

THE LAST HARBOR
(A Novella)

Johanna's comments

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Colors

One important color scheme is the pink-blue: yellow-blue combination, sunset and sunrise, an embodiment of the yin-yang principle. Selma, dressed in pink and blue, reminds Daled of sunset, while he, in yellow and blue reminds her of a flower (the two flowers are also, because of their structure, an embodiment of yin and yang) because of its color scheme, the flower is associated with sunrise. The fundamental ambiguity of the colors makes it possible at the end for the sunset to be a flower, thus perhaps the sunrise of Daled's life.

It is interesting that Selma is attracted to sunrise colors: the flowers, the cookie wrapping, while Daled's possession, the shells, are sunset colors.

The other important color scheme is black-white. In general, black represents the abyss - emptiness, loneliness, despair, while white symbolizes purity (white sand of zeds), harmony (white as opposed to black teabowls) comfort (white sheets) and illumination (awakening).

A further important color is green, with brown shades. For Selma, green is an ominous color of decay or rot. For Daled, as evidenced by his seeing a green (where Selma sees a blue).

his dream of a green onsen door, and by his reaction to the painting of the Arhat, green is a pleasant ^{secure} color. Selma serves Lipton tea, avoiding the green, the tea Daled chooses.

* The white-black scheme is one manifestation of the light-dark theme. The introductory quote from Churyong-tze suggests the tragedy of the deprivation of light. Similarly, as Daled becomes more immersed in hatred and suffering, darkness increases, while a mist settles or a cold wind blows. Yet light & dark are also part of yin-yang balance - so that every darkness has some light (in Daled's dream, the light which appears as a sunlit palace in the darkness of night). Because the darkness in their lives accompanies the encroachment of natural darkness, you get a feeling of inevitability or perhaps acceptance.

Social Commentary

The story deals primarily with two people. And, in an age which lacks the ability to love or anguish, it attempts to evoke both ~~such~~ emotions. As such, it is a form of social protest. It further registers a subtle protest against current politization of every sphere of life. Daled is a staunch upholder of "committed non-ideology." Yet it is permissible to wonder whether his

* his authoritarian attitude may possibly stem from an unconscious fear of Selma - in early conversations he tries to placate her
(5) Philosophy presents any constructive alternatives as he is ambiguous about his relationship to society. Daled places faith in the lecture as a means of ultimate communication; but if his sinacle is a reality, then this effort is a complete failure.

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Impressions of Daled + Selma

Daled is an intellectual, but a decaying intellectual. He pursues order and systems, admittedly, with the intention of transcendence. But it seems even when the ultimate result is sterility, he is unwilling to deviate. Because he has a compulsive need to prove himself, he must never doubt that his life is an upward spiral. Especially in his relationship to Selma, he cannot admit failure. He is often unmerciful to Selma & has obviously repressed her spontaneity, while forcibly expanding her consciousness. He has compassion for her, however, and at moments a refreshingly un-neurotic affection. The remnants of a once loving relationship are still apparent. Daled dissociates his own flaws from his insightful abstractions of them; thus it is
his own betrayals.

doubtful how much true wisdom he has. Often, his blind commitment to academics makes him reject Selma's love. Toward the end of the story (87), he allows himself to touch her only through the lecture.

Dale's intellectualism is softened by his sense of humor and by a child-like aspect in his character, which allows him to think of red-berried and do yoga under a bird-feeder.

Ironically, altho Dale is dictatorial toward Selma, there are hints that unconsciously he is afraid of her and tries to appease her.

Selma is a simpler character, less mented than Dale but more bitter. She cannot reconcile herself either to his decay or to her own. As the story of the vice-cookies indicates, she is an attention-seeking child; yet she has just enough consciousness to realize the worthlessness of such attention. She has been repressed by Dale and consequently has no respect for her own ideas (Symbolically Dale's shells replaced her flowers as the only arrangement in the tea room). She is often vindictive toward Dale, but her tears when looking at the arhat suggest she is motivated by a deep-seated confusion & unhappiness. She is a non-intellectual, altho she is not

* Daled is Selma's mirror, so he is equally her reflection.

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59 un-intelligent. You suspect she has intentionally cultivated this role to aggravate her husband.

