

Study of the Nature in David Malouf's novel Harland's Half Acre (1984)

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Abstract: Where human life is deteriorated, the environment is degraded simultaneously. In this novel, similarly, the life of Harland family lingers around possession, dispossession and obsession. Life of Frank Harland is centered on his art of drawing and his love for his family, including his father and farm (refers to half) acre) and his four brothers. Frank desires to restore his lost prosperity. The story goes parallel with Frank Harland's and Phil Vernon's life.

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David Malouf has gained success in presenting beautiful and real Australian society in the mind of readers about the era of world war II and post-war conditions, dealing the socio-political, economic and educational plight along with the description of beautiful landscapes and environment in Australia.

'Named like so much else in Australia for a place on the far side of the globe that its finders meant to honour and were piously homesick for, Killarney bears no resemblance to its Irish original. It is lush country but of the green, subtropical kind, with sawmills in untidy paddocks, peak-roofed weatherboard farms, and on the skyline of low hills, bunyan pines, hoop pines and Scotch firs of a forbidding blackness. Tin roofs flare out of an acre of stumps. Iron windmills churn. On all sides in the wet months there is a flash of water. These are the so-called lakes. Rising abruptly around fence-posts to turn good pasture for a time into a chain of weed-choked lily-ponds, they are remnants of a sea that feeds one of the great river systems of the continent - fugitive, not always visible above ground, but attracting at all times of the year a variety of waterfowl and real enough to have had, when the native peoples were here, an equally poetic name that no one has bothered to record.' (From the *Penguin* paperback edition, 1985.)

Harlands are brought up on the story of how they won and then lost the land. Motherless Harland brothers were split up and scattered to relatives of whom many of them they bereaved in the great war, while the remaining children lived in the grubby chaos in a single roomed shack. Their life was too difficult because of destitution and their world very confined... where getting bread to fulfill the hunger was the celebration and getting admission in school was only hegemony of the children of the brightest and the richest people. He, having a destitute father of an unprofitable dairy farm and five motherless boys including him, Frank Harland is the mouthpiece (third person narrator) of David Malouf in this novel. He has many saddistic and bitter experiences and memories in the house of his uncle and aunt (Fred and Else), where Frank learns

to draw and discovers his inherent art that sustains him throughout his long life, through a hung shirt in the cupboard of their only son Ned, which he draws. Here, the title of the novel Harland's Half Acre, is symbolic and suggestive to the difficulty of owning and sustaining property, where life itself is very difficult ... such a world where a lady dies from an infection of wounds pricked by rose thorns and children die from Spanish flu. Malouf takes up the story with the childhood and adolescent of a motherless boy, Frank, his destitute father Clem and his unprofitable dairy farm. Taking advantage of a trip to Brisbane for a bull show at agricultural site, Frank visits an art gallery with some of his pictures, where a dealer sends him a good teacher of art, Mr. Hopkins and he finds a job as an advertising copy artist, so that he would pay his fees for his lessons, although Frank feels guilty for being away from his father and farm. He lived in a remote cheap boarding house so that he could send money to his youngest brother for his education until he lost his job coming on the road, he went in depression. His ambition and hope for his family seems helpless. Frank, a gentle, dignified wearing sockless shoes and a jacket pulled tight across his chest to conceal that he had no shirt, is a potential hero who has migrated to Brisbane from his homeland to secure a half acre land and property which is out of his reach to achieve and remains his aspiration.

"A story rich in passion and incident and with the obsessive, sometimes violent claims of family life. "From his poverty-stricken upbringing on a dairy farm in Queensland, Frank Harland nurtures his artistic genius until the time comes when he can take possession of his dreams. Inextricably tangled with Frank is Phil Vernon, the only child of a wealthy Brisbane family, whose roots stretch back to England. Together their voices echo the story of a great country in a novel of remarkable artistry and power." (Dust jacket synopsis)

Frank Harland was born into a poverty all the harder to bear for being only two generations removed from relative wealth and gentility. The Harland family once had substantial pastoral holdings in Queensland, later drunk and gambled away. Frank's father, Clem, is a charming egotist and a weakling, a man whose power arises from its worldly relinquishment, from the eloquence with which he weaves a mythology out of his failures and flaws. Frank is one of two sons from his father's first marriage. His mother dies shortly after giving birth to his younger brother, when Frank is two. Frank is sent away for some years to live with an uncle and aunt, and it is this early severance that paradoxically confirms in him an abiding connection with his brother and, later, his half-brothers. Even as boy he grasps that the responsibility for shielding the Harlands from the world will fall to him. It will surprise no one familiar with Malouf's writing that he is at his best when describing the processes of artistic creation. The author's description of Frank's first glimmerings of vocation while drawing is so good that it demands quotation:

'The page was transformed. Where the soft lead bit into paper, the paper resisted at first, then yielded, enough for the pressure-point to make a dent, and

for the dent to fill with minute crumbings. It looked like a full stop, but was in fact an opening from which the lovely grey-black graphite flowed out.'

