

Quest for love, Sense of loss and Alienation in Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*

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Abstract: W.D. Snodgrass, the American poet was the innovator of the confessional style of writing. The present paper discusses the search for love and different stages of loss in the anthology *Heart's Needle* by W.D. Snodgrass. The poems here are about war, alienation from the world and the bitter effects of his broken marriage.

Keywords: Marital breakup, postwar, confessional, self-revelation

W.D. Snodgrass (1926-2009), one of the most prominent poets of the United States was a poet, translator, dramatist and essayist. His poetry led to the beginning of confessional school that influenced poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes, and even his teacher Lowell. His first Pulitzer Prize winning anthology *Heart's Needle* grew from heartbreak after a bitter divorce and at losing custody of his most lovable daughter. The poem *Heart's Needle*, is an elegy on the virtual loss of his daughter Cynthia, born apparently during the Korean War. Snodgrass has drawn the title from the Old Irish Story, *The Frenzy of Suibhne*, a messenger tells Suibhne that various members of his family are dead. Part of this grievous recital goes 'your daughter is dead', said *Loingsechan*. 'And an only daughter is the needle of the heart', said Suibhne (40). This sequence inspired Snodgrass to produce the anthology with great intensity of grief and its elegance of formal presentation.

Snodgrass himself says about his primary influencers in writing: "I was writing under the influence of William Empson. I'd fallen for the intense, very intellectual, style" (18). In a letter to Nolan Miller, Sexton commented: "I would particularly like to meet W.D. Snodgrass because his poem '*Heart's Needle*' startled me so when I read it, that I just say there saying 'why didn't I write this'" (Letters 34). Further, in a letter to Snodgrass himself, she gushed: "I read *Heart's Needle* and I changed. It made me see myself new" (Letters 62). Such was the impact of *Heart's Needle*.

The major themes in his early collections are family relationships, war, confessional and autobiographical reminiscencing his past life as a child and his present life. There is a sense of loss in his early poems and he talks much about death in his early poems but he had avoided it in his later collections. Though he was the innovator of the confessional style, he did

not follow this style in his later poems. Snodgrass is also much criticized for writing highly personal poems. In one of his interviews he states, “I was greatly influenced by my psychotherapy at that time and by Randall Jarrell’s criticism of my work. . . . He Said, Snodgrass, do you know you’re writing the best second- rate Lowell in the country” (Ernest Hilbert interviews 2008). These words made a deep impact on Snodgrass to come out of Lowell’s influence.

Heart’s Needle is a breakthrough in modern poetry. It is essentially autobiographical, and sings about the loss of the poet’s daughter through the divorce, packed with meaning and feeling. The poem explores for the first time in the history of American poetry, realities of intensely personal pain and growth. Paul Gaston opines on the poems as “emotional autobiography” (62). The imagery, theme and symbols in the collection make it a unified one.

The poem begins as the poet confronts the cold war, his marriage has become, the child newly born to it and the rival, illicit love that he has been unable to deny. It follows the process of deepening alienation, premonition, separation and divorce, a process that takes the poet’s daughter away from him. The specific reference to the passing of the seasons adds to the dramatic unity of the poem. The seasonal references, instead of imposing an arbitrary order, reflect an order of cyclical development indigenous to it. The seasons provide ideal background for the relationship in the poem because relationships also have seasons. More over the seasonal frame also supports the poems abundant natural imagery. Hall opines on the poems of Snodgrass as “the best pair of eyes since Williams Carlos Williams” (3). The images also have a crucial function in helping the thematic development of the lyrics. Images from nature, death, intimate the poet’s own loss and guilt as they reflect the pain he has caused his daughter. We can see the poet’s intense feeling of estrangement, loss of identity and awareness of alienation in the poem *Untis...Outis*, dedicated to Dr .Powell. It is a matured description of the poet’s youthful experience. The Greek quotation refers to the shrewd pun by which Odysseus secures his escape from Polyphemous Cyclops in Book 9 of *Odyssey*. Similarly, the speaker in this poem is able to persevere only by temporary surrender of his identity. At the end, he is able to accept, assert and divulge himself only through the assistance of his “dead blind guide”. The following lines project the poet’s awareness of alienation and his own free will and – self- realization at the end.

Unseen where all seem stone blind, pure disguise
Has brought me home alone to No Man’s land
To look at nothing I dare recognize.
My dead blind guide, you lead me here to claim
Still waters that never will wash

To kneel by my old face and know my name. (9-14)

The opening poem in the anthology, *Ten Days Leave* is about the soldier returning from war. The young soldier here fails to find the familiar security and comfort he had expected. He confronts a mixture of familiarity and strangeness. Finally, he feels strangeness in that

familiarity. The following lines portray the estrangement of the poet from his own house.

