

Elements of pastoral
literary mode in alan
hollinghurst's the
swimming-pool libra...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Summary: This essay's purpose is to explore the use of the pastoral technique as a specific dominion for English homoerotic literature, focusing on Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Swimming-pool Library*. I make an attempt to look into the main features of classic pastoral mode incorporated in English landscape culture and also to find the contrasting characteristics of anti-pastoral literature.

This essay, therefore, is meant to determine whether and, if so, how the pastoral traditions are made use of, in the process of re-establishing the technique of pastoral presentation to serve the needs of gay writing at the end of the twenty-first century. The term pastoral is used in three broadly different ways.

The pastoral is a historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry, developed into drama and more recently could be recognized in novels. 1] It is the use of it, in novels, what is of a special interest for my essay; therefore, I will focus on the course of its evolving as a literary mode which reverberates powerfully in many recent works and more specifically in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Considering the tendencies of literary devices as regards their transformation and reformulation in fiction, the challenge of this paper lies in discovering the particular usage of the pastoral literary mode in the novel and also to demonstrate how, taking into account the use of anti-pastoral, it outclasses the classically known application of former.

I will also make an attempt to find an answer to the question what has made this tradition to be so closely related to homoerotic literature. In its essence,

the pastoral literary mode depicts a utopian scene of countryside with the naturalness and innocence of its inhabitants, which is displayed in a direct contrast to the decadent urban life. Although pastoral works are written from the point of view of shepherds, they are always penned by highly sophisticated, urban poets. Some related concerns in pastoral works are the tensions between nature and art, the real and the deal, and the actual and the mythical.

English Renaissance pastoral has classical roots, but contains distinctly contemporary English elements as well. Among them “ humanism, sentimentality, depictions of courtly reality, a concern with real life, and the use of satire and comedy. ” I think, it has been employed as a technique to assume a role of a shield rendering gayness invisible and imperceptible as well. However, it is very important that we make a proper distinction between the pastoral literary mode and nature literature, what the former is not. Indeed pastoral lit

As a set of binary oppositions to be considered in their use in the novel, I need to touch upon the anti-pastoral conception as well. By contrast, anti-pastoral, suggests a poetics of undermining, in which pastoral conventions are deployed or alluded to, in order to suggest or declare the limitations of those conventions, or their downright falsity.

If pastoral suggests that rural life offers freedom, anti-pastoral may proclaim it is a prison-house, and the farmers slaves. A defining feature of such poetry has been its realistic treatment of labour, protest against idealising poetic

traditions, and in some cases outcry against political conditions related to land enclosure.

The pastoral, as a genre can be traced back to the Greek poet Theocritus (316 -260 B. C.) who used the pastoral literary technique to entertain the sophisticated Alexandrian court of Ptolemy. Nonetheless, it was Virgil (70 -90 A. D.) who, two centuries later, writing with the Idylls very much in mind, created the literary device of Arcadia that has become the generic name for the location of all pastoral retreats. As Lawrence Buell has argued: “

Pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that Western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without”. [7] Since ancient times nature has been part of the cultural concept in the form of landscape where literature has placed and redirected cultural emotions.

Arcadia, as mentioned before, was originally a vision of pastoralism and harmony with nature. In its very idea this admiration of nature intended to provide the inhabitants of urban centres with a metaphysical escape. Put differently, the ancient reader of verses could imagine a vanished pastoral setting, and doing he was also able to retreat from the stress and strain of urban or, in fact, non-idealised, real life. And as Sales and Lucas point it out, pastoral literature has been frequently labelled conservative due to its nostalgic undertones and style of escapism. 8] Instead of facing the reality, these texts tend to have an underlying sense of yearning for an early, and already gone, period of time; they represent an unrealistic dream of a parallel world. Thus, certainly, the question that arises concerns the myth of Arcadian survival and more specifically what makes this tradition so closely related to homoerotic literature. Is it because homoerotic culture is <https://assignbuster.com/elements-of-pastoral-literary-mode-in-alan-hollinghursts-the-swimming-pool-library/>

especially prone to long for the imaginary, sentimental, metaphysical nature of Arcadia?

This is a questions to be only deciphered through the analysis of Arcadia's secrets. Another way of framing the focus question of this paper is to explore the bucolic in its aspect of escapism; Arcadia is a touchstone theme connecting the idea of pastoralism to Alan Hollinghurst's novel in question. Indeed the Arcadian, as Terry Gifford views it is a "celebration of retreat which is its strength and its inherent weakness. When retreat is an end in itself, pastoral is merely escapist.

Pastoral discourse essentially unfolds a retreat which may, either reveal an escape from the complexity of the city, the court, the present, "our manners", or certainly to explore them. It is because retreat is a device of reflecting upon the present that the pastoral is able to "glance at different matters", as George Puttenham, put it, in 1589. This side of the pastoralism is largely attractive for homoerotic literature as that retreat can be "from 'fierce desire', which would inevitably be as 'selfish' as it would be 'voluptuous'" as well. As Rictor Norton puts it, pastoralism has always been a privileged vehicle for homoerotic culture to express itself.

