

18

If She Comes Up, It's Baptism

Quick question: I'm walking down the road and suddenly I fall into a pond. What happens?

You drown?

Thanks for the vote of confidence.

Or you don't?

That pretty much covers it. Now what does it mean?

Does it really mean anything either way? I mean, if you drown, you drown. If you get out, maybe all it means is you can swim.

Fair enough. For a character in a novel, though, the case is different. What does it mean if he drowns, or if he doesn't? Have you ever noticed how often literary characters get wet? Some drown, some merely get drenched, and some bob to the surface. What difference does it make?

First of all, let's take care of the obvious. You can fall into the water in an instant, from a bridge that gives way, for instance, or you can be pushed, pulled, dragged, tripped, or tipped over. All of which have their own meanings, of course, and can be taken quite literally. Beyond that, drowning or not has profound plot implications, as do the means by which a character does or doesn't drown.

Consider, just for a moment, that a disconcertingly large number of writers meet their ends in water. Virginia Woolf. Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ann Quin. Theodore Roethke. John Berryman. Hart Crane. Some walked in, some jumped, others swam out and didn't come back. Shelley's boat capsized and *Frankenstein's* author became a very young widow. Iris Murdoch, who drowns enough characters that it seems like a hobby, herself nearly drowned in the sea fairly late in her career. Young Sam Clemens, years away from being Mark Twain, repeatedly had to be fetched out of the Mississippi. So maybe on some level tossing characters into the drink is (a) wish fulfillment, (b) exorcism of primal fear, (c) exploration of the possible, and not just (d) a handy solution to messy plot difficulties.

But back to our soggy character. Is he rescued? Does he swim out? Grab a piece of driftwood? Rise up and walk? Each of those would imply something different

on the symbolic level. For instance, rescue might suggest passivity, good fortune, indebtedness. The piece of driftwood raises issues of luck and coincidence, serendipity rather than planning.

Remember the situation that begins Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* (1976)? Most likely. If you're over a certain age, you probably saw the film in a theater (almost everyone did, evidently), and if you're under a certain age you had it assigned, at least, in high school English.

So you know the deal. Two brothers go out sailing on Lake Michigan, a storm comes up, and one of them drowns. And one doesn't. Now the story works because it's the older, stronger son, the swimming star and apple of his mother's eye, the one who never dies except in family tragedies and war stories, who perishes. The younger one, Conrad, the one who would never survive, survives. And he's tortured by his success at living, to the point where he tries to kill himself. Why? He can't be alive. It's impossible. His brother was "stronger" and didn't make it, so weakling Conrad has to be dead, too. Except he's not. And what he has to learn, through his sessions with the psychiatrist, is that he was stronger; he may not have been the athlete his brother was, but in the moment of crisis he had the tenacity or luck to hang on to the boat and not be

swept away, and now he'll just have to learn to live with it. This learning-to-live business turns out to be hard, since everyone, from the swimming coach to kids at school to his mother, seems to feel that he's the wrong one to still be here.

At this point you're probably saying, "Yeah, he's alive. So . . . ?"

Exactly. So he's not just alive. He's alive all over again. Not only should he have died out in that storm, we can say that in a sense he did die, that the Conrad we meet in the book is not the same Conrad we would have met before the storm. And I don't just mean in terms of Heraclitus, that you can't step into the same river twice, although that's part of it.

Heraclitus—who lived around 500 B.C.—composed a number of adages, what are called his "apothegms of change," all of which tell us that everything is changing at every moment, that the movement of time causes ceaseless change in the cosmos. The most famous of these sayings is that one cannot step into the same river twice. He uses a river to suggest the constantly shifting nature of time: all the little bits and pieces that were floating by a moment ago are somewhere else now and floating at different rates from each other. But that's not really what I have in mind here about Conrad. True, when he is rescued from the lake and steps back

into the stream of his life, everything has shifted and changed, but there's a more violent change in the universe where he's concerned.

Which is what?

He's reborn.

See this in symbolic terms. A young man sails away from his known world, dies out of one existence, and comes back a new person, hence is reborn. Symbolically, that's the same pattern we see in baptism: death and rebirth through the medium of water. He's thrown into the water, where his old identity dies with his older brother. The self who bobs to the surface and clings to the sailboat is a new being. He goes out an insecure, awkward younger brother and comes back an only child, facing a world that knows him as that kid brother, as his old self. The swimming coach can't stop reminding him how much better his brother was. His mother can't relate to him without the filter of his brother. Only the shrink and his father can really deal with him as himself, the shrink because he never knew the brother and his father because he just can. Moreover, it's not just everyone else who has a problem; Conrad himself can't really understand his new position in the world, since he's lost some key elements to placing himself in it. And here's the thing he discovers: being born is painful. And that goes whether you're born or reborn.

