

LONELINESS IN
MODERN
AMERICAN
FICTION

A. K. Mishra

LONELINESS IN MODERN AMERICAN FICTION

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
S. SHERWOOD ANDERSON, ERNEST HEMINGWAY
AND T. THOMAS WOLFE,

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Loneliness in Modern American Fiction is a provocative study of a major theme of modern literature. According to Dr. Mishra, loneliness in traditional literature is situational, dialectical: it points to a state beyond itself where there is no loneliness. But the twentieth century American novelist depicts man in a situation that is anything but dialectical and contains within it no opposite possibilities. Basing his study on Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe, Dr. Mishra shows that loneliness is not physical separation, it is not even a yearning for community, rather an expression of metaphysical homelessness. There are two mutations of loneliness: the loneliness of separation, loss & helplessness and the loneliness of subjective fulfilment ('aloneness'). Dr. Mishra discovers in modern American novelists a pattern of search and discovery, "a progression from the tortured realization of loneliness to a calm acceptance of it, from the impotent striving of the anonymous man to the fruitful aloneness of the creator, from the lost and forlorn no-man to Everyman".

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IN MEMORY OF

MY FATHER—

THE BEST TEACHER

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A.K.M.

Foreword

Loneliness is not an American invention, although "the lonely crowd" may be. "How insular and pathetically solitary are all the people we know," said Emerson. Loneliness is inherent in the human condition. It is a paradox that in our very loneliness we recognize our kinship to others and lament our alienation from them, which makes it a poignant and universal theme in world literature. The variations on that theme in American literature, as Dr. Mishra's fine study demonstrates, are intriguing and significant. Thornton Wilder has identified "the American loneliness" as "the loneliness that accompanies independence and the uneasiness that accompanies freedom.... Americans constantly feel that the whole world's thinking has to be done over again.... They did not only leave the Old World, they repudiated it. Americans start from scratch." Emily Dickinson called loneliness "The Horror not to be surveyed," yet at the same time "The Maker of the soul/Its Caverns and its Corridors/Illuminate—or seal."

Dr. Mishra who began exploring his subject nearly twenty years ago when we met at the American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad, illuminates the caverns and corridors of writers and works we had assumed to be familiar but can now, because of his study, understand better. He shows us the distinctive elements in Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe relating to his theme. They show, as Dr. Mishra tells us, "what happens when the cords that bind man with realities external to himself are severed and he is set adrift." Dr. Mishra finds their fictional characters "impressionable centres of consciousness, reflecting, on the one hand, the dislocations of modern life and, on the other, the experience and vision of their creators." He finds in his novelists a "pattern of search and discovery, a progression from the tortured realization of loneliness to a calm acceptance of it; from

the impotent striving of the anonymous man to the fruitful aloneness of the creator, from the lost and forlorn no-man to Everyman."

Dr. Mishra's thematic study draws not only on the fiction itself but also on philosophical insights and the backgrounds of American culture and literary tradition. His central chapters suggestively titled "The Transparent Wall" (on Anderson), "Assault on the Wall" (on Hemingway), and "The Insurmountable wall" (on Wolfe), see the "wall as a recurrent symbol of the barrier to communion and fulfillment." The concluding chapter, "From Loneliness to Aloneness," relates vision and technique and shows how the theme of loneliness and the thwarted inner life has influenced the art of fiction.

Dr. Mishra's sensible study, well written and well designed, shows convincingly how these major writers whom he finds in surprising agreement about the causes of and resources against loneliness, explore a common theme and contribute to a better understanding of man's isolation in America and, by implication, in modern industrial society. His book has been worth waiting for.

Salt Lake City, Utah
March, 1984

William Mulder
Professor of English
University of Utah

Preface

The problem of human loneliness can be studied in the abstract as philosophers do or with reference to changing social and psychological climate as sociologists do. It is not my intention to make excursions into philosophy, sociology and psychology. My objective is implied in the title of this book : it is a study of the theme of loneliness with reference to three major American novelists, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. These writers bring to the writing of fiction vastly different talents and they belong to no recognisable literary group. But together they represent a cross-section of modern American fiction and each one of them, in his own distinctive way, is acutely concerned with the problem of human loneliness.

The novel presents man in a multiplicity of relationships with his fellow human beings, time and the timeless order. These writers show what happens when the cords that bind man with realities external to himself are severed and he is set adrift. The drifter is lonely; he belongs to no one and to nothing. Loneliness impoverishes man; it threatens him with defeat and destruction. But at the same time, it is a challenge to his sense of honour and instinct for survival. The above mentioned writers present many facets of loneliness. Among a variety of characters created by them some wither away in silence, some approach the heroic in their determination to go it alone and others try to surmount their loneliness with the aid of their inner resources. These characters serve as acutely impressionable centres of consciousness reflecting, on the one hand, the dislocations of modern life and on the other, the experience and vision of their creators. Viewed as a whole, the writings of these novelists fall into a pattern of search and discovery. There is a progression from the tortured realization of loneliness to a calm acceptance of it; from the impotent striving of the anonymous

man to the fruitful aloneness of the creator; from the lost and forlorn no-man to Everyman.