He sat very still and contemplated what was before him, the passage concludes: It seemed as if he had understood something important; that his hand, almost without him, had made a great discovery."The narrative running from this insight stretches like a long, albeit often-interrupted, line through the artist's subsequent career, as Frank's life intersects with a period of political upheaval and social change, both domestically and in the great world beyond. We follow him through his apprenticeship as a newspaper illustrator in Brisbane and the long, lean years of the Depression - when it is only the modest sale of his paintings that gets the Harland family through (Malouf traces Frank's shifting relations with them with elegant thrift, embedding letters to siblings and others in the text) - and then to the first stirrings of fame, when he is discovered by the novel's second narrator in a jerry-built studio on a pier off Gold Coast's Broadwater. Frank is helpless losing his job and after all the success and fame comes on the road and the in depression subsequently suffering away from the roots, nature and pasture which is all about a struggling to improve material life leading economically un-uniform .

Phil Vernon is a child of the middle class Vernon family, a companion and competitor of Frank, whose early and sympathetic identification with Frank for a few years during World War II -- a period when the painter becomes a friend of the Vernon family - is a mystery that will take him a lifetime to decode. A watchful, passive, intelligent boy, Phil's first-person perspective adds a necessary second dimension to the author's portrait. It is he who draws the narrative through the post-war years and the emergence of the very different country we inhabit today. Readers of Malouf's autobiographical twelve Edmond stone Street will note immediately Phil's narration incorporates details from the author's life experience. Indeed, as Malouf's near-coeval, Phil brings to bear a minutely detailed knowledge of people and place, especially during the 1940s - 50s, during the second world war and post war, the years of his childhood and youth in the novel.

The vivid descriptions of South Brisbane scattered about these pages, and the perceptive account he gives of his large family and their circles complex domestic circumstance - his sympathetic yet dispassionate insights into their various mental and emotional states, their complex interiority - can only be described as Proustian. Here is Phil on a regular dinner guest, Miss Minchin, who had done missionary work with the aborigines and "had seen a child taken by a crocodile once off a tartan blanket, while they were having tea on a lawn": *She recounted this tragedy, and others, in a small flat rather mannish voice and with so little emotion that she might have had a little machine tucked away under her scarf at her throat to save the trouble of telling the stories herself, they were so unremarkable.*

But it is Frank Harland to whom Phil Vernon is finally drawn, through ties of affinity that the boy, and later the man, can hardly explain to himself. It is through his eyes we watch Harland's triumphant emergence as a national figure. But we also witness how the artist's determination and fierce asceticism first alienates and then ultimately destroys those family bonds he worked so hard to preserve. Harland's final years are spent in isolation and retreat from the world, without a younger heir to whom to bequeath his works. This sounds the stuff of tragedy, and partly it is. Yet out of all of the sadness and betrayal that mark Harland's life comes a vast tranche of artworks - enough paper and canvas to cover a half acre. This territory was not violently appropriated, as the Harlands' original holdings were, rather, won through the artist's own quasi-demonic agency. His visionary landscapes and portraits describe a different kind of ownership: a more provisional yet richer means of inhabiting the land.

Phil Vernon is always to intersect Frank. He is an only child to his big middle class family consisting his uncles, aunts and grand parent, Frank is living in the shabby remnants of a picture theatre in Brisbane. Phil is an only child; his large middle-class family and grandparents with whom his parents are living because his grandfather is dying. It is a tense household, dominated by his aloof, uncompromising grandmother whose ambitions included running the family fruit and vegetable business and sabotaging her daughters' chances at any romance. Uncle Gil struggles with shell-shock while Phil's father is a small-town dandy who fancies himself as a patron, handing out shillings to hard-luck stories and keen to buy the work of a struggling artist even though he himself has no taste in art at all.

While Frank's story is always told in third person omniscient narration, Phil relates his story as a reflection of the past with the immediacy of childhood memories moderated by the observations of a mature man. Phil accepts his grandfather's decline matter-of-fact and relates the idiosyncracies of his relations with a child's detached pragmatism. Chapters alternate between Frank's and Phil's story so that the readers learn the origins of a painting that shocks twelve-year-old Phil who is the catalyst for Frank's career as an artist of note. In the quiet stillness of this poignant novel and the simple of Brisbane in the days when it was still more of a country town than a capital city, the sudden eruption of violence emanating from the wider world impacts on Phil in ways he did not expect:

'None of this could I have put into words that day. I put it into silence. It was a silence, along with other things, that I felt I shared now with Frank Harland.' (p. 72)

The material success, economy and environmental harmony could not be achieved. Malouf has depicted Australia in poetic manner, the rich element of nature we find in the novel but the society failed to harmonize it with enrichment of nature. There is always struggle of power, political conflicts and war. There is inefficiency to harmonize the world in humane sense close with

nature, vegetation and heavenly image of Eden. Exploring possession and dispossession, loneliness and solitude, the loss of a city's innocence and the end of an era, Malouf shows us family life as fragile. He shows us how being a 'gentleman' has nothing to do with money, but that the cost of dignity is an inability to express emotion. Frank's final days of willing dispossession bring him risks as well as a kind of peace – and those who love him have to let him go.

Richard Kerridge's definition in the mainly British *Writing the Environment* (1998) suggests, like Glotfelty's, a broad cultural ecocriticism:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (p4)

Keeping in mind to the Darwinian theory, as a good seed will sprout into a good plant similarly a healthy environment will create a wealthy society. After the battle of life, the protagonist Frank is lost in the nature of the self, physical environmental nature like D.H. Lawrence's hero Paul Morel and R.K. Narayan's Chandran. It is a beautiful and successful novel by Malouf to be a treasure of Australian literature.

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