Not every character gets to survive the water. Often they don't want to. Louise Erdrich's wonderful *Love Medicine* (1986) may just be the wettest book ever set on dry land. At the end of the novel Lipsha Morrissey, who's as close to a protagonist as the novel comes, observes that once all the northern prairie was an ocean, and we realize that we've been watching the drama play out over the remnants of that sea. His mother, June, walks across the snow of an Easter blizzard "like water" and dies. His uncle Nestor Kashpaw has repeated thoughts of swimming to the bottom of Lake Matchimanito and staying there—an image conflating death and escape. The scene I want to talk about, though, involves Henry Lamartine Jr. and the river. Henry Jr. is a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He seems to come out of it a little when his brother Lyman damages their prized car, a red Chevrolet convertible, almost beyond repair. Repair it Henry does, though, and when he's all finished they go on a picnic by the flooded river. They seem to be having a great time, talking and laughing and drinking beer, when Henry Jr. suddenly runs out into the middle of the roiling, flooded stream. He says, rather simply, that his boots are filling with water, and then he's gone. When Lyman realizes he can't save his brother, he feels that

in dying, Henry has purchased Lyman's share of the car, so he starts it and rolls it down into the stream to be with Henry. The scene is part personal tragedy, part Viking funeral, part Chippewa trip to the next world, all strange.

What does the scene mean? I've been insisting that in novels things are rarely as simple as they seem on the surface. Henry Jr. doesn't just drown. If that's what it were about, Erdrich would simply have him fall in and hit his head on a rock or something. He *elects* to go in, thereby choosing not only his relation to the world around him but his manner of leaving it. In a sense, Henry has been drowning in life since he came back from the war—he can't adjust, can't form relationships, can't leave his nightmares behind. In a manner of speaking, he's already lost, and the issue for the novelist is how to have him physically depart the scene. There are a lot of deaths in Erdrich's novels that are suicides or, at best, what a British coroner would call "death by misadventure." If we take a straight sociological (or daytime-talk-showological) view, we have to say, "It's terrible how hopeless and depressed their lives are." Which is true, of course. But I don't think that's the point. The characters' deaths are a form of choosing, of exerting control in a society that has taken control from them. Henry Jr. decides how he's going

to leave this world, and in so doing offers a symbolic action—he's swept away in the flood.

So there are literary drownings like Henry Jr.'s, and near-drowning baptisms like Conrad's, but a character's baptism can also be less harrowing. In the wonderful *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison has Milkman Dead get wet three times. First he steps into a small stream while searching for gold in a cave, then he's given a bath by Sweet, the woman he meets on his trip into his familial past, and then he swims with Sweet in the river. So he gets wet three times. There's a religious or ritual association here—it resembles baptism in some sects, where the believer is immersed thrice, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Of course, it is worth noting that Milkman is not inevitably more religious, or at least not in any conventional sense, but he's clearly changed. Nicer, more considerate, less of a sexist pig. More responsible. More grown up. High time, too, since he's thirty-two.

So what happens to make him a changed man?

Yes, he gets wet. Now, his getting wet is different from Hagar's disastrous trip in the rain, in that he enters bodies of water. Rain can be restorative and cleansing, so there's a certain overlap, but it generally lacks the specific baptismal associations of submersion. And Milkman does eventually go all the way in.

But if characters reformed every time they got wet, no book would ever have rain. The thing about baptism is, you have to be ready to receive it. And what preps Milkman for this change is a steady process of divestiture. Literally. He leaves parts of his outer shell as he goes on this quest: his Chevrolet breaks down, his shoes give out, his suit is ruined, and his watch is stolen. All the things that mark him as a fine city fellow and his father's son, gone. That's his problem, see? He's no one on his own when he starts out. He's Macon Dead III, son and heir of Macon Dead II and inheritor of all his worst tendencies. In order to become a new person, he has to lose all the outer remnants of his raiment, all the things he has acquired from being the son of his father. Then he's ready to become a new person, to undergo his baptismal immersion. The first time he goes into water, he steps into a little stream he's trying to cross, but since he's just starting out, the experience only begins to cleanse him. He's still after gold, and characters who seek gold aren't ready for change. Later, after much has happened to change him gradually, he is bathed by Sweet, in a cleansing that is both literal and ritual. Of equal importance, he returns the favor and bathes her. Their intent clearly is not religious; if it were, religion would be far more popular than it is. But what the characters intend as erotic ritual can have

spiritual implications in the novel. When Milkman swims in the river for his third immersion, though, he knows it's significant *for him*: he whoops, he hollers, he laughs at danger, he's a brand-new person and he feels it. Which is what dying and rebirth is all about.

In her *Beloved*, Morrison makes even greater use of the symbolic implications of baptism and drowning. When Paul D. and the chain gang escape from the prison, they do so during a flood of biblical proportions by diving down under the mud below their cell doors and swimming, as one being, up through the muck and the mud, emerging into new lives. Later (chronologically, although it takes place previously in the narrative), when *Beloved* makes her appearance, she emerges from water. On this, more in a bit. When Sethe gives birth to Denver, she does so in a canoe, for heaven's sake, and on the Ohio River no less. Now that particular body of water is significant in the novel, separating as it does slaveholding Kentucky from abolitionist Ohio. Ohio may not be much more hospitable to black folks in other ways, but at least they aren't slaves there. So to enter the river on the south side and climb out on the north, or even to cross it, is to emerge from a kind of death into a new life.

