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Mrs. Bentley's Creative Logos: The Confines of Narrative Framework as Seen in Sinclair
Ross's *As For Me and My House*

In Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Mrs. Bentley is consumed by a lack of meaning in all facets of her existence. This lack isolates her in an existential¹ stasis, ultimately leaving her to narrate her way through the void of futile meaninglessness. As such, Mrs. Bentley articulates her struggle by creating a catalog of composite emotional narratives: her diary. The novel is a compilation of Mrs. Bentley's diary entries, thus confining the reader, and her subject matter, to her gaze, placing particular attention on her husband, Philip. Mrs. Bentley emphatically states that "it's a woman's way, I suppose, to keep on trying to subdue a man, to bind him to her" (Ross 85); therefore, she actively binds Philip to herself through each entry, framing him within her the confines of her diary's narrative. By framing Philip within her narrative, Mrs. Bentley suspends him within the same stasis she suffers. She projects her internal emptiness onto her husband, using him as a proxy to author her own emotional autobiography, thus subsuming him within her desolation. As a result, she dispels, and defers, emotional ownership through her projections, making Philip the targeted focus of her internal purgings while absolving her of the weight of her emotions. Also, she routinely undermines and subverts Philip's character through both direct and indirect criticisms. Considering that Philip is used as a catalyst for analyzing her own interiority, this narrative strategy is exemplary of the

¹ Existentialism places "particular emphasis on the essential meaninglessness of the universe and on man's need to struggle to create meaning" (Murfin 147)

parasitic manifestation of her own toxic hostility, slowly eating away at everything around her, including herself.

Mrs. Bentley sees her condition in everything around her by projecting her own creative logos through her perceptive gaze. She habitually envisions herself and superimposes that image onto existence at large, making everything a mere reflection of her self. She describes herself as “looking down a corridor of years and Horizons, at the end of which [is] a mirror and [her] own reflection” (109); “or better, like a whole set of mirrors[...] [r]anged round [her] so that at every step [she] met the preacher’s wife, splayfooted rubbers, dowdy coat and all. [She] couldn’t escape. The gate and doors and windows kept reminding [her]”(31) of her own existence, projected outwards and refracted back onto her, thus suffocating her within her own gaze. The constant associations are unrelenting, projecting despair onto every facet of her existence, engulfing her within it. She is so engrossed with her own existence that it isolates her into a stasis of self-reflective angst, invariably making everything and everyone a participatory pawn within her own struggle.

Mrs. Bentley uses Philip as a means of addressing and assessing her own anxieties and grievances. When describing the former towns they have inhabited, Mrs. Bentley remarks that “[t]here hasn’t been much change, either in the towns or in us. He still draws, cold little ghosts of his dream that are stronger than their uselessness. He’s alone in his study with them now, quieter even than he usually is. It was the train today, reminding him again of the outside world he hasn’t reached” (45). This passage suggests that despite their [re]locations, their emptiness persists; therefore, while Philip is in his study drawing “ghosts of his dream,” Mrs. Bentley is outside, contemplating Philip,

“ask[ing] [her]self how many more years like this it’s going to be, the little house so still and dead, the door between [them] closed” (96). In addition, it is important to note that Mrs. Bentley is narrating Philip’s inner responses and immediate associations (how the train “remind[s] him”(45) of his failures). Interestingly, Philip is described as “alone in his study” in silence, ultimately leaving the reader questioning how Mrs. Bentley is able to state affirmatively how he would react to the sound of a train passing by considering that he did not confer this information directly to her. One can draw the conclusion that this is a fabrication of Mrs. Bentley’s own inference founded by her own feelings; she is outside his study, unable to tap into his consciousness and “reach” Philip. She identifies and superimposes her condition onto him, thus making him the catalyst for talking about her futile attempt in escaping meaninglessness. Later on in the novel, she describes how “[she] dread[s] the nights, [she] dread[s] getting up to start another day. There’s no escape. [She] feel[s] as if [she] were slowly turning to lead” (184); as if hearing a train in the distance reminding her that there is no escape, no exit from her condition.

As Philip retreats slowly into the labyrinths of his own hermetic desolation, Mrs. Bentley is left intensifying the radical projections of her inner turmoil, erasing any divide that separates her emotions with the outside world. She describes how Philip is “grow[ing] more and more to himself. At times[she] find[s] even [herself] an outsider. He retreats to his books and wants no intrusions” (12). Finding herself outside can be understood as her feeling shut out(side) of Philip’s life; in addition, it also suggests how her internal state is now outside of herself, manifested in the external realm. The way that she sees things has permeated itself into a projection of her interiority onto exterior existence. She also says that the “outside world ha[s] no place for him either, that there

too he would be unwanted and deplored” (41); therefore, as Philip recoils into a tightly woven unrelenting knot, she describes the outside world as inhospitable to *him*. This may be attributed to the fact that her internal state is overflowing into the external world, confining him to smaller and smaller spaces, trapping him within her narrative precincts.

Within the diction of her narration, Mrs. Bentley regulates and censors Philip’s authentic self. She casts her reservations onto him by confining and restricting his actions and his character within the parameters of her narrative will. For instance, within the first few pages she describes Philip as “the small-town preacher and the artist – what he is and what he nearly was – the failure, the compromise, the going-on – it’s all there – the discrepancy between the man and the little niche that holds him” (7). The sheer notion of summarizing Philip’s character encapsulates him within her narrative framework. Mrs. Bentley traces Philip’s temporal manifestation by delineating and imposing her own subjective suppositions onto him in a fallaciously objective fashion. As such, she fuses her partiality onto him, invariably making him a subordinate product of her gaze. The usage of punctuation, in particular dashes, further accentuates his entrapment within the syntax of her prose. In this passage, Mrs. Bentley also comments on Philip’s life on a macroscopic, surface level; however, simultaneously, she is indirectly commenting on how he is represented within the shackles of her own narrative psyche. She binds him within her narrative “niche,” holding and confining him to her perspective, thus creating an immediate “discrepancy” between her opinion and his ‘true’ character. This “discrepancy” also parallels how her authorship fills the void, namely, the lack within their relationship by fictionalizing the gaps between them.

As Philip retreats from Mrs. Bentley, she is left filling in the gaps within their vacant narrative, ultimately consuming his voice entirely. She comments on the futility of their routine lives and how it “destroy[s] him[...][and] leaves [her] alone outside his study door[;]. [...] not bitter, just tired, whipped. [She] see[s] things clearly. The next town - the next and the next. There doesn't seem much meaning to [their] going on” (136). Mrs. Bentley feels so entrenched within the monotony of their lives; therefore, her only escape is her creative outlet, her writing. Within the creative vein, she is able to blur the lines between her voice and Philip's, fusing them together as one. This narratively creates the ultimate intimacy: his articulations of her own emotions, thus finally aligning them. Consequently, any bout of defiance on Philip's part is immediately thwarted by Mrs. Bentley, bestowing on her ultimate control of him:

I could feel the hot throb of all the years he has curbed and hidden and chocked himself -- feel it gather, break, the sudden reckless stumble for release - and before it was too late, before he could do what he should have done twelve years ago, I interrupted (96).

Mrs. Bentley intervenes in time to stunt his potential growth, making him a product of her narrative control. She appropriates his voice while acknowledging that “he ought to have had the opportunity to live, to be reckless, spendthrift, bawdy, anything but what he is, what I've made him” (136). By routinely suffocating him within her narration, she usurps any potential meaning outside of her own purview, ultimately drawing him into her own futility.

Mrs. Bentley is embedded within the trapping of her own condition, permanently stuck in a state of lack being unable to escape the shackles of her own mundane routine.

She has “a queer, helpless sense of being lost [...], flattened against a little peak of rock” (47) akin to both Prometheus’s and Sisyphus’s fate to endure the same torment over and over again. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, states that “a face that toils so close to stone is already a stone itself” (121). Her own voice, alongside everyone else’s is usurped into the meaninglessness of her own condition. Everything around her is consumed within the vacuous sense of repetition and monotony, and this ultimately manifests itself in the dysfunctional relationship she has with her husband.

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