If literary Arcadia has always been a reserved realm for social renegades, particularly gay individuals, Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* reasserts tradition, but also challenges it. Thereby, the pastoral can be of great help for rendering gayness invisible and imperceptible along with its daily agenda.

In other words, the pastoral literary mode, with its subtleties and developed anti-pastoral elements into it, offers a great deal of prospects for the uneasy situation of homosexuality, hence the continual success of the genre among gay writers. However, representation of nature as idyllic landscape, is an intrinsic part of English culture. English identity has frequently been based on the romantic idealization of nature as a political, aesthetic, nostalgic, imperialistic and psychic strategy and scenario of national as well as emotional contention and pride.

The idyllic landscape, therefore, has a romantic effect on a whole culture, one that literature has explored. Indeed in some critics' view, the old English novel "was thought to display national character, contemporary English fiction questions [our] experiences of national identity". This aesthetic conception of nature as presenting the lines of rolling hills and spires of medieval parish churches alike, as a constant feature in English culture and literature, is also a basic building block for the novels by Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte.

Seen through a (post)colonial context, Africa is a point where landscape and identity intermingle. As Burden puts it, there is "feminine and a masculine spatial practice" in Africa. The examples given are of English male explorers who "penetrated the heart of darkness in Victorian Africa, as a space to be conquered". Recalling Simon Gikandi, the critic points out the new role that women - and, I would add, gays - could play as colonisers, freed from the (hetero)normative restrictions of the metropolis. In principle, as it was widely popular, Africa was seen as a replacement of Arcadia.

Thereby a space where white people –especially officers with unconventional sexual orientation – enjoyed sexual freedom. This particular situation can be seen in Hollinghurst’s novel, *The Swimming-pool Library*, where it is in the form of secondary narrative voice of Charles Nantwich which is made known to the reader through his diaries kept at the time of his service in the colonies. Going through his notes via Will’s role in the novel, we realise the elders view on the Sudanese savannah and its association with a (gay) male practice.

Nantwich depicts himself as an explorer who symbolically “ penetrates” the heart of Africa and its peoples. He describes “ the Nuba people enchanting, with an openness and simplicity sadly lacking among the people of the north”. Their natural state is presented as, “ largely or wholly naked, standing round under dead-looking trees, gazing at Aocks of goats or herds of cattle”, which is certainly very appealing to the aristocrat. At this point it is quite simple for Charles to make a connection with the myth of Arcadia.

However, in this setting where politics and priorities diverge, his perception appears immensely controversial. On the one hand it is idyllic for the colonizer, but on the other hand it does not look so attractive to the colonized. Indeed, Africa allows him and his peers a (sexual) freedom unimagined in England, nevertheless, freedom in Arcadia is just a dream, that being the case Charles and the black men around him do not, truly, have any freedom. In fact, Charles is in the role of a tiny particle functioning in the colossal machine of English imperialism.

As readers, we never truly gain insight into the situation of the local population and their point of view is never taken to be of any significance. Consequently, the imbalanced status of the people involved becomes obvious. Unquestionably, the idealized and revered landscapes are spoiled by the prospect of the exploitation taking place around, and the existing norms of subordination turn the things into a complete contradiction with the Idyllic world. As a matter of fact, the African landscape, with its innate beauty and unconquered wilderness with isolated villages represent the backside of Charles's exclusive love affair, with his servant Taha. It is merely through a utopian construct that the affairs can be represented: Africa works as an aesthetic scenario and the servant is akin to an Italian baroque painting in Charles's imagery. Once back in England, the hero attempts to relive the spell of African sunsets. That is how, quite callously, Taha is forced out of his motherland and customs, no matter what the youth's feelings and/or desires are. The will of the colonizer is imposed on the colonized.

Broadly speaking, it is questionable whether Nantwich's narrative in *The Swimming-pool Library* is at once recognizable as pastoral, and the idea of retreat linked directly to Arcadia's aspect of escapism. Nevertheless, Charles's behaviour is an attempt to retreat from "reality" with a subsequent return. Yet, on his return, he does not bring social solutions from Arcadia as classic pastorals in many scenarios do. What is more, now, back in his own country, Charles is trapped, smeared as a gay black-worshiper, and also imprisoned as a deviant. At this point the anti-pastoral overtones in the novel become unmistakable.

Although, the idyllic retreat into the African savannah looks cheerful, his return home is just a final role-play, that simply reaffirms the illusion they lived in. Reality appears to be contrasting to the dream overwhelmingly, which are the anti-pastoral nuances, further developed, by contemporary literature. The Arcadian realm appears to be a mirage or a bobble breaking apart.

As Gifford regards it, one of the most problematic sides of anti-pastoralism lies in “ finding a voice that can be celebratory whilst corrective, that does not adopt the very vices it is criticising”. 24] Nantwich’s depiction of his innocent existence in Africa, in fact, is an ironic expression of what is considered definitively anti-pastoral. The ironic undertones of the scene seem to be too obvious, and no solution is conceivable for this character. As a result, Arcadia of his imagination fails and the anti-pastoral decidedly takes its place. Considering the Arcadian literary tradition and analysing Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library*, we can see another forceful illusionary scenario, a utopia of a world apparently populated by gay men only.