Loneliness which seems to be the dominant theme of modern American fiction as well as that of the post-war European literature is both fascinating and elusive. The experience of loneliness finds expression in a bewildering variety of feelings and responses. It has been my endeavour to discover a pattern underlying the variety. Not all lonely men are victims of their environment. While to some loneliness is a token of defeat, to others it is a badge of triumph. Following up a valuable distinction made by J. Krishnamurti between loneliness and aloneness, I have tried to show that the antithesis of loneliness, as envisaged by these writers, is aloneness and not togetherness or integration with the community. In a sense, this distinction between loneliness and aloneness constitutes the silent centre of my study.

In the fiction of Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe the 'wall' is a recurrent symbol of barrier to communion and fulfilment. While the Anderson protagonist wastes behind the wall, the Hemingway protagonist makes a symbolic assault on the wall through his determination to survive alone by courage and discipline. Thomas Wolfe is a category by himself. Basing his novels on the myth of the American's search for home and father, Wolfe shows that man is a born stranger. Far from being peculiar to America or the twentieth century, Wolfe says that loneliness is the very weather of man's life: the wall is insurmountable. The Wolfean protagonist tries to transmute his loneliness into the aloneness of the creative artist.

Preoccupation with loneliness and the thwarted inner life has influenced the art of fiction. The last chapter, *From Loneliness to Aloneness* is more than a summing-up. There emerge certain distinct patterns from the fiction of these writers which relate both to their vision and technique. These writers explore a common theme and thus contribute to a better understanding of man's isolation in America and, by implication, in the modern industrial society. They are also in surprising agreement about the causes of and resources against loneliness.

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O Lonesomeness! my home,
lonesomeness. Too long
have I lived wildly
in wild remoteness to
return to thee without tears :

—Nietzsche

Thus Spake Zarathustra

1

The Lonely Crowd

Loneliness is not an exclusively modern or American experience. It is as old as man and as pervasive and intractable as feelings of joy and sorrow. As an experience it cuts across boundaries of place and time. The Old Testament is a haunting expression of human loneliness. Marlowe, Shakespeare, Browne, Pascal and many others had known loneliness as a frightening malady of the soul. "He whose exults in loneliness is either a wild beast or God"¹, wrote Bacon. Nothing in contemporary literature surpasses the loneliness of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. But, nevertheless, these are exceptional cases, the stuff of myth and poetry. Man was so firmly entrenched in faith, in a stable social and ethical order and above all, in the idea of God that every case of dislocation proved the stability of the order to which he belonged. Man invariably returned to God and to the security of assumptions held by mankind. This applies to Job who is vanquished by the voice out of the whirlwind, to the wise men of *Ecclesiastes* who amid vanities and uncertainties of life have found certitude in the idea of God, and to Faustus whose quest for a richer and fuller life ends in his alienation from man and God. The *Ancient Mariner*, estranged from man and God,

had known the pain of loneliness :

Alone, alone, all all alone
 Alone on a wide, wide sea
 And never a saint took pity on
 My soul in agony.²

Loneliness is negation of life; it is death-in-life: "And a thousand slimy things lived on; and so did I".³ The Mariner lives on like a thousand slimy things amid the dead men, rotting sea, rotting deck, rotting things. Loneliness is a curse and the Mariner breaks the evil spell of the curse by articulating a prayer. The prayer transforms anguish into joy, ugliness into beauty. Even the water-snakes become beautiful. Now that the Mariner is involved in all life he is not lonely. Sin is separateness and love, relatedness.⁴ Thus love and faith are antidotes to loneliness. Ever since the miracle happened to the Mariner he has been travelling from land to land repeating his woeful tale :

Since then at an uncertain hour
 That agony returns
 And till my ghastly tale is told
 This heart within me burns.⁵

The Mariner's experience is archetypal. It points to the cause, character and cure of loneliness.

Since human nature does not change from age to age, it may be assumed that man's experience of love, loneliness and death has also remained substantially unchanged. As such the Mariner's experience may help us in understanding loneliness which seems to be the central concern of modern life and literature. The Mariner shuts himself from grace through a wanton act of violence. This results in his alienation from God, nature and man. In fact, he is alienated from himself. He is no longer in full command of his faculties : he cannot repent, he cannot pray. He cannot even communicate with his shipmates. Loneliness blights his peace and happiness. Again through love and devotion his relatedness to all things and beings is restored. He perceives beauty in God's creation and his own life becomes beautiful. All the constituents of loneliness are present in the Mariner's experience : impoverishment of life, breakdown of communication,

estrangement from man, nature, God and self. Though the Mariner suffers great loneliness, he suffers within the framework of an accepted moral order. To transgress the limit or to overstep the boundary is to invite loneliness. Likewise Job and the wiseman of *Ecclesiastes* suffer the anguish of loneliness but they have not lost the ethical and moral framework. They experience loneliness in dark moments of doubt and that also only to assert that one should never overstep the boundary, that knowledge and inquisitiveness should be subjected to the discipline of faith.

