The Choiring of the Trees Short Guide

The Choiring of the Trees by Donald Harington

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Characters

Nail Chism was, as his role of shepherd suggests, a protector of the innocent, a quiet and compassionate man, strong and gentle. Yet, when he enters the death chamber for the first time, he wears around his neck a blade of a table knife he has sharpened on his cell floor to use to kill as many people as he can before they kill him. This change began when Nail was tried and convicted for a crime he did not commit, the rape of the thirteen-year-old Stay More girl, Dorinda Whitter. Nail was targeted for this frame-up when he opposed the actions of his brother-inlaw, Newton County's chief administrator and a member of "the courthouse gang" that ran an illegal liquor business. The brutality of prison life intensified the deadening of Nail's compassion.

Although Viridis grew up in an economic environment very different from that of Nail, she, too, has experienced a deadening of her own emotions. Viridis's father, a vice-president in a prominent bank in Little Rock, had, for some years, sexually abused her. In her twenty-first year, she managed to evade her father and go to Paris where she studied art. When her father stopped her funds and demanded her return, Viridis suffered a mental break down. In the process of recovery, she had hardened herself. On her return, she greeted her father with pistol in hand and the threat of death if he ever tired anything again.

Despite their hardening of themselves, Viridis and Nail are still capable of compassion, as they demonstrated in their empathic responses to a prisoner's execution that they both had witnessed a month earlier. The strongest sign of their potential for compassion and for a renewal of themselves is that they both hear the magically singing of the trees — "the song of life" — in the death chamber as they await Nail's execution. They have begun to love each other and to love themselves, but the growth of their love is restricted by Nail's imprisonment. Unable to love in each other's physical presence, they learn to love each other through friendships they develop in the pursuit of their love.

Nail's friendship develops when he returns to prison from the death chamber. This friendship is with a new prisoner, Ernest Bodenhammer, whom Nail helps adjust to prison life. Because Ernest is a talented, self-taught artist, he can help Nail begin to understand the importance of art for Viridis. Two friendships Viridis cultivates, when she visits Stay More to collect signatures for a petition for Nail's pardon, help her to understand both Nail and Stay More. The first is with the sophisticated eighty-six-year-old woman who was the mistress of Jacob Ingledew and the best friend of Jacob's wife. She provides Viridis with a place to stay, insights into the people of Stay More, and courage to carry through. The second is with the fourteen-year-old Latha Bourne, who is, like Viridis, "honest enough with herself to have some left over to be honest and kind and smart with other people." Because Latha has been Dorinda Whitter's best friend, Viridis is not only able to get Dorinda to sign the petition for Nail's pardon, but she is able to bring Dorinda with her when she returns to Little Rock.

Their friendships help Viridis and Nail sustain themselves, strengthen their courage, and preserve their sanity. Their friendships are signs of and a means toward renewal of

them. By caring for and protecting Ernest in prison, Nail renews his role as shepherd. Viridis's acts on behalf of Nail's pardon are for her, "the recapturing of something she had lost."

Because Latha is both an actor in the story as well as its teller, readers see both the potential and the fulfillment of her character. As a fourteen-yearold, Latha was spirited, had a sharp eye for hypocrisy, and had a firm belief in honesty. Latha helped guide Viridis around Stay More, and Viridis, likewise, became a model, a guide, for Latha. Viridis showed Latha a different world but, more importantly, she showed Latha affection and respect.

Quite simply, Latha came to dearly love Viridis, and, for that matter, to dearly love Nail because Viridis dearly loves him. Now, at eighty-six, Latha wants to revive not simply her memories of two fine people but also to demonstrate the importance of story, of art, to her life and to the lives of her readers and listeners. Her narration confirms the narrator's evaluation in Lightning Bug (1970) that Latha is a superb teller of "ghost" stories. Harington's portraits of Latha in Lightning Bug and The Choiring of the Trees, written twenty years apart, are themselves marvelous achievements of storytelling. They are not only consistent and complemen tary, but they also depict a woman who embodies love, compassion, and moral strength.

