

# "drowning" versus "the trap": perspectives on similar events in poetry and prose

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The poem, by Sid Marty, titled "Drowning", and the third chapter, titled "The Trap", in his novel *Men for the Mountains*, both deal with the same event of a man drowning; however, they each come at it in different ways borne of necessity from the differing structures and restrictions of the respective genres. A poem is limited by the amount of detail and information that it can convey. Instead of using volumes of words, poetry layers carefully selected scenes and specific diction, uses the repetition of words and sounds, and employs subtle shifts in perspective, to create a narrative that has emotional depth and speaks on many levels. The poem "Drowning" stays in the present moment, with all the action taking place over about a thirty-minute time span, and keeps its spotlight primarily on the event of the drowning. Fast-paced and impressionistic, it moves from moment to moment in bursts of images and in chronological time. Whereas the poem places its emphasis on the present and narrows its focus to one singular event, the novel is able to expand an event placing it in a wider context. The sheer volume of materials which can be worked with means that the author is able to freely draw from many timelines as well as points of view. He is able to combine many seemingly unrelated stories to build comprehensive concepts of life, death, and mercy. He can use foreshadowing to slowly build tension, let the tone range from the humorous to the horrific, and while playing with the roles, and role reversals, of the hunter and the hunted, he can explore the idea of what is Man's place in Nature.

One of the many tools available in poetry is the layering of specific words, contrasts, and images, to create mood as well as tell a narrative. The title of the poem, "Drowning", not only tells the reader in one word what is

happening in terms of action and focus but it also creates an image of helplessness in the face of a force stronger than ourselves. The opening scene of the summer's day " when everything is waiting/ lazily for the moment" and " Gordon's child [is] loose/ between the old mare's hoofs", " apparently invulnerable", are layered together to create a mood of subtle vulnerability (162). The first line of the third stanza, " this mood is broken", disrupts the innocent moment between humans and nature by contrasting it against the news that " someone fell in/ the Kicking Horse River" (162). Now the action comes fast and furious with the use of the words " suddenly", " waving", and " yelled", to show the change in the mood and situation (162). The fourth stanza completes the break in tone with the distressing transformation of each of the characters. The old mare who had been " considering" now " jumped away mad" and the child, " loose" and " apparently invulnerable" in one moment, has her laughter broken into " crying" in the next (162). The words in this stanza convey action and anxiety, sadness, anger, and fear.

Besides contrast and juxtaposition, the poem also uses consonance and repetition to reinforce imagery and mood. As the men approach the scene of the accident they are moved into a new setting of unnatural destruction and death. The " blasted walls", " block the traffic", " with rockfalls"(162). Using consonance these words with their heavy and repeating " b" and " r" sounds, emphasize the heaviness of the rocks and create a feeling of struggle and frustration. The final lines " rockfalls / delays the smearing of lesser mammals" not only introduces the imagery of violent and unnatural death,

as well as the word "fall", but it also uses the repeating "s" sound which brings to mind the slippery sliding slope and a feeling of falling (162). There is a noticeable repetition of the word "down" that echoes through three consecutive stanzas. The third line of the fifth stanza, "down that highway", the first line of the sixth stanza, "down the big hill", and the first line in the seventh stanza, "down to the whirlpool" (162). The repeating of the word "down" three times in succession emphasizes the word and gives a sensation of going lower into the depths, or, of dropping. We feel the change from higher to lower as it traces the flight of the "someone" who "fell" (162).

Whereas the novel easily moves back and forth in time and space, as well as shifts in perception and point of view, this poem takes place in the present, moves generally in chronological order, and is mostly told from the author's point of view. There are however subtle shifts from this structure. In the last stanza of part one the author becomes deeply aware of the victim's brother's internal state. The phrase "Knowing he/ must tell it to himself/ for many years" brings the present acknowledgement of his brother's death and pushes it into the future (163). The following, and final line, "Must get it right", encapsulates the heavy responsibility, as well as the burden of grief, that the brother is feeling in this moment (163). Another shift comes in the eighth stanza of part two when the dead man has been dragged out of the water and laid down on the shore. The narrator now becomes aware of the victim's internal emotional state and describes him as "grief struck, surprised/ to find the end of his life" (165). This shift not only connects the characters on an emotional level but it creates humanizing bond between

them as victim, witness, and rescuer, all acknowledge the moment of death. The last stanza is used to contrast this connection with the dis-connection of "the curious": the previously described "bovine tourists", who "gawk, and fool with zoom lenses", hoping to catch a glimpse of death (162-4). This final image creates a sense of bitter irony, hinting that most people stand "on the brink" of life watching, without participating, without understanding, thinking this distance makes them safe from the reality of their own mortality (164).