Daled and Selma embody the principle of yin-and yang. They are opposites, yet they are one*. They are unified by their decay and their futile memories of past happiness - the days of Zen discovery in Japan, a summer in Malaya. Above all, they are successful as old people, trapped by the weight of their years.

Daled - Selma Interaction

What is most evident is their lack of communication. Daled thinks she smiles to show off her teeth. Selma asks about birdfeeder, he tells her about the dream, she ignores the dream. Daled ignores the story of Jingster-dani and the rice-cooky adventure. Selma ignores the story of the bridges and Daled's statement of fear. At different times they attempt to bridge the gap between them, but they are rarely receptive to each other's efforts. As Daled ironically observes, they are trapped in an insoluble dilemma. Their mutual boredom, annoyance, frustration produces an endless spiral of conflict. Reconciliation generally occurs through evoking some past device - such as Wabi, or memories of when they first met.

Animals & Plants

The redbirds are the symbol of past beauty, serenity, but they are vanished. Other animals, exist only through metaphor and imagination, but they suggest a hidden uneasiness w/ie Daled toward the natural world. Vipers, spiders, sharks people his fantasies.

The leaves of the maple are broad, the leaves of the pine long and pointed. One flower has its pistil sticking outward, the other inward. Yin and yang, its unity and harmony, manifested in the natural world.

Water

Water is an impotent, altho ambiguous symbol. at times, water is a mirror, the embodiment of Zen. at other times, it is a beautiful harp. It bears a similarity to the Quest in its motion and aliveness. In the form of the onsen, it offers Daled a sort of security. Yet at other times it is a distinctly ominous symbol. T-vi-yin uses the metaphor of drowning in trivality. Daled continues in this vein, speaking of the quest as buried in waves. Later, he sees the ocean as a whiplash drawing blood. However, the dichotomy is ultimately resolvable in a unity. When Daled kills himself

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the quest is indeed buried beneath waves, but in a larger sense it has become the waves, as Daled suggests when he sees himself merge w/ his reflection.

For Daled, the ocean has a lure (made evident by his preoccupation w/ the seashell containing the sound of the surf) that is at least partly sexual. He speaks of breasts like a swelling wave. Also, the seashell suggests female genital organs.

Illusion, Dream or Reality

Satori implies an awakening, so dream would imply a less enlightened state. Indeed, Daled uses the metaphor of sleep protecting one from the quest.

Similarly, when Selma commands Daled to wake up, it suggests that his life has become a tedious sleep. Finally, Daled roused Selma from the "naive, romantic" dreams of her youth.

Yet dreams are not only deceptive illusions. Daled turns to them for inspiration and insight. And his dreams do foreshadow his fate - he dreams of falling, of sinking into a water, of drowning. Further, it is in dreams that he has important insights into his relationship with his daughter and into the oneness of Bloom & Santiago, which is a confirmation of his life's effort.

Finally, Chuang-tze's dream of the butterfly calls into question - the Western distinction between dream and reality. Perhaps it is not the dream that is deceptive, as Daled's dualistic mind suspects, but reality that is illusory, as the ship dream reveals. The structure of the narrative tends to bear out this point of view. Is Daled's suicide a reality or a dream? In large part, the answer seems to be irrelevant, thus the distinction disappears. ^{In Daled's} ^{his life style}

The question of what is the reality is further complicated by extensive use of shadows, mirrors, reflections. Daled sees Selma through the kitchen window as a picture. She also sees him as framed. Yellow trees exist in the Arbat painting but they also exist in reality. When the moon is reflected in the water, who is the man? Daled? the Chinese Sisyphus? And where, for that matter, can the moon be said to be? Similarly, the ship and the toui have reality only as shadows. Yet their significance to Daled is tremendous - the toui as a symbol of soaring, his goal as an educator - the ship as a means of escape, his choice as an individual. As a corollary of this confusion of dream/reality, time becomes at once crucial and meaningless. The reader is made constantly aware of the passage of time. Yet Daled &

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Edna pursues in the tea ceremony a timelessness produced by the intersection of Raum & Zeit. And, although Daled lives by time, he dies w/o watch, w/o hearing the cuckoo strike. Perhaps, as according to Zen, Daled has gone through time beyond time.

