as to become the stimulus for the present poem. It is a poem which reveals Cowper's inner self believing his soul to be doomed eternally. Cowper's compares his spiritual disaster to that of the sailor who was swept overboard in a storm. He wrote poetry to preserve his sanity. It was a way to distract himself from the terrible brooding on the inevitability of his damnation, and even when his gloom made to focus on subjects other than his own condition. Cowper manages a balance between the subjectivity that injects his own gentle humanity into a poem and the objectivity that allows universal significance, he is at his best.

In the poem *The Castaway*, Cowper presents his inner struggle of mind; it is a poem of his personal struggle which is in narrative form. In the Poem the word "Castaway" means a person who has been swept over-board from his ship and been thrown into the sea. Where *Castaway* means 'one who is ship-wrecked'. The personal element in the poem is very valuable as acquainting us with the poet's spiritual suffering. In the poem the poet compares his own life to the sailor's. The poet has been struggling with the misfortunes of life and he feels that he has been completely over - powered by them. The Ocean of life has swallowed up to the poet just as the Atlantic Ocean swallowed up the sailor. This is how the ordeal experienced by Anson and his crew is depicting in the Walter Robbins account:"the distress with which he struggled, during the three succeeding months will not easily be paralleled in the relation of any former naval expedition"(77).In the poem we can see the spiritual disaster or suffering of Cowper's life. Throughout his life, Cowper suffered from recurrent attack of melancholia and insanity. His life was very unhappy. The poem presents the suffering of life and full of self-pity. When the poem begin the poet says:

Obscurest night involved the sky
The Atlantic billows roared,
When such a destined wretch as I,
.....His floating home forever left.(line 1-6)

On a dark stormy night when the waves of Atlantic Ocean rose high into the air, an ill-fated, unlucky sailor was swept over -board from the ship. Being thrown into the sea, he has lost friends and hopes and everything. Not only was he separated from his friends and deprived of the comfort which hope brings ,but he had for ever lost the ship which was a sort of floating home for him.

In the second stanza of the poem we can see the deep love and the attachment of the sailor, with the ship and the ship captain, but his attachment proved fruitless because he never again saw either of them.

No braver chief could Albion boast
Than he with whom he went
...he loved them both, but both in vain
...nor him beheld, nor her again.(line 7-12)

In his personal life we can see Cowper's deep love for his wife a lot but she was not with him lifelong that loneliness or attachment with the near and dear ones we can see in these lines with pathetic note.

In another stanza of the poem we can see the Sailor struggled desperately with the angry waves in order to save his life.

Not long beneath the whelming brain,
Expert to swim, he lay;

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

.....strength decline,
..... Or courage dies away .(13-17)

Pathos is its key –note. The sailor’s fate stirs our pity. Pathos runs throughout the poem, but is more marked in such lines as:

But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.(18 -19)

The sailor was excellent swimmer. Therefore he did not remain submerged in the overwhelming sea for a long time That is, he rose to the surface before the sea could devour him. He presented his strength and batted against death perseveringly. Finding his situations hopeless, he was desperate and this desperation give him additional strength in his efforts to save himself.

He shouted: nor his friends has fail’d
To check the vessel’s course
.....still before the wind. (line 20-26)

In the fourth stage the ship from which he had seen swept into the sea was driven away by the storm and his comrades could not rescue him. Sailor cried at the top of his voice to rescue him. The sea captain and others try to pick him up but the storm raged so angrily that they were forced to suppress their sympathy and to leave their unfortunate friend struggling in water while the ship was driven away by the storm. We compare the struggle of sailor with the cower’s own life when he was alone in his young age and try to commit suicide and then after the experience of unhinged his brain he spent twelve months in an asylum at St. Alban’s.

In next stanza of the poem:

Some succor yet they could afford;
And, such as storms allows,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
.....should visits more.(line 27-32)

We can see the struggle of the sailor and the forcedness of the sea captain because they could not stop the ship, yet they could offer him some kind of help, the help which a storm permits. But they know that, no matter what help they gave, he was doomed and that he could never reach the shore or be picked up by the ship.

Through this stanza we can analyze the forcedness of the surrounding of the Cowper’s real life. People want to help him but the circumstances and the inner struggle of his mind not supported him.

In another stanza of the poem these line says:
Nor, cruel as it seem’d, could he
Their haste himself condemn
Aware that flight ,in such a sea,
Alone could rescue them:
Yet.....

.....friends so high.(lines 33-38)

Though the sailor could not blame them for leaving him behind yet he felt it very bitter to die when they were so near. Certain lines are noteworthy on account of their psychological truth.