Whereas the poem is concentrated and specific, the novel is far-reaching and rambling. There is a slow and meditated weaving together of events which is used to change the tone, and the meaning, of the message. The first set of stories introduce the concept of, and accompanying feelings towards, things which are out of their natural place. Marty uses gentle humor to broach this subject, such as using stories about tourists who interrupt his bath-time, coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress, and, having his home invaded by mice. The "unbearable [and] unbelievable" tourist, the "Touri Ignoramus", is used to represent Man, who is disconnected from, and has no understanding of, the power of Nature, and the forces of Life and Death (68-9). Marty is able to create a metaphoric link between the tourist who drowns and the invading mouse who falls into his water trap, set up back at his cabin. Slowly building his connection of concepts he uses the technique of foreshadowing when he writes "all that is needed to spring it is a little curiosity: something that both mice and men possess in abundance...the drowning pool waited below, merciless and serene" thus linking the microcosm to the macrocosm and touching on the theme of the

connectedness of all of Life (74). Unlike the poem which keeps the drowning as the main event, the novel uses the idea of the trap to not only address this concept of " something, yet out of place", but it also uses it to talk about the reversals of role between the hunter and the hunted (74). Man, who normally places himself into the role of the powerful hunter is suddenly, by turn of Fortune, the hunted, trapped under a falling log, and ironically caught in the same trap in which he had killed a bear the day before. This story touches not only on the power of life and death but also on the idea of mercy towards all living things. All of these stories of traps, death, and mercy, are leading up to the tourist who falls into the trap set by the anthropomorphized Nature.

Unlike the poem, Marty spends very little time describing the dynamic, and violent, power of the river, simply stating that "[anyone] who fell into that pool would be battered in the chaotic swirl of rocks and debris" (79). Although the story and the poem mention the ghoulishness of the people who are eager to see the dead man's body, Marty spends much more time detailing the rescue effort itself and humanizing the experience by concentrating on the details of the rescuers. This changes the overall tone of the narrative from bitter to bittersweet. Instead of targeting the violent force of the river Marty strives to spiritualize and anthropomorphize it. He describes the way the water " roars, murmurs, and chuckles to itself like a green living spirit" (79). He continues to focus on the hypnotic forces of water and gravity and writes that the " roar of water washed over [his] senses like a charm...the vanishing point of half-sensed desire—Thanatos,

the God of last wishes." (80). Marty has the space to ponder " What draws people to the very lip of a precipice to gaze down under the spell of gravity... reaching out a tentative hand to feel the cold force of the water"(80). Rather than focus, as the poem does, on the momentary action of the man who falls, Marty asks the big question of Why, and, he makes connections between the macro and the micro, between the spiritual and the physical. He writes, " Then I knew that the ledge was the pan of a trap, but what motive lay behind its creation? I thought, then, that there is a power in the universe that plays with men, the way that men play with mice" (80). It is not so much the man's "[sudden] death that happened as casually as the death of a fly swiped by a horse's tail" but the fact that even after this tragic event occurred " birds sang, people waved hello as they drove to their summer places, children, their faces bright flowers, waved at the wardens who waved back, ' hello, hello.'" (85). Rather than play up the indifference and ignorance of man, Marty instead emphasizes the idea that, by being connected to our own mortality, and the fragility of life, we are able to show mercy and compassion for all life. When he gets home, there is a victim in his water trap, a " small figure slowly [circling] the metal canyon of the drowning pool" and even though "[it is] beyond the mouse's comprehension, as well as its experience, to expect mercy from a predator ...it [swims] on, in defiance of the giant shape that [looms] over it... [refusing] to acknowledge the rule of the trap" (86). As he spares the life of the mouse, and scoops the " small survivor out to dry in front of the stove", the narrative ends on hopeful note rather than one of bitter irony (86).

The genre of novel writing allows the author the freedom to expand settings and characters, to draw from many moods and timelines, to ask, and answer, big questions and concepts, as well as to use foreshadowing and bring together many seemingly unrelated stories with which to make his point. He may use as many words as he wants and create poetic images but the author must adhere to the rules of English and punctuation. In contrast, the genre of poetry is very limited in size but more open in structure. The author of a poem can ignore the rules of English, leaving out all punctuation, capitalizing for emphasis, and using rhythm and sounds to create mood and meaning. The poem is shorter than the novel but demands interpretation and awareness to detail; by accepting the separate genres of these works, a reader can appreciate the slow build and connectivity of the novel as well as the clever and exacting combination of words, sounds, and spaces, that are created by the poet.

## **Works Cited**

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