So when writers baptize a character they mean death, rebirth, new identity?

Generally, yes. But we need to be a little careful here. Baptism can mean a host of things, of which rebirth is only one. Literal rebirth—surviving a deadly situation—is certainly a part of it, just as symbolic rebirth is the point of the sacrament of baptism, in which taking the new believer completely underwater causes him to die out of his old self and to be reborn in his identity as a follower of Christ. It has always seemed to me that the whole business probably ties in with some cultural memory of Noah's flood, of the whole world drowning and then this small remnant being set down on dry land to restore life to earth, cleansed of the sin and pollution that had marked human life right before the flood. Seen this way, baptism is a sort of reenactment on a very small scale of that drowning and restoration of life. Of course, I'm not a biblical scholar and may therefore be miles off base. Still, it's certainly true that baptism is itself a symbolic act and that there's nothing inherent in the act that makes a person more religious or causes God to take notice. It's not as if this is an activity universally practiced among the world's religions, or even among the big three Western religions.

So in a *literary work*, does *submersion in water* always signify baptism?

Well, it isn't always anything. "Always" and "never" aren't good words in literary studies. Take rebirth.

Does it represent baptism? If you mean, Is it spiritual, then we can say, sometimes. Sometimes, though, it may just signify birth, a new start, largely stripped of spiritual significance.

Let's take my old standby D. H. Lawrence. (In a passage of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom thinks that Shakespeare has a quote for every day of the year. He could have added that Lawrence has a symbolic situation for all those days.) In "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (1922), he has a young woman, Mabel, nearly drown herself, rescued at the last moment by the local doctor. Her family horse farm has been sold off after her father's death, and although she's been little more than a drudge in the family structure, she can't bear to leave and go to the only place, a manor house, that will take her in. So she cleans the gravestone of her long-dead mother (clearly indicating her intent to join Mom) and walks into the nearby pond. When young Dr. Fergusson sees her go under, he races in to save her, nearly dying in the process as she pulls both of them under. He manages with some difficulty to get her above water again, to carry her to safety and generally to care for her, which is clearly a first for both of them. Here's where things get messy, though. The *doctor* brings her forth from her watery bed. She is coated not with clean water but with *slimy*,

smelly, rather disgusting fluid. When she awakens, she has been *cleaned up and wrapped in a blanket*, under which she's as *naked* as, well, the day she was born. In fact, it is the day she is born. Or reborn. And if you're going to be born, you may need a doctor in attendance (although he usually doesn't have to dive in with you, to the relief of mothers everywhere), and there's going to be all that amniotic fluid and afterbirth, and after that the cleansing and a receiving blanket and the whole bit.

So what does she do with this brand-new life of hers?

Tell young Fergusson "I love you," a thought which has never occurred to either of them until this moment. And his reborn self thinks it's a satisfactory idea, even though he's never found her attractive until this moment. But she's a brand-new person, and so is he, and these new selves find something in each other the old ones, limited by their associations with the rest of her family, couldn't possibly find. Is it spiritual? That probably depends on what you think about possessing a brand-new self. It's not overtly religious. On the other hand, almost nothing happens in Lawrence that doesn't seem to me to be deeply spiritual, even if it's in fairly mystifying ways.

So when a character drowns, what does that mean?

Oh, they die. Remember me mentioning Iris Murdoch earlier? Given half the chance, she'd drown

the Seventh Fleet. If there's water in one of her novels, somebody's going to drown. In *The Unicorn* (1963), she has a character nearly drown in a bog, in order to have a cosmic vision, and then be saved only to have the vision fade before it can do him any good. Later, she has two characters drown in separate but related incidents, or at least one drown and the other fall over a cliff by the sea. And Flannery O'Connor, along the same lines only more peculiar, has a story called "The River" (1955) in which a little boy, having watched baptisms joining people to God on a Sunday, goes back to the river the next day to join God on his own. Yes, he does, sad to say. And Jane Hamilton, in *A Map of the World* (1994), has her main character allow a child to drown through negligence, then she has to deal with the consequences throughout the remainder of the novel. Not to mention John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), in which Rabbit Angstrom's wife, Janice, drunkenly drowns their child while trying to bathe it. Each of these instances is particular. It's a little like Tolstoy says at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* about families: All happy families are the same, but every unhappy one has its own story. The rebirths/baptisms have a lot of common threads, but every drowning is serving its own purpose: character revelation, thematic development of violence or failure or guilt, plot complication or denouement.

To return to Morrison's character Beloved rising from the water, back from the dead. On the personal level, the river may be the Styx, the river of the dead in the Greek underworld that the spirits crossed to enter Hades. And it certainly functions that way: she has returned from the dead, literally. But the river stands for something else as well. In its small way, it is the middle passage, that watery sojourn that, one way and another, took the lives of millions, as Morrison says in the novel's epigraph. Beloved has died when her mother kills her rather than allow her to be taken back across the river into slavery. The drowning imagery is not merely personal here but cultural and racial. Not every writer can pull that one off, but Morrison can.

Like baptism, drowning has plenty to tell us in a story. So when your character goes underwater, you have to hold your breath. Just, you know, till you see her come back up.