Social Concerns

TheChoiring of the Trees examines and questions the concept of capital punishment. It opens with a young man from Stay More — Nail Chism, who is not quite twenty-eight — being escorted to the electric chair for execution. Although his execution is aborted by the Governor's last minute stay, Nail will have the experience of twice more being escorted to the electric chair. What makes Nail Chism's death sentence so morally chilling is that he is innocent. He had been framed by a crooked Newton County politician and his cohorts. Much of the story details Nail's imprisonment from late in 1914 to mid-1915 in the Arkansas Penitentiary in Little Rock and examines, consequently, the ways society treats those whom it imprisons. The conditions Nail and his fellow prisoners experience are barbaric: Little attention is paid to hygiene, the food is barely nourishing, and some of the guards are sadistic. This prison, then, is not only a place of confinement; it is also a place of torture and death.

Harington did not make up Nail's story just to present a compelling example of the injustices of capital punishment. The story's essential "facts" are based on the case of an Arkansas Ozarker named Neil McLoughlin, who in 1914 was sentenced to death for a rape he did not commit. Three times McLoughlin faced death in the electric chair, and three times he evaded it.

Finally his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. At that point McLoughlin escaped and hid in the Ozark hills until, in 1917, Bernie Babcock, a woman novelist, took up his case and got the new Governor to pardon him.

That Harington has based his novel on historical events leads to a question that has troubled many readers and listeners of stories — Is the story true?

Granted, the question is a naive one for a reader of fiction. Yet, even the most sophisticated of readers are willing to imagine that characters shaped out of words are "alive," are "real." Harington brilliantly constructs a story that seems true to "reality," and that, at the same time, allows the reader to enjoy the narrator's imaginative act of making that "reality."

Another important concern of the novel is one that Harington has consistently depicted in each of his books: the concern of not just coping with loss but of recovering from a significant loss, of restoring imaginatively the lost beloved. The Choiring of the Trees remarkably embodies and demonstrates the power of art, of story, of love to bring what seemed dead to life again.

Techniques

In addition to having the older Latha tell a story about an experience of her youth, Harington also enhances the narration's double perspective by entitling the alternating chapters "On" and "Off." These words, suggesting the power of electricity, contrast the electricity, the vitality, of storytelling with the electric chair, the novel's emblem of death. The contrasting chapter titles also demonstrate the contrast explicit in the pastoral. The "On" chapters tend to be fairly brief, intense, and they deal, usually, with scenes in the urban prison. The "Off" chapters are usually, explanatory, relaxed, and set in Stay More. The first three "On" chapters depict Nail's and Viridis's experiences at the first attempt to execute Nail. The first "Off" chapter explains how Nail came to be in the electric chair, and the second explains how Viridis came to be in the death chamber sketching Nail's portrait for the newspaper.

In addition to showing how Viridis came to be in the death chamber, the second "Off" chapter shows, in detailing Viridis's experiences in Paris, not only the type of painting she did but also how painting serves as a refuge and a source of renewal for her. In Paris Viridis became friends with such artists as Picasso, Marie Laurencin, Apollinaire, and Marguerite Thompson Zorach. Harington uses actual artists as a means to help the reader believe in the "reality" of Viridis. The reader learns, for example, that in Marie Laurencin's painting Apollinaire et ses amis (1908), Viridis is supposedly the woman third from the left. Her friendship with Marguerite Thompson Zorach reveals many similarities between their backgrounds and their paintings.

This comparison permits the readers to imagine how Viridis's paintings might look by examining Marguerite Thompson Zorach's paintings done from 1908 to 1912.

Such acts of imagination remind the reader of the powerful role imagination plays in the making of a story.

Throughout the story, Latha reminds the reader that she is often imagining what might have occurred rather than simply reporting what "did" happen.

