Identification in "Ashes Come Home"

By SISTER M. ANDRÉ MARTHALER,
O. S. B.

The Funeral of Sinclair Lewis:
An Essay and A Critique by the Author

I wasn't there for the funeral. I was going to school in Indiana. When I got home for a vacation four years later the townsfolk told me about it. Maybe the funeral wasn't exactly like they told it, but this is what the old grandmas and the middle-aged fathers, the farmers, and the store clerks in Sauk Centre told me.

They said the folks in our town had never seen such a funeral. When they went to wakes they went to homes or to funeral parlors. They went to look at a real body and to see who sent flowers. They went to see the family cry and to hear about the death from the relatives. Their funerals were always connected with religion; there was always a priest or a minister and they always had prayers. But nothing was right about this funeral.

The janitor had swept the high school auditorium and put around some rows of chairs. Under the clocks he put one of the heavy small tables from the shop room.

Late that January afternoon, Doctor Lewis brought home the ashes of his brother Sinclair and set the small glass urn on the shop table. Sinclair's divorced wife, his son, and two or three other persons were there, too. They sort of stood around by themselves all evening. They didn't pray and they didn't cry. The few townspeople who came walked up to the table, gaped awkwardly for a minute, looked around into the emptiness, and left quickly. The men went to Schwarzmann's bar down the street; the women went to the Red Owl and the National Tea and talked and waited for their men.

Next morning word got around that the ashes of old Doctor Lewis's boy was all they had to bury. In the early afternoon the retired townsfolk and those that had no jobs came to the auditorium. Lots of folks from out of town sent flowers. The Lewises stacked them under the table and piled the rest along the wall. Old Mr. Schwarzmann went to Doctor Lewis and asked him if he wanted to put out some of the flowers. Doctor Lewis told him, "Red gave orders before he died -- no flowers!" The Lewises moved around in a little group near the table. Off and

on a few strangers came in and joined them. The hometown folks stood opposite the door near the back. They had nothing else to do.

At two o'clock Doctor Lewis sounded the signal and the folks pushed around and finally sat down. The Lewises sat in the front row with the strangers. Our men took off their caps and waited for prayers. The women poked around in their purses looking for hankies. Finally some man who had been carrying a book got up and stood in front of the table. He said he was a writer from the University. He said he had lost a great friend and that he wanted to read something from one of the books of the departed. He said he was going to read from a book about a doctor -- where the doctor said death is the end of everything. He read a little piece but it didn't mean much to most of us. Old Clem Mueller was rubbing his finger up and down behind his right ear like he does in church when he doesn't know what the preacher is talking about. When the man got through with his reading, Doctor Lewis went to the table, picked up the urn, and dropped it into his pocket.

It was a cold day. There was a strong wind blowing the loose snow and gravel. The Lewises, the strangers, and about a dozen homefolks went out to the cemetery. They went to the Lewis lot where the old Lewises are buried. With his foot Doctor Lewis scraped the snow out of the little hole that was to be the grave of his brother. He started The Lord's Prayer. Young Lewis looked up. "Hey, Doc," he said from where he stood, "Dad didn't want any prayers. Remember?" Doctor Lewis looked at his nephew and said, "Shut up! I'm running this damn show," and finished the prayer.

He tried to open the urn then, but his fingers were too stiff from the cold. One of our men handed him a pliers and with them he opened the seal. He bent down to spill the ashes into the grave. A swirl of wind blew some of the ashes back into his face. "Damn you, Red," he said, and scraped the dirt over his brother's ashes.

Everybody left the cemetery then. The Lewises and the strangers left for Minneapolis. The townspeople went back to the auditorium. The flowers were in vases and on the chairs along the wall. Young Schwarzmann had brought some of his bar over from down the street. The homefolks were drinking beer and eating pretzels.

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In "Rhetoric Old and New,"(April, 1951),Kenneth Burke says, "If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the 'old rhetoric and the new' ... I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was 'persuasion' and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the 'new' rhetoric

would be 'identification' which can include an 'unconscious' factor in appeal.

Now, what does Burke mean by identification. One thing, he says, can be identified with another thing when both are shown to share the same whatness or substance. When a writer, a speaker, a politician, a mother, a soldier, anyone, identifies himself with someone else or with some thing which, too, has a whatness, he becomes consubstantial with it. In "Ashes Come Home," which as a prose piece is a form and an act interpreting/reporting an action, the townsfolk, as actors in a specialized activity, participants in a funeral, possess a consubstantiality in that they share among other things, the same attitudes about what makes for rightness at funerals: a real body, flowers, grief, conversation about how the 'loved one' died, religious ritual, an officiating minister, a wake in the home or in the funeral parlor.

What about the identification of the writer? Does the writer have identification, consubstantiality with one or with both sets of actors? Burke says that in the fact that man is symbol user, symbol maker, symbol creator all men have consubstantiality. All men have identification in that they employ their symbol making-using facility, a facility which most "explicitly, revealingly, and universally" manifests itself through the medium of language.

In the first place, the writer seems to seek distance, to be consciously uninvolved, non-participating: "I wasn't here for the funeral. I was going to school in Indiana." But after these two opening statements, the writer reveals, and nowhere relinquishes, identification, consubstantiality with the townspeople. This is accomplished through "the townsfolk told me about it." The principle of identification exists, first of all, in that communication. Then there is the strategy of the possessive pronoun: our in "our town" and "our men." Identification is suggested in the noun phrases: "the hometown folks," "a dozen homefolks." The writer has, in language, chosen to reveal identification with the townspeople.

The writer's identification with the townsfolk is revealed in the choice of simple, ordinary, colloquial vocabulary, the vocabulary of the simple townsfolk. The syntax is simple, ordinary, non-complex. The sentences are short; most of them are of the direct noun phrase plus verb phrase variety. The grammatical function of like in "like they told it" and "like he does in church..." indicates the writer's identification with the dialect of the townspeople. The attention to small, almost the trivial, details reveals the writer's receptivity to the communications of the "old grandmas, the middle-aged fathers, the store clerks."

The writer's participation in the whatness of the townsfolk's response to the Lewises as actor, to the why of their coming together with them, to the agency of the urn, to the agent in the person of Dr. Lewis, who, of course, was once one of them but from whom they are, in this action, separated, to the entire act of the wake, the burial rites, to all that is and makes the scene, is communicated directly, and indirectly, by and through the entire essay. No one part achieves this identification with the whatness of the characters alone. Whatever it is that produces this appeal was in no way a conscious manipulation by the writer. That it is there can be tested by an oral reading of the essay to an audience. (In my case, several of my dorm mates at Patterson Hall)

The strategic positioning of "Doctor Lewis went to the table, picked up the urn, and dropped it into his pocket." with the drop pitch and the voiceless stops /p, k,t/ in pocket, a sentence which ends one thing and begins another, yet is intimately bound with all that comes before and after, invites a response from an audience which is the whatness of the response made by the townspeople. They, too, gape awkwardly, and, because there is no one to bring them beer and pretzels, resort to just moving about, uncomfortable.

Reciprocity

DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER 1890 – 1969

By WILLIAM D. ELLIOTT
Bemidji State College

Lament, for priests of life have sprung,
Turned on him; yet he cries, yet blind can see.
Call us a country of deathless corresponding;
Dry Normandy, door of cliffs, strike open
Uplift the temples of our declining North
Strike beggar-like to fathom new routes West
Upset time coming South
Lament the fiction of the concrete universe.
Lost allegory, our lives
Test in court for North America
Try us a country of young men
Who see the fracture of the hour
And Seers, die in winter, sleep,
Pin on the temples of our soul
The fusion of the galaxy.