
JESSE STUART'S "DAWN OF REMEMBERED SPRING"

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Jesse Stuart has always had a controversial reputation. As William S. Ward states in his *Literary History of Kentucky*:

During his lifetime [Stuart] was accustomed to three critical reactions: an uncritical, almost mindless adulation that would make him one of America's great authors; an indifference close to scorn that either ignored him or dismissed him summarily as an undisciplined writer with few ideas and small literary merit; and a more temperate view which had lamented shortcomings while readily citing strengths and offering encouragement and critical advice. (244-45)

Today Stuart is probably regarded by the "serious" academic establishment as "merely" a regionalist, a quaint and rapidly outdated "Kentucky" or "Appalachian" writer with a multitude of sins and few graces (although even as recently as 1977 Ruel E. Foster asserted that "Jesse Stuart is emerging as one of the leading short story writers of American literature" [40]). In this paper I join with those who recognize Stuart's strengths, chiefly the universality of some of his best works. If Stuart mirrors his community -- his particular time and place -- as he surely does, much of his work is likewise a mirror of *life*.

The cultures and heritages of particular places and peoples are now more than even seen as creating the themes in the larger tapestry of American literature. Literary regionalism is perhaps finally being taken seriously. As novelist Lee Smith replied to Edwin T. Arnold when asked why her "regional" novel *Oral History* had been so widely reviewed:

I think it has something to do with the old thing you always tell your students: the more specific to the particular detail you are then the more universal the story will be. (243)

Jesse Stuart is certainly "specific to the particular detail" -- a Kentucky hill country setting, the use of mountain dialect, and Appalachian characters -- in his short story "Dawn of Remembered Spring" which also recreates enduring and universal human situations and conflicts. It is often said of regional literature that it somehow "transcends" its regionalness or "goes beyond" local color; those who say this are supposedly vesting significance in this regional literature but in a backhanded way. The best regional literature does not somehow transcend its particularity but rather find its significance *in* it.

"Dawn of Remembered Spring" first appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in June 1942 and then was reprinted as the title story of a Stuart short story collection in 1955. All of the stories in the collection deal with snakes. "Dawn of Remembered Spring" is the story of a young boy, Shan (Stuart's alter ego in many short stories), who goes out

against his mother's wishes to battle the fearsome water moccasins which infest the neighborhood. Snakes are the great fear of the neighborhood and a real threat: one has bitten Shan's friend Roy Deer, who lies near death at the story's beginning. In the first part of the story Shan wades through the creek, killing water moccasins, until he has astonishingly killed fifty-three.

The story takes a rather unexpected turn, however, just before the conclusion. After he has killed the fifty-three water moccasins and is on his way home, triumphantly wondering, "What will Mom think when I tell her I've killed fifty-three water moccasins" (9), Shan comes unexpectedly upon the sight of two copperheads, as it appears to him, locked in mortal combat -- "snakes a-fightin'." As Shan describes them: "They were wrapped around each other. Their lidless eyes looked into each other's eyes. Their hard lips touched each other's lips. They did not move. They did not pay any attention to me. They looked at one another" (9). Shan wants to kill them, "if they don't kill one another" (9), but just before he does, old Uncle Alf Skinner comes up and realizes that the snakes are not actually fighting: "Snakes a-fightin', Shan you are too young to know! It's snakes in love! Don't kill 'em -- just keep your eye on 'em until I bring Martha over here! She's never seen snakes in love!" (9-10). In fact, Uncle Alf rounds up almost the entire neighborhood, his wife Martha, Shan's mother and father, Art and Sadie Baker, Tom and Ethel Riggs. The people of the community watch in fascination and awe as the snakes mate, spotlighted in a glow of sunshine in the midst of the shadowy hollow. Aunt Martha says, "I'll declare . . . I've lived all my life and I never saw this. I've wondered about snakes! (10). And Shan's mother states, "It's the first time ever I saw anything like this" (11).

When his father tells him to "hurry to the house" and cut his stove wood, Shan still says, "I'd like to kill these copperheads" (11). But everyone standing around watching the snakes laughs at Shan. They appear to be very happy rather than appalled by the snakes, and their fascination and good humor are a mystery to Shan:

Uncle Alf and Aunt Martha laughed as I walked down the path carrying my club. It was something -- I didn't know what; all the crowd watching the snakes were smiling. Their faces were made over new. The snakes had done something to them. Their wrinkled faces were as bright as the spring sunlight on the bluff; their eyes were shiny as the creek was in the noonday sunlight. And they laughed and talked to one another. I heard their laughter grow fainter as I walked down the path toward the house. Their laughter was louder than the wild honeybees I had heard swarming over the shoemaker, alderberry, and wild phlox blossoms along the creek. (11)

Thus, the story ends with Shan's mystification and wonder at the adults' reaction to the snakes "in love."

The external conflict between Shan and the snakes, and in a larger context between the community and the snakes, is the major conflict in the story. This is the universal struggle between civilization and nature. There is, in one dimension, an archetypal confrontation between good and evil -- between the hero and the monster. Snakes are archetypally feared and associated with evil, while the innocent and courageous protector is associated with good. Shan is in some ways comparable to the mythic or cultural hero, to Beowulf, St. George, or the Biblical David, who fights against the dragon/monster/"worm" in order to defend his community and achieve personal renown. Shan is the folk hero who bravely challenges the unknown. Just as David met Goliath armed only with a slingshot and five smooth stones, Shan goes forth to challenge the snakes with only a wild-plum sprout with a knot of roots at the end as his club -- "It would be good to hit water moccasins with," he understates (4). The conflict between hero and monster is a part of the classical western literary tradition, particularly of the folk and oral literature that formed a great part of Stuart's tradition. It is, of course, ironic that in the latter part of the story the snakes become symbolic of the life-affirming procreative instinct rather than remaining the archetypal enemy, but the dramatic

shift in their symbolic value in the second half of the story forms part of Stuart's artistry, his reliance on indirection.