One of her major acts of imagination is the telling of Nail's escape from prison and his journey back to Stay More. To prepare to tell Nail's story, Latha studied maps and selected from the names of the towns the route she thought Nail would have travelled. She decides, for example that Nail crossed the Arkansas River and landed at a town named Nail, because, as she says, that was "a name to show me that this was where Nail would have landed." Near the end of his journey, Latha says, "If we are only going to imagine things, we may as well imagine them as we have known them," a statement that blurs, as does so much of Harington's fiction, the distinctions between the imagined and the "real."

Themes

The pastoral theme is central to the novel. The pastoral opposes life in the country to life in the city. It depicts a world of simplicity, of shepherds and shepherdesses, and a time that seems an endless summer when everyone is young and in love. From a less idealized perspective, the pastoral implies nourishment, as a pasture feeds the sheep, and spiritual comfort, as the Lord's Prayer suggests the pastoral world to be. In the pastoral nature works in harmony with humankind.

The singing of the trees that Nail hears when he enters the death chamber is a magical moment when the life forces of nature cry out for the living to stay more. To exemplify the pastoral theme, Harington opposes the "civilized" penitentiary and its deadly and brutal technology to the simple, bucolic life of Stay More, especially as it was lived by Nail Chism, Stay More's only shepherd.

Until his editor suggested its present title, Harington had called his novel Shades of Green. This title, too, has its pastoral connotations, for the pastoral is the green world, the world of spring and new life. In addition, it also hints at the important role art plays in the novel. The novel's representative of the world of art is a young woman from Little Rock named Viridis Monday.

Viridis is, of course, the woman, like Bernie Babcock, who will rescue the prisoner. But Viridis is not a novelist as was Babcock; she is an artist. (Harington worked a similar change with Nail's vocation. McLoughlin was an auto mechanic, not a shepherd). The theme of art permeates the novel; at the beginning Viridis is in the death chamber to draw Nail's portrait for the Little Rock paper. As the narrator, Latha Bourne, says, she began the story with a picture of "a red-haired newspaperlady sitting in the death chamber at the state penitentiary and sketching a head-shaved convict waiting to die.

The making of the sketch was what started the saving of him, and started this story ..."

This statement suggests how art preserves or "saves" life. It also suggests that an image often can provoke a story. If words can rise out of pictures, so, too, as the ending of The Choiring of the Trees illustrates, pictures can be painted by words. As her last act in this story, Latha describes another of Viridis's paintings, a painting that shows Nail playing his harmonica and watching his sheep. Viridis sits beside him sketching the scene while the trees are singing and the young Latha crosses the meadow to join Viridis and Nail in reality and in art.

This concluding picture is a brilliant example of a literary form called ekphrasis, which is a verbal representation of a visual representation. Harington's use of ekphrasis demonstrates again Harington's desire to harmonize opposites and how art can, in its own way, restore what has been lost.

The theme of loss and restoration is Harington's foremost theme, and in The Choiring of the Trees, it works on many levels. The story is told in the mid1980s about people and

events from 1914 to 1915. Most of the participants in Latha's story are dead at the time of the story's telling. They are the "shades," the ghosts, that Latha's tell ing brings to life, makes "green." Latha restores the past so that the reader can appreciate the lives of people Latha believes should be known now, for her story, shows how Viridis and Nail, psychologically "deadened" when they met, helped themselves to restore the mselves to the vitality of love.

Key Questions

Harington has described The Choiring of the Trees as the most realistic of his novels. What do we mean when we use the term "realistic"? If you have read Lightning Bug, Harington's other novel in which Latha Bourne figures prominently, do you think that it is less "realistic" than The Choiring of the Trees? A related question is what is a story and what are the pleasures of story? As early as his unpublished novel, A Work of Fiction, Harington has shown his great interest in the relationship between storytelling and our ideas of "reality," and, in each succeeding fiction, he has both tried to convince the reader of the "reality" of his story and to remind the reader that the story is a made object, a "fabrication." Although the story of Viridis and Nail has its reference in the actual world, the novel makes explicit the fact that it is a story.