His dream asleep here likes a small homestead
Preserved his long past time in memory
Of one great man who lived here and is dead.

They have restored his landscape faithfully: (21-24)

After returning home from war the soldier feels a lot of difference in his own place, though there is no difference in the household, the poet feels that he had moved a great distance from them. The distance here is the distance of mind. Thus, the poem introduces the question of alienation throughout the anthology. The poem *At the Park Dance* reminds the poet's earlier experiences of alienation. There is a quandary of choice in *Heart's Needle* and it finally establishes the speaker's resolution. Alienation from the world is one of the subjects in *Heart's Needle*. Instead of simply retelling a tale, Snodgrass pursues mythic and current concerns simultaneously like the moon and the park, which change with changing seasons; love too has its changing seasons. This is tangible in *September in the Park*. The poem *Papageno* refers to Snodgrass's divorce of his first wife and courtship of his second wife. It is dedicated to Janice, his second wife and is in the form of lyric. The poet's search for love after the fracture of the first union showing the image of his depressed spirits is the main theme of this poem. Phillips analyses the poem as about the poet's search for love after the fracture of the first union, "in the dark and anxious time after divorce, 'went to whistle up a wife', seeking love and purification" (51). *The Marsh* contains images of decay, despair and entrapment. The poem signals an important shift in the relationship between the represented dramatic experience of the poem and the continuing experience of the speaker.

You look up; while you walk / the sun bobs and is snarled
in the closing weir / Of trees, in their dead stalks.

Stick in the mud, old heart, / What are you doing here? (13-18)

The above lines represent symbolic rebirth, his convulsive escape from the growing inertia of the swamp. The poem dramatizes the growing depth of the poet's self-awareness. *September in the Park* is reminiscent of *At the Park Dance*. It is also metaphorical. By personifying the moon, the speaker is able to project upon it the knowledgeable detachment that he himself assumes in reading the signs of approaching winter. There is a fine balance in this poem between sensitivity and objectivity in natural description. Here there is a strong personal sentiment expressed in the last two lines/And I, dear girl, / Remember I have gathered/ my hand upon your breast (45-47). The poems *Riddle* and *Home Town*, details the diversity of love. There is also a balance between thought and feelings in these poems. The poet's bitterness and dejection in love is lucid in the following lines:

Fifteen years gone; once more,
The old lies are the truth: / I must prove I dare,
And the world, and love, is evil. (9-12)

Winter Bouquet celebrates the speaker's joy in the presence of his loved

one by a striking symbol of the absence, a “dark arrangement” of dry lifeless plants. In the poem *Song*, the speaker turns from private exultation tone to an artful, carefully patterned, sober approval of its substance.

Woman, we are the rich / Soil, friable and humble,
Where all our murders rot, / Where our old deaths crumble
and fortify my reach / far from you, wide and free,
though I have set my root / in you and am your tree. (17-24)

The above lines from the poem *Song* clearly pictures the recognition of absolute sterility instead of compelling the speaker to another personal reference, provides a transition. The speaker and the woman together are the soil, the common basis for their union, but in their union, there is differentiation in role as the figure of tree suggests. The poem *Song* characterizes the woman's love that conveys a sense of stultification, oppression, and encumbrance. Earlier, his woman creates thick domesticity; he becomes a creature of nature, self-centered, predatory and contentious. The love described in the second *Song* seems to be internal. The first *song* turns on an imaginative confrontation with lifeless clay to the effect of transition from the speaker's rootless past to rooted present. The second shifts when the speaker finds reflection in the “sweet beast” the girl, is prompted by a frank admission of absolute isolation. Both the poems describe a progress from isolation to union. These two poems are about the human relationships on two distinct levels.

The poem *Home Town* reveals a more thorough exposure and examination of the part of nature, which we find in the *Song*. The poet measures himself against the mythical analogues, against the expectations of the society, even against his own standards of responsibility. The process leads to renewed attempts at self-direction and assertion. The conclusive poems in *Heart's Needle* have a dominant plain style, combining straightforward, colloquial diction, with variation in stanzaic forms. The poems are self-critical, sensitive but become more personal and direct. These poems illustrate, signify, and prefigure important changes in the mind of the poet. The speaker is isolated physically and spiritually. The poem *A Cardinal* dramatizes the poet's shift from frustration and inaction to a renewal of personal and artistic will. Paul Gaston remarks: “It recalls in several ways the work by Wordsworth that stands at the head of the tradition; as Wordsworth's poem seeks the refreshment in the woods, but finds increasingly dejected and increasingly inarticulate” (50). The poems were based on actual experiences in the poet's life. In the early part as Snodgrass summarizes in his poem, the speaker is blaming on the society for his inability to write. He is resentful in his present frustration, and Paul Gaston comments that he sounds like it, “a proud rejected man”, the speaker encounters in the ten poems diverse stages in the movement towards authentic existence (48). The real action in the poem takes not in the woods but in the poet's mind, as he converts the symbol of avarice and societal corruption into one of natural, essential self-assertion. Even the natural images around the poet cannot compel him to change the