A second dimension of the conflict between Shan and the snakes is the conflict between man and nature, the forces of nature represented by the snakes. The struggle between man and nature has been continuous and continues, particularly in rural areas where man must constantly try to wrest civilization from nature by clearing and cultivating land. Shan's conflict with nature is indeed prodigious -- he succeeds in killing fifty-three snakes -- but he is doomed to ultimate failure. The reader knows that no matter how many snakes Shan kills, he can never kill them all. At the very beginning of the story, when Shan says to his mother, "All water moccasins ought to be killed, hadn't they, Mom?" her reply is: "Yes, they're pizen things, but you can't kill them. . . . They're in all these creeks around here. There's so many of them we can't kill 'em all" (3). Shan's Pa has "mown the weeds along the path with a scythe" (4), but the snakes are constantly taking back what man has taken from them. As Shan's Pa says: "It's because these woods haven't been burnt out in years. . . . Back when I's a boy the old people burnt the woods out every spring to kill the snakes. Got so anymore there isn't enough good timber for a board tree and people have quit burning up the good timber. Snakes are about to take the woods again" (7). There will always be more snakes, and the ironic spectacle of the snakes' mating at the end of the story suggests that man and nature will always be in opposition. The point is that man must learn to live with nature, that in fact the enemy is not nature but man's irrational misunderstanding of nature and his role in it.

These external conflicts of the story -- Shan versus the snakes and man versus nature -- are intricately bound to one of the story's major themes, the theme of initiation, also taking in the universal conflicts between youth and age and life and death. Shan sets out to become a man: "It was my day of freedom, too, when Mom and Pa were gone and I was left alone. I would like to be a man now, I thought; I'd love to plow the mules, run a farm, and kill snakes" (4-5). Shan disobeys his mother -- "Everybody gone, I thought. I am left alone. I'll do as I please. A water moccasin bit Roy Deer but a water moccasin will never bite me. I'll get me a club from this wild-plum thicket and I'll wade up the creek killing water moccasins" (4). Confrontation with parental authority is certainly a situation with which most readers can empathize. In fact, confronting parental authority is a part of the maturation experience.

Likewise initiation often involves conflict between youth and age, innocence and experience. In this story that conflict is enacted by Shan and the older members of the community. Shan's immature perceptions are different from those of his elders. Whereas Shan sees the copperheads as "a fightin'," the elders, those specifically identified being married couples, perceive the snakes as "in love." Shan must eventually confront the difference between his perception of the snakes and the perception of the other members of the community. The older members of the community can see something that Shan cannot.

Shan's gaining of wisdom and his movement toward manhood in the story appear to pass through several stages. At first, he is simply the hero challenging the monster, David slaying Goliath. He gets simple satisfaction from his success at killing so many of the snakes. But he must learn the maturer wisdom -- that there is more to life than killing, that is, confronting and subduing nature, for the killing of the snakes is a never-ending task. And Shan must also learn that his idea of manhood -- plowing, farming, killing -- must be tempered. Stuart presents the sight of the mating copperheads, a symbol of love, intimacy, and sexuality, so that Shan can grow beyond the deeply rooted -- but immature -- masculine instinct for conquest and conquering. While everyone stands around watching the snakes mate, fears are dissipated, and the snakes are not the dreaded enemy. As Ruel E. Foster states, "the old people momentarily change and grow with wonder and delight -- a kind of metamorphosis. In classical mythology the sight of serpents could frequently work a metamorphosis" (48).

Shan's experience of seeing the people's reactions to the snakes "in love" is actually the beginning of his awakening, his initiation (metamorphosis) -- the "dawning" of his perception of the adult world, death and life -- when he witnesses the joy of the community people as they are literally transfixed (and transformed) by witnessing the life-affirmative mating snakes. The experience makes them laugh, happy to recognize the procreative instinct in a form which many of them have never seen before, and yet obviously know -- the remembered spring when they were too young. In addition there is the careful juxtaposition at this point of Roy Deer's death with Shan's moment of insight. Thus, the somewhat enigmatic title of the story, "Dawn of Remembered Spring" (how can something be remembered and dawning at the same time?) may be understood in this way: it contains two words denoting beginning, rebirth, awakening -- "dawn" and "spring." And "remembered" suggests something deeply imbedded in the psyche of those participating in the story. A new awareness is dawning for Shan of both the mythic beginnings of mankind and the psychic beginnings of maturity and initiation into adulthood. As the old people remember their own spring, Shan's is just beginning. This, too, is a universal situation: all of us, no matter who or where, at some time confront ourselves, our world, our relationships with others, as we mature and are initiated into the fellowship and knowledge of humanity.

We are currently experiencing in American life and in American literature a pluralism which finds significance in the regional and ethnic experience. One no longer has to feel ashamed of one's ethnic heritage, and indeed the new pluralistic spirit in America is making us all prouder of who we are. But the greatest asset of the best local and regional literature is still its universality, the quality which makes it applicable to and significant for all people. As Flannery O'Connor said: "The best American fiction has always been regional. . . . It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking" (54).

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