Finiteness

One of the most powerful contradictions in the book is the dual function of the finite. According to Zen, transcendence is through the finite. Thus Daled, like Bloom, seeks salvation through trivia. Yet the finite is what limits the soaring of man's mind. The book is filled with oppressive flaws - musty hair, failing sight, weak teeth, fatness, illness, wrinkles, sagging flesh, grey hair. Decay of the body, the most inescapable manifestation of man's finiteness, impedes the Buddhist ideal to die while living. Their finiteness, instead of leading to transcendence, often turns them against each other.

Transcendence can be another word for freedom. In his lecture, Daled is able to resolve the above paradox. The limitations of the flesh do not hinder freedom - on the contrary, they provide freedom. Yet Daled does not have enough insight!

* At end, they are not even angry w/ each other. of the
sth has dissipated, leaving only a sense of tiredness
and aloneness.

to realize that this can apply to spiritual flaws as
well. Thus one can only transcend one's failing by
going through them, not by avoiding them as Daled does
(99). He seeks freedom by liberating himself from this world,
but there is no sense of liberation in the final scene.

Loneliness

Because of the lack of communication, the story
arouses a pervasive sense of loneliness, epitomized
by Daled standing alone in the tearoom, or
Selma struggling with her zipper. There are moments of
sharing, as with the rice cooky or the phoenix
tea bowl, but the final feeling is one of separation,
two people alone and unable to touch each other.*

Intellect or Feeling

Selma sees Daled as passionless and she is afraid
he will make their life the same way. It is not
true that Daled does not feel emotion, but he does
demand continued analysis and dissection, which is
irreconcilable with Selma's unthought-out reactions.
Also, it seems true that Daled relates to life
intellectually. For example, his lecture consists in
large part of an analysis of Chinese characters.
Thus, the dissection of words represents the

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culmination of his attempt at communication.

In another way Daled is passiveness by Western standards. Somewhat self-consciously, he cultivates an acceptance, a calm toleration. This attitude, so frustrating to Selma, in part explains his mysterious fluidity immediately after Selma shouts "I hate you." Partly, his calmness is a mask, for Daled has long ceased allowing himself to confront his more disturbing emotions (for example, almost immediately he represses his fear, so that the reader is never sure whether he is afraid of death, or of turning their life into a grave etc.). Partly, however, Daled has learned to accept - flaws in his body, flaws in his relationship. It is an imperfect acceptance - perhaps insincere - for Daled cannot even accept his partial blindness. Similarly, his clinging to the belief that his life is an upward spiral is too consciously an attempt to shut out ugliness, rather than accept it. Yet, whatever its imperfections, I think it is this aspect of Daled's character (I call it neurotic blindness or insightful) which motivates his suicide. Although even at death, there are still words, they are spontaneous and unartificial.

* Even when he leaves the house, it is questionable whether he intends to kill himself, or only replenish the birdfeeder.

The suicide is unconscious*, although Daled (97) has obviously thought about it, while he does it he does not think about it. It is a spontaneous non-intellectual act, yet there is something deliberate or fated about it, as if Daled is acting from a sort of innate acceptance, as if every decision becomes the "right decision".

Selma, in contrast to Daled, is an emotional, illogical woman. Although she is intelligent, she has let her mind atrophy in favor of emotional outbursts. She cries, whereas Daled does not. She is not interested in intellectual understanding, but she cherishes her feeling for beauty. This feeling, though, is marred by her personal decay, which she cannot reconcile with her aesthetic standards.

Lecture - Learning

The lecture contains two important themes. One is the theme of search or awakening. In large part, Daled's exposition on the "search" seems autobiographical. Like Zen Buddhism, his own awakening has become historical subject, fit for scholarly dissertation. And when Daled speaks of waking up one afternoon to realize the quest is buried, the parallel is too close to miss. Thus everything that Daled does on

This may be an act of apology to Selma, an admission of guilt

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this day must be interpreted in ~~the~~ light of ~~the~~ his awareness that the quest must be renewed.