1. What qualities in Nail and Viridis attract them to each other? Does this attraction seem believable?

2. As part of their desire to give a novel's characters "body," readers often imagine actors who might portray the characters. Who would you have portray Nail, Viridis, and the young Latha? Although it is fairly easy for the reader to imagine a particular actor playing one of the characters, the actual conversion for novel to film is sometimes nearly impossible. Do you think this novel would be fairly easy to convert to a film? If you were to do the screen play, would you have the older Latha in it?

3. Often it is valuable to consider why a particular character narrates the story he or she tells. What difference does Latha narrating the story of Nail and Viridis make to the reader's understanding of the events that happened?

Why do you think that Latha has Viridis describe her experiences in Paris rather than telling of those experiences herself? Do you think that even though Latha says Nail told her about his experiences in the prison that Latha's description of them is an accurate reflection of the way Nail told them?

Does it matter whether Latha's descriptions are accurate or convincing?

4. What is meant by "trees singing"?

Is it the wind blowing through the branches and leaves or what?

5. Green seems to be the dominant color in The Choiring of the Trees. Is that an appropriate color for the themes of the novel. Is there a dominant color for other novels that you have read? How does trying to think of one color characterizing a work of fiction help the reader better understand the moods or themes of that particular work?

6. In Lightning Bug its narrator seems to love Latha and Every Dill as if they were his "wished-for parents." Does the young Latha also love Nail and Viridis as if they were her "wished-for parents"? Why should Latha have such a need to love?

7. If you had read both Lightning Bug and The Choiring of the Trees with no knowledge of when they were written, which would you think had been writ ten first?

8. Harington refers to movies in many of his novels. In Lightning Bug Latha looks like an actress in a movie, in The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks, the preacher Long Jack Stapleton's narrative powers are so great that "word pictures" are like movies, except that Brother Stapleton's "word pictures," provoke all the senses and not just the visual. What significance do movies have in this novel? What about the importance of "word pictures"?

9. Would you characterize The Choiring of the Trees as an adventure story, a story about a particular era in history, a romance story, a story of nostalgia, or, perhaps, a wonderful combination of all these stories so that it is, ultimately, a story about story?

Literary Precedents

The whole body of prison literature that depicts the experience of imprisonment is a major literary precedent.

Among the more modern examples of this literature are Franz Kafka's fictional In the Penal Colony (1919) and Kurt Vonnegut's Jailbird (1976) or the factual "novels" such as Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song (1979) and Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (1965). Of course one might also think of Harington's Lightning Bug where Latha endures incarceration in the state mental hospital. When she says in regard to a prisoner being moved to the state mental hospital that she has good reason to know that that hospital is not better than the prison, she hints at her own experience there. A reader could also consider novels such as Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest with its depiction of life in a state mental hospital as a possible precedent. Importantly, however, for Harington's work, there is no one novel or one author that serves as the primary literary precedent for The Choiring of the Trees.

Related Titles

Lightning Bug, the other Harington novel in which Latha Bourne plays a major role, is clearly related, and since the town of Stay More also has a significant part in the novel, all of Harington's' other novels that deal with Stay More are related. Interestingly, Ekaterina, which is set primarily in fictionalized or "shaded" versions of Pittsburgh and Eureka Springs, Arkansas, was sparked by a reviewer's naive response to The Choiring of the Trees.

That reviewer wanted to know just exactly what was actual and what was imagined in the fictional work, forgetting that storytellers always want their readers or listeners to believe their every word.

Ekaterina marvelously plays with the "actual" and the imagined, as does The Choiring of the Trees, and it has as its literary precedent the fantastic "realities" that Vladimir Nabokov created in his novels Lolita (1955) and Pale Fire (1962). It continues the good humor that fills the pages of many of Harington's works, and it depicts briefly and tellingly, a realistic version of life in some parts of the Arkansas Ozarks.

Above all, it is, like all of Harington best work, a brilliant, entertaining composite of the "real" and the imagined, like all great stories should be.

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