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

When the sailor struggled against the waves he was “supported by despair of life”. It is a fact that when a man knows he has to die he will make a desperate, all out effort to save himself. Similarly, it was very painful to the sailor to have died with his comrades so near:

Yet bitter felt is still to die

Deserted, and his friends so high .(lines -39-40)

For a whole hour, he battled against death. Sometimes appealing for help, some time crying farewell.

He long survives, who lives an hour

In Ocean, self-upheld;

And so long he, with unspent pow’r

His destiny repelled.(lines 41-44)

It means that sailor struggling to save his life in ocean without any means of help. He would be drowned in a short while but he try to save himself in the same way in his real life he was struggling since his childhood but his courage and effort make him alive with lots of difficulties in life.

At last his comrades has sailed a long way off. Tired of his exertions, he was drowned in the sea

For then, by toil subdued, he drunk

The stifling wave, and then he sank (lines 48-49)

The lines depicting the poet’s own spiritual misfortunes are even more poignant (Pathetic; stirring pity) the lines present the pathetic note for the sailor’s fate.

In the next stanza of the poem we can see no other poet wrote an elegy over sailor’s death; but a pathetic account of sailor’s death is found in Lord Anson’s Voyage in which he has to immortalize.

And tears by bards or heroes shed

Alike immortalize the dead. (Line 54-55)

This means that a dead man’s memory can be made permanent by a hero’s account of his fate as much as by a poet in verse.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,

Descanting on his fate

To give the melancholy theme

A more enduring date.(lines 56-59)

The poet has no intension to lead a greater durability to the sad subject of the sailor’s death. But being unfortunate himself , the poet likes to dwell upon the misfortunes of another. This is so natural .Finally; the poet’s reason for writing such a poem is psychologically true. He sees in the sailor’s misfortunes a reflection of his own misfortune and, therefore the sailor’s fate is sort of consolation to him:

But misery still delights to trace

Its semblances in another case.(60-61)

Barry interprets the poem on two levels. First, he identifies the poem’s inspiration, *Anson’s Voyage Round the World*, and reads it as an “imaginative retelling of the death of a sailor lost over board during one of the expeditions of the explorer George Anson”(75). secondly ,he interprets it as a In “metaphor for the isolation and depression felt by Cowper himself”(75), a reading that would explain the shifts of the poetic subject.

In the last part of the poem the poet think that, like the sailor, he has also perished .he has, however, sunk into a stormier and deeper ocean than that into which the sailor sank.

No voice divine the storm allay'd
 No light propitious shone;
 When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
 We perish'd each alone. (Lines 62-65)

The last two lines are indeed, a lament, a cry of pain and grief:

But I beneath in a rougher sea,
 And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he. (Lines 66-67)

This melancholy, this pessimism, this self –pity is romantic in character and anticipates such as poets as Shelly's, Keats and Byron. *The Castaway* is a poem that enters into makes full use of the pathetic powers of the ballads form. The personal element in the poem is very valuable, as acquainting us with the poet's spiritual suffering. Yet it is strictly speaking out of place. A narrative poem should not, as a rule, contain personal references. It should be impersonal and objective. As we go through the beginning of the poem our curiosity is aroused .As we read more, our suspense is increased and we tremble on the edge of anxiety. At last the tragic end of the sailor is reached, and the closing stanzas become deeply personal. We have in this poem an excellent specimen of a short narrative conveying intensity through simple means.

So we can say that Cowper has written the Sailor's story not because he wished to immortalize the sailor in his verse, but because talking of another man's misfortunes is a source of comfort to him in his own misery. The poem reference to the spiritual disaster or suffering of Cowper. Throughout his life, Cowper suffered from recurrent attacks of melancholies and insanity. His life was very unhappy. The last two lines of the poem are therefore, full of self – pity. The poem is, on the whole, marked by simplicity of language though there are certainly words which belong to the poetic diction of eighteenth century. The poem is written in 6 line stanzas, each containing four lines of alternate rhyme and rhyming couplet at the end.

The tragic death of this sailor is feelingly described in Anson's *Voyage Round the World*. If the poet is now describing it in verse, it is only because he sees in the sailor's sad fate a reflection of his own misfortune. The sailor met his death by drowning, while the poet has suffered a spiritual disaster which is more painful than the sailor's experience. The poem becomes deeply personal towards the close. The poet finds in this tragedy a likeness of his own spiritual disaster.

Work cited:

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* 3rd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

William Cowper, *The Castaway, in The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. Baird and Ryskamp III, 214-16 Macmillan Publication 2005.

A Voyage Round the World,77

<https://www.enotes.com>

<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/cries/cris2h.html>