Daled sees his own life as sunk in an oppressive sleep of habit & boredom, and he is determined to revitalize it. He does not abandon the order and ritual, but he does attempt to recapture the Zen essence. For instance, when he says the cookies are very good, he is trying to prevent the whole ceremony from unravelling, to keep the illusion that it is meaningful. Also, Daled corrects the pollution of the tea ceremony and it is finally performed accurately. He is so successful that the reader can never ultimately decide whether the ceremony is a peaceful truce or a potentially explosive stifling of life. Finally, Daled's suicide can be interpreted as a manifestation of Basho's haiku, a further indication that today Daled seeks to renew the quest.

(A metaphor for the quest is the ship sailing out to sea, which Daled perceives through the shadow of a trivial & finite clothesline.) The irony is that altho the lecture, as ^{the} climax of an upward spiral, is the symbol through which Daled renews the quest, it has only the appearance of spontaneity. In reality it is carefully prepared.

One wonders how honestly or purely the quest can be renewed
 — That the quest, for Daled, is a matter of faith becomes manifest in the story of the suspension bridge. Walking on the bridge in faith, beyond intellect, beyond knowledge, is a renewal of the quest. —

The second important aspect of the lecture deals with Daled's philosophy of learning (teaching). For Daled, teaching is the great reconciler — a way to impose unity on his dualistic Western mind. Thus, he teaches Zen, a philosophy of action and non-intellection. He believes it is through learning, that the self will pass. Thus, knowledge is the equivalent of wisdom and understanding in relating to the world and other people. A teacher must be an exemplar, not a destroyer. He must appear to have preserved his integrity while soaring. Also, because learning is a means of ordering experience, it is the key which invests trivial daily life with meaning.

This has been Daled's theory all along, as suggested by his memories of rousing Selma to greater consciousness. Yet it is obvious as we see Daled living this day that he is unable to make a practical application of his philosophy. He himself says, the word

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lives in living, yet it is obvious that his words are dead. A thought of Selma's hints that Daled may now be skeptical about the advantages of great consciousness. This is further substantiated by the manner of his suicide, which occurs on the semi-conscious level of dream or the unconscious level of spontaneous act. Is Daled committing suicide or is he merely reaching for the light? Does he want to die or to live? (Throughout the book, the sun and the flower symbolize light, by extension illumination, awakening, satori) Possibly Daled feels he will live through dying. In any case, at this most crucial moment, he seems to have abandoned consciousness.

Legends \downarrow should be Icarus

The two legends, of Daedalus and Chinese Sisyphus, suggest an existential interpretation of the story. The first suggests that man will aspire to something beyond and that he will fail. The second suggests that satori is in the search, that man's struggle must be unending. The fact that man attacks the cypress tree suggests the eternal element is not to be found in the transcendental realm, but in the every-day, ordinary act of chopping.

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Unity

The story cannot be said to provide a feeling of liberation or of triumph. Dale's death cannot be regarded as a victory, as the culmination of a victory. ~~But there is a sense of unity,~~ But there is a sense of unity, of inevitable oneness. The theme of yin and yang is a pervasive one and it suggests a universal harmony. The waterfall crashing onto the rocks, which foreshadow's Dale's own leap, produces pain. But it produces a simultaneous beauty. The overall feeling is not one of triumph, but one of merging and balance. The Zen poem reflects the unity of the self with nature. Later, nature itself calls him to join it. The closing scene is filled with images of flowing, merging. Metaphysically, his death merges with his awakening, becomes his awakening: the unity of water and rain in the Zende create an embryo; the unity of rain or water at the close bury the developed embryo. At the close, nature becomes an indistinguishable 'working oneness'. Similarly, his physical, intellectual, spiritual anguish all merge.

Other ways in which this overall unity is expressed is by Dale's one-dimensional vision,

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which tends to distinguish less than it merges.

Thus at different times, the spider is reflected on the mountain, on a cloud, on his stomach - suggesting that its true place in the universe is everywhere & nowhere. As Daled suggests, Selma, caught up in the apparent dichotomies of age & beauty, life & death, dominance & subservience, cannot detect this overall unity.[#]

* Finally Daled's death is significant not for its importance but for its unimportance. Almost instantly, it is lost in the indifferently harmonious processes of nature.

[#] Another indication of the unity of man with nature is the identification of Selma with the willow tree, of Daled w/ a flower