



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Garden of Eden, Garden of Hell?

*The Many Uses of the Symbolic Garden in Malcolm Lowry's
Under the Volcano*

B.A. Essay

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May 2014

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Abstract

Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry is a novel set in Mexico in 1938, on the verge of the Second World War, and which relates the final twenty-four hours of the life of Geoffrey Firmin, on November 1st, the Day of the Dead. Faced with a reunion with his estranged wife, Yvonne, and half-brother Hugh, Firmin nonetheless, through perpetual inebriation, destroys his chance of happiness and is eventually killed by fascists in the local police force. Based largely on Lowry's own reality and personal truth, the novel employs the symbol of the garden to represent the wilderness present in the human soul. By using ecocritical theory as a means of analyzing the novel, the symbol of the garden expounds the correlations between disparate places as well as condensing personal realities, which in turn become symbolic of larger issues. Following this argument is the analysis of the way one person's inner psychological turmoil is reflected onto the surrounding landscape, and how conversely an idyllic place could quell the suffering within. Lowry's garden is an Eden gone to seed, abandoned by God. Augmenting the presence of mystical elements is the use of the Cabbala in the novel, which posits Geoffrey Firmin as a black magician who has the wrath of natural elements set against him. Finally, because of Geoffrey's incessant inebriation, his physical, mental and emotional being is a broken system in need of a return to purity and rebirth. This in turn is emblematic of the theme in the novel of micro- and macrocosms, in that, Geoffrey is the embodiment of the state of the entire earth.

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I. Introduction

Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry is a multifaceted and complex novel. Its level of complexity is so high, that as Ken Moon astutely notes, “There seems little end to what the reader can decide *Under the Volcano* is about” (37). It is possible to assert that this is a novel which is overwhelmingly cultural at its core, as the quantity of references to works of art and literature are nearly as many as the amount of written words.

Underneath all of these cultural references, though, is an intricate weaving of symbols. These symbols are employed in a way that manages to unify the many strands of thoughts and concepts, creating a convincing and holistic novel, which depicts “a momentum towards destruction and self-destruction” (Moon 37). One of the most prominent symbols is that of the garden, which, though conceptually simple, encompasses a wide variety of implications, both for the integrity of the story and what the reader takes away from it. This essay will draw heavily from ecocritical literary theory, as well as general literary analysis. It will delineate an assessment of the novel, focusing particularly on the symbol of the garden, and the issues and reality which inspired its use.

Under the Volcano belongs to the Modernist literary genre and utilizes many known techniques from it. Lowry’s source of inspiration was to be found in his own life and being, which in turn meant that his writing was overwhelmingly subjective, stemming directly from the innermost convictions of the author. The complexity of the novel stems mainly from the author’s desire to create a poetic novel.

Imperative to the analysis of the symbol of the garden is the application of the concept of fractals. Another way of defining a fractal is to view the garden through the dichotomy of micro- and macrocosms. The concept of fractals and micro- and macrocosms will be implemented throughout the essay in order to demonstrate the correlations between the themes and issues which are directly affected by the symbolic garden. The symbol of the garden viewed from an ecocritical perspective gains a new dimension. In ecocriticism, gardens are defined as a natural space which is directly influenced and controlled by man. In *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry transposes the concept of the garden onto the wild, as well as doing the opposite by bringing the wild into the garden. The attitude towards the depiction of natural landscapes is influenced heavily by the inner turmoil, or conversely, the imagined bliss of the characters. A clear correlation exists in the text between the presence and absence of

certain characters and the surrounding landscape. Additionally, the idyllic visions of a better life somewhere else imbue the landscape of the distant place with paradise-like qualities.