attitude. He suddenly sees the foolishness and injustice in making the Cardinal the object of his resentment. The poem celebrates the surest justification of man's capacity for self-determination, his ability to change his mind. It also brings home the view, the poet has frustrated search for a temporary refuge from the noise of civilization. *The Campus on Hill* reflects Snodgrass' teaching experience at Cornell. It is a stinging rebuke to the kind of academic enterprise, which protects the sensibilities of its clients instead of exposing them to the truth. This poem is an expression of sensitivity. In *These Trees Stand*, the final line, "Snodgrass is walking through the Universe" celebrates both his return to the "physical world" and it is to sound his wonderful name explicitly and to emphasize in that way the ever-closer relationship between the poet and the speaker. The speaker's ironic self – conscious self-importance is revealed in the first three stanzas. Snodgrass like any other poet defines the celestial sphere with absolute authority. *April Inventory* one of the best-known poems of Snodgrass is a definitive expression of the guileless self-assessment as *These Trees stand ... April Inventory* is not only a record of the memories and feelings of the poet's thirtieth year, but also categorizes them clandestinely according to the values he has chosen. The poet is getting older with the passing years but it has nothing to do with his forever-young mind. We can see the poet's sheer dejection in his failure to acquire a true love in the lines below:

I taught myself to name my name,
To bark back, loosen love and crying;
To ease my woman so she came,
To ease an old man who was dying,
I have not learned how often I
Can win, can love, but choose to die. (37-42)

In *Heart's Needle*, there is a seasonal reference in the order of cyclical developments autochthonous to it. The seasonal frame supports the abundant natural imagery. The poem is also about the animalistic nature of man, but at the same time, there is an essential difference by which it distinguishes him as a human. The title poem begins by introducing his only daughter Cynthia, who is the needle of the heart. The following lines show the intense agony of the poet: Was torn / By love I could not still, / By fear that silenced my cramped mind (4-6). The poet's only consolation is his daughter who has been a medicine to the cold war, which ended in a bitter divorce. The main message of the first part is that spring will not wait. In second poem, spring has arrived and with it, there is a clear sense of coming separation. The ritual here is the planting of the child's flower garden. The conclusive lines in this poem show the poet's self-determination in the third poem the poet talks about his separation from his wife. He determines three sharply different episodes viz, an observed moment of parental teamwork, the settlement of Korean War, and a small playtime injury once he inflicted on his daughter. He also proves the sure sign of love in the following lines: It may help that a Chinese play/Or Solomon himself might say/ I am your real mother (31-36). The allusion to Solomon forms a just conclusion to the poem with varied

images of loveless tugging. The fourth poem reflects the sorrow of father and daughter as they settle in to their approved visits. There is also a sense of inadequacy, guilt, and frustration in these lines. The poet returns to winter. It is about acknowledging the distance that return can reveal. There is also an increasing awareness of the changes in his daughter. The sixth part depicts the poet's self-knowledge and self-determination, in the next part, there is an oscillation of affection and understanding and distance, control of freedom in the eighth part, the poet here reminds an unhappy incident here, in spite of his true love and care his daughter has preferred to be with the strangers.

Winter returns again in this poem where the poet sinks into a deeper malaise. The poet is in fact obsessed with the "dead lock" he describes at the poem's conclusion. The final poems objectify the poet's spirits that has risen along with the winter wheat. The long chronicle of painful separation, of good and ill portents, of self-assertion and self-examination and self-loathing ends quietly, efficiently and effectively. The majority of the poems deals with alienation from the world, the reality of limitations and the necessity for loss as a prerequisite for autonomous choice, and filled with sadness. Though the poet is well aware of his own alienation, he presents it with self-depreciating irony that elevates the pain of life and the poet learns to surrender his freewill. However, this alienation is not necessarily a bad thing, it is the essential condition for the life of self-awareness and self-determination, the only kind of life in which joy, love and commitment are viable. Snodgrass's extreme self-analysis is an attempt to reveal feelings as honestly as possible.

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