

excerpt on Patrick Lawler's "Mickey Mantle"—reading the counterpoint in the poem

I'd like to now show a youtube video of the "Mickey Mantle" poem because I think the photographs especially are helpful:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-68Lmykjm_Q&feature=youtu.be

I'd also like to show you this poem so that you can more easily follow the ideas I am going to discuss:

http://mmpress.org/ffe/Lawler_Mickey.htm

"Mickey Mantle" presents a persona or self who carries multiple themes at once without any self-conscious thematic connections. The persona is confident that we will be able to make the intuitive leaps that he is making. We have (1) "the American in Mexico," (2) "Mickey Mantle dying of cancer," and (3) "the burning of a symbol of the past" set up right away in the first stanza.

Each theme gets deeper and more complex, and the leaps made between the themes become more jarring and more emotionally loaded. The American in Mexico theme is made ironic in the second stanza—the seas are too rough for swimming as black flags are on all the beaches. This theme quickly also gets deeper than it first appeared because now the persona is seeking a miracle, a *milagro*, but he is self aware enough as an American abroad to know how ridiculous it sounds to ask a Mexican to buy everything he has. The quest for a miracle seems to be tied to some unspecified "pain." So at the end of the first five stanzas, the first theme has become a myriad of subthemes.

One could note here that the motifs of "pain" and some sort of "healing" in "Whole Poems" seems to have carried into "Mickey Mantle." In "Whole Poems," pain did at least seem more defined and contained; however, here it has become in the fifth stanza comparable to an entire "species."

Then in the sixth stanza, he suddenly brings in a counter-theme from WWII, the war that Patrick's father fought in, by the way. We see parachuting soldiers, and then Hiroshima in the seventh stanza. Then the American-in-Mexico theme intensifies and gets more complex as the persona seeks something like a miracle cure with "holy water and forgiveness," and he also seeks a *milagro* everyday in the next stanza.

A little further, at the twelfth stanza, the persona is giving up the quest for healing—it seems hopeless. In the thirteenth stanza, we learn why, finally. We see the holocaust of Hiroshima turning a living boy into a shadow. Two stanzas later, the American-in-Mexico theme intensifies again as a woman tries to sell her body to him. In another ironic twist, the American feels friendship for a poor but proud Mexican couple—and their pride in his friendship seems to be involved his status as an American.

The seventeenth stanza is the crucial one, though, for here the poet says, returning to the second theme, Mickey Mantle dying of cancer, that "I needed someone else other than my father/to be my father. Mickey Mantle/stumbles around the bases." So here the father who was disabled seems to have been symbolically replaced by a baseball hero, but then even that substitute father is dying, stumbling. So the wish for a father who could be worthy turns out to be impossible—"the ball will never land." Just as the poet in "Whole Poems" sought to find some imagined healing machinery for a disabled father, now the poet with Mickey Mantle as a symbolic father seeks a miracle cure for him.

How ironic it is, then, at that moment (stanza 20), to return to the Hiroshima theme, and to hear the copilot's words, "My God, what have we done?" It is not merely that as an American the poet shares in this guilt. It is also that the poet has another kind of guilt, the guilt of the son who has wished for someone else to be his father. For the way that counterpoint work is that we hear the words both by themselves and as they resonate against the adjacent theme. Thus, the words of the

copilot may also resound as the words of the poet-as-son, who is saying, ‘My God, what have I done?’

Doesn’t it make sense, then, that the poet persona has melted hands? Then in the twenty-second stanza, it could make sense that the poet persona feels as though he is dying in 1961 and in 1995 he has been dead a long time. Or it could be that this also is the poet persona imagining himself as his own father.

In the final surreal stanzas, it seems almost as though the dead from Hiroshima return to land out of the sea in Mexico—in the penultimate stanza we see the victims of the atomic bomb plunging into the sea, seeking the coolness of the water. Finally, given that Mickey Mantle died in 1995, it is a fitting ending that the hero will be put away in a shoebox—the baseball card will be stored away.

So this poem is, at once, a very personal confessional poem even while it is a very public, national and even global poem in that it is about the collective guilt of America for Hiroshima. Because of the counterpoint, the interweaving of themes, the personal confession of a guilty son to a father and the confession of an American for the act of violence to Hiroshima resonate together, and the failed personal hero (the father) and the dying public hero (Mickey Mantle) are somehow buried together symbolically as the poet gives up the quest for a miracle cure.

The poet persona has needed a miracle of forgiveness just as America has needed a miracle of forgiveness. The weaving together of these very personal and very public (historical and national) themes makes the poem speak more powerfully and eloquently about what it means to have a symbolic hero passing away while having to accept what in the world remains behind. In the end, we return to the third theme in that opening stanza—burning a symbol of the past, a gesture of leaving, a putting away of old things.