Another aspect of the garden symbol is the theme of Christian sin and penance. The effect of this theme is to place both the main characters and all of humanity as outside of the Garden of Eden and, in effect, to place them within the wilderness. In the Judeo-Christian belief system, the wilderness represents hell. An alternative possibility is presented as God abandoning the Garden of Eden, and in turn all of the earth. Befitting the complexity of this novel, the symbolic garden acquires yet another dimension in light of the presence of many mystical elements, in particular the belief system of the Cabbala. Both Lowry and the main character Geoffrey Firmin were Cabbala enthusiasts. Lowry posits Geoffrey Firmin as a black magician, who has abused his magical powers and will therefore not be able to climb the ladder on the tree of life, situated at the center of the Garden of Eden.

The many uses of the symbolic garden, both as a physical entity and a literary device, convey the image of an unkempt and deteriorating system. Moreover, the symbolic fraction of the garden, that is, Geoffrey Firmin, has become a convoluted and inoperable system, resulting in a biological mesh. This theme of a biological mesh is present both in the microcosm of Geoffrey Firmin, and in the larger macrocosm of all of life. All of humanity is like an inebriated parent, damaging the future of its child. The ability of mankind to grow from this state to that of responsible stewards is hampered by its inebriation. The need for a rebirth and return to purity are emblematic of the novel's lessons on life. Visible in some of Lowry's other work is an extension of the bliss-inspired narration of the natural sphere. Again, the opposing views of nature as hell and paradise were drawn directly from Lowry's own experiences.

Born from inner physical anguish, subdued by an idyllic dream, Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* explores the path to self-annihilation of one man, and all of the earth. Inspired heavily by the issues of his time and coupled with his own experiences, Lowry's epic novel employs the symbol of the garden as a means of expressing concern for the welfare of humanity, as a people facing the damning effects of expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

II. General Critique of *Under the Volcano*

Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry was first published in 1947. The story is that of an alcoholic British man named Geoffrey Firmin living in Quauhnahuac in Mexico, on the last day of his life, November the 1st 1938. In Mexico, the 1st of November is the celebrated Day of the Dead. The reader encounters the paradoxically eloquent and well-educated, yet self-destructive Geoffrey Firmin. As the story progresses, we read how Geoffrey, an ex-Consul to the British government, ruins any chance of prosperity and happiness for himself and his former wife Yvonne, who has just returned to him after a year of separation. Through this evocative novel we are presented with the world on the brink of the Second World War, in a country which is distant geographically from Europe. Despite this, the impression that the world is undergoing the process of globalization and the imminence of violent conflict is evident throughout the novel. Seeing Mexico through the eyes of foreigners, only manages to enhance the motif of the exotic, yet, simultaneously creates the impression of a world which is becoming smaller with time. In *Under the Volcano*, Lowry plays with our senses and minds bringing into our consciousness this vibrant yet horrifying tale of a man and the world destroying themselves.

Some general yet relevant themes in the novel are readily understood by the reader. These include themes of love, friendship, family, betrayal, and war. In addition, the repetitiveness of life and other such existential musings are used to express the sense of futility and violence found in Western History. Damon M. DeCoste argues that “the cataclysm of war comes to figure not as a singular catastrophe, but as the inevitable rehearsal of a cyclical, indeed unredeemable, Western Violence” (767, 768). In fact, most of the novel is under the shadow of violence encountered in the past, present and future of the characters’ lives and of historical occurrences. Though violence is featured mainly by the continuous reminders of war and fascism, a more subtle form of violence between individuals is found in the relationships between the principle characters. The connections between the “impoverished existence of his (Lowry’s) three main characters” (Espinoza 76) is summarized well by Herberto Espinoza,

To Geoffrey’s alcoholism and inability to cope with his guilty conscious (for an alleged war crime), Lowry added to his torment the painful memories of Yvonne’s promiscuity (affairs with Geoffrey’s half-brother Hugh and her

former boss and mentor, Jacques Laruelle) ... the characters' personal memories, conflicts and desires keep incessantly turning and returning. (76).