Quite relevant to the pastoral and anti-pastoral also, is threat posed by AIDS. It remains an issue implied and scarcely talked about and its grizzly aspects are perceived as another example for the character’s disappointment. Like many of their predecessors, these gay men search for a utopian Arcadia where they can come to terms, live, and give expression to their experiences. The process of criminalization of homosexuality at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of twenty-first centuries brought profound disappointments for the gay community.

<https://assignbuster.com/elements-of-pastoral-literary-mode-in-alan-hollinghursts-the-swimming-pool-library/>

Beyond question, gay individuals suffered from the restrictions of their liberties, and yet, AIDS appears to be another obstacle for them to get through. The “ Trouble for Men” even brings more serious disillusionment leading to eruption of a more conspicuous homophobia than what was before. Will, the novel’s sexy protagonist, it would seem aided to a high degree by his social status enjoys his sexual liberty. Till, of course, the plight of AIDS has an effect of sobering down on him. It pierces the bubble of Will’s self engrossed sense of sexual freedom to cruise and entertain in a gay wonderland.

It is quite in the light of the pastoral mode that we see the whole structure of pornographic video production established to satisfy the fetishist desires and longings of white people. Fictionally woven, feeling nostalgic about the past of colonialism and holding imaginatively constructed colonial, superior positions, people (quite morally ambivalent) like Charles, apparently still long for that past of retreat and enjoyed sexual liberty, as they need to produce fetishist materials to submerge back into the times when intercourse with black and incredibly masculine looking male individuals, in the realm of Arcadia, was fairly easy.

The film making conspirators, in the face of Charles and photographer Ronald Staines, in disguise of philanthropy, take advantage of the, ethnically diverse, working class boys’ presence to produce images to smooth the rough edges of the disenchantment they are placed into. In those images the revived utopian world feeds the fantasy of the perverts attracted to the Empire and slumming.

In other words the fetish, as a magical object, disregarding the trappings and psycho-sexual drama of colonialism, makes an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the past, comforting the discrepancies. To my mind, it is at this point that *The Swimming-pool Library* adopts a melancholic pastoral outlook. My argument will be reinforced considering Charles's character. Charles fails getting over the illusion he used to live in; back in his own country he built the utopian world around himself one more time.

He wakes up from the dream world when only experiencing the traumatic events such as his imprisonment. His encircling himself with pieces of art to maintain this image of Arcadia, in his private home, is a proof to it, so also is his assumed role of philanthropist, used to allure working class boys, for the production of pornographic images of the time lost, to feed his imagination. This is, certainly, a desperate attempt for Charles to revive his sexual illusions, and consequently feed his longings for and nostalgia of a former colonially constructed pornocopia.

Literary Arcadia in Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* reasserts tradition, but also challenges it. In terms of the further development of the anti-pastoral elements in itself, the novel tends to outclass and preponderate over the canon; it has its additional contribution to the formulations of a bucolic landscape in English literature and culture and its adaptation of a new and broader basis and approach. Thereby, we can observe how the English landscape and "other" landscapes -particularly in the colonies- are both used and reshaped in this spirit.

In other words, Hollinghurst's characters are seen experiencing landscape as part of their cultural orientation as regards various issues of forming identity in terms of gender, nationality, race, and class. Indeed, some of his characters are longing for idealistic times already left behind where nature is a medium recasting their own identities in the surrounding world.

Nevertheless, the envisioned stereotypical English landscape or utopia -with picturesque countryside, running streams, forests and dwellings- ultimately turns out to be illusionary.

Consequently it affects the anti-pastoral perception of most of the story. At this point a question about the classical construct of Arcadia arises, as to what extent that idealized world can serve our purposes? To a restricted one, I reckon. After all, African savannah, the idealized English nature, or imagined landscapes can have their application in literature, to a certain or limited degree. The boundaries between pastoral and anti-pastoral are not invariably easy to differentiate. What is more, they do not follow a chronological order either. At times, they can even get synthesised in a single body.

At any rate, as it is well seen in Hollinghurst's novel, Arcadia can only serve as a realm for retreat from reality for English society in general, and for the sexual dissidents in particular, as seen in Charles Nantwich's case. But it is clear that anyhow the dream soon dwindles away, and then, inevitably, one has to face the merciless "reality": Escapism is transient, which is well known to those who have experienced it. To sum up, pastoral tradition in gay identity and culture is all too clear in Hollinghurst's novel. With its subtleties,

Arcadia as a construct, revised and reshaped, offers a great deal of prospects.

Perhaps, due to the increasingly blurred boundaries between the concepts of pastoral and anti-pastoral the new generation of gay writers feel the necessity of a new and wider approach concept of Arcadia. Undeniably, *The Swimming-Pool Library* has homosexual identity as its primary interest and factor, however, as the writer is renegotiating and reformulating literature with sublimated cultural anxieties between different constructs, he also seem to play with the classical techniques applied through the prism of the colonial heritage, attempting to find a compromise between his critique of the Empire, of gay amorality and his own sexuality.