From this we infer that loneliness in the ages of faith was a rare experience. History shows that in all ages a valid mould of experience was available to the vast majority of people. Loneliness was the penalty one paid for deviating from the norm. Besides, in no other age was loneliness the overriding concern of the thinker and creative writer. Loneliness is not the central concern of the Old Testament and Shakespeare's tragedies, of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Scarlet Letter*. In traditional theology and literature loneliness is an avoidable curse or punishment. The emphasis is on safe conduct, on the avoidance of loneliness.

The twentieth century writer's concern with loneliness is not tangential but total. The human scene mirrored in contemporary writing is a multitude of isolated units—a lonely crowd or a crowd of lonely men. Men and women go on living and partly living: they collide but do not meet, talk but do not communicate. The bonds that tie man with man and with the larger physical and metaphysical scheme of things, have given way. It is, as if, man is drifting in a void. His isolation is from within, not without. Modern man, as George Lukaés, the Hungarian writer and critic points out is "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationship with other human beings."⁶ According to Lukaés loneliness in traditional writing can be ascribed to certain factors in man or his predicament whereas in modern writing, it is part of a universal experience; it is in the very air he breathes :

The basic solitariness of man must not be confused with that individual solitariness to be found in the literature of

traditional realism. In the latter case we are dealing with a particular situation in which a human being may be placed, due either to his character or circumstances of his life. Solitariness may be objectively conditioned as with Sophocles' Philoctetes put ashore on the bleak island of Lemnos or it may be subjective as with Tolstoy's Ivan Illyitsch or with Flaubert's Frederic Moreau in the *Education Sentimentale*. But it is merely a phase, a climax or anti-climax, in the life of the community as a whole. The fate of such individuals is characteristics of certain human types in specific social or historical circumstances. Beside or beyond their solitariness, the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before. In a word, their solitariness is a special social fate, not a universal condition humaine.

The latter, of course is characteristic of the theory and practice of modernism.⁷

Lukačs underscores the point that loneliness in traditional literature is "a special social fate" or a state acquired through some accident or flaw in character. All such cases of loneliness affirm the validity of the ethical and metaphysical order whose axioms and codes one must not violate. The tragedies of Job, Faustus, Macbeth and Hester Prynne are fully accountable in terms of such violations. In each case one can easily identify the flaw that became a wall between the protagonist and his world. Besides, such men had immense capacity for good and evil and they could endure a lot of suffering. Often they became martyrs to their conviction. Impelled by desire or conviction they went beyond all men to court their destiny. No amount of persuasion could deter Faustus from selling his soul to the Devil. Determined and irrepressible, Captain Ahab hurled himself with all his might against Moby Dick. Though derided and ostracized by the world, Hester Prynne remained calm and unperturbed, because deep within she had a feeling that she was pure and inviolate. She never judged herself by the standards of her Puritan society. The lonely heroes of the past seem to be in complete harmony with themselves. In most cases they know that the pain of isolation is the price they have to pay for having chosen a lonely way. Either they dominate their circumstances or go down as heroes shining in defeat and death with heroic grandeur. For instance the loneliness of the traditional

tragic hero is embodied in the figure of Hardy's Michael Henchard. Henchard is self-alienated. He has not been hurled into an incomprehensible and uncontrollable situation. He retreats into obscurity and takes the final punishment—death—to atone for his moral guilt. Henchard's self-chosen isolation and immense capacity for suffering invest him with a heroic grandeur: "I—Cain—go alone as I deserve—an outcast and a vagabond. But my punishment is not greater than I can bear".⁸ This heroic figure of man was virtually swamped and submerged by the new realities of the twentieth century life.

Perhaps history powered by science moved too quickly for man to keep pace with it. Science and technology gave tremendous fillip to the process of industrialization. Vast populations moved into the new urban centres of the world where men and women are no more than commodities engaged in the production and consumption of commodities. Man ceased to be part of a compassable whole. Family, the most primitive unit of communal life was threatened with extinction. Success was given the status of religion and for increasing number of people traditional religion became irrelevant. Man laboured not for personal fulfilment or in pursuance of personally viable goals but of those set by others, by the anonymous authority called society or time or history. The mechanism through which the anonymous authority operates is conformity. David Riesman, in his fascinating book, *The Lonely Crowd* shows how the American character (the drives, aspirations and attitudes that constitute social character) has undergone a change from inner-direction to other-direction. Before World War I, says Riesman, the typical American character was "inner-directed". He had taken up the standards he was taught, was moralistic in the late Victorian sense, and had strong motives and ambitions. But the present typical American character is "other-directed". He seeks not to be outstanding but to "fit-in". In other words, he is forced to distort himself in the interest of a design. The other-directed man is unheroic, completely shorn of the powers and potentialities of his predecessors. In fact he does not want to be heroic. Afraid of his uniqueness and anxious to be absorbed in the group he is no more than an automaton. An automaton