The first chapter which serves as "an epilogue to his tale" (DeCoste 767), introduces the reader to Jacques Laruelle, one of the two men who, it is insinuated, had an affair with Yvonne. He thinks of the events which happened a year earlier, the day that Yvonne came back to Geoffrey. On this fateful day, Geoffrey, Yvonne and Hugh, take a trip to the town of Tomalín, a bus ride away from Quauhnahuac. The pace of the novel is relatively slow at the beginning, featuring many inner dialogues and hallucinations in Geoffrey's mind. Towards the end of the novel, after discussions involving themes of fascism and war, which Geoffrey's brother Hugh feels passionately about as he is a communist, Geoffrey disappears from the group and heads off to a dingy bar named El Farolito. At this bar, after several conversations and misunderstandings, Geoffrey is murdered by men who claim to be police. Before he is murdered he frantically tries to release a horse, which he believes the police had stolen from a dying Indian which he, Yvonne and Hugh had passed on the way to Tomalín. This same horse after stampeding its way through the forest tramples Yvonne and kills her.

The literary genre to which *Under the Volcano* belongs is Modernism. As one of the final offerings of the Modernist literary genre, it does not contain all the elements usually found in high modernism, though it does represent the movement nonetheless. In the book *The Modernist Novel*, Kern places the resistance to "existential plenitude" as an important aspect of modernism (24). He goes on to argue that it is "questioned whether a person can actually be anyone thoroughly" (24). Lowry was influenced by this and several other modernist writing techniques. This particular concept of "existential plenitude" as one of Lowry's techniques is substantiated by Gordon Bowker, who posits Lowry's technique as "reflecting what he (Lowry) called his 'multiple schizophrenia'" (9), and goes on to assess Lowry's writing as "all was appearance, disintegration and confusion" (9). The various elements explored in this essay are directly affected by this technique, as the layering of meaning within one concept or symbol is intricate, creating something akin to a network or a web.

Despite adhering to the aforementioned aspects of Modernism, Mark Hama notes that Lowry's writing style "differs from the works of other great modernists because of his own intensely subjective approach to writing" (59). Similar to this claim of Lowry as a "subjective" writer, Bowker observes that he is also said to have based

his characters on people he knew personally, “His characters Sigurd Storlesen and Sigbjorn Wilderness ... personify ... an idealistic figure, inspired by his good angel Grieg (Nordahl Grieg), and opposed to his dark angel Aiken (Conrad Aiken), whose spirit hangs over *Under the Volcano*” (7).

Furthermore, the writing and character formation of Malcolm Lowry is greatly based on his own life and person. In an essay on the life of Lowry by Gordon Bowker, Lowry the man and writer is put into the context of his work: “For him, writing was therapy without which mental disintegration could ensue, so he brought to it the honesty one might expect to find in someone baring his soul on the psychiatrist’s couch. He was a man pursued by furies, tormented by a guilty past” (7). Based on this statement, it is safe to assume that the main character in *Under the Volcano*, Geoffrey Firmin, is based largely on Lowry himself and the problems of his own being. Writing, for Lowry, was a cathartic activity, the reality and problems of Geoffrey Firmin were in essence those of Lowry’s channeled into the novel so as to disentangle himself from them on a personal level.

In addition to his own life as inspiration, Lowry picked out things from his surroundings which interested him: “He noted down whatever caught his eye-letters, advertisements, newspaper headlines, graffiti-and wasted little ... to transform such material into art” (Bowker 7). It is likely therefore that many of the elements picked up and dispersed among the text of physically present items such as posters, signs, brochures and train timetables could have actually been known to Lowry from his own time in Mexico, though, altered in one way or another to better suit his artistic purposes.

Frequently in *Under the Volcano*, we experience the characters preoccupied with life-altering questions. Yet, the answers are never straightforward, as an element of convoluted uncertainty always permeates the text. This is in part due to the enormity of the issues being tackled; they cannot be dealt with simply. In this sense, Lowry creates realistic human experience, which is multifaceted and complex. On this topic Bowker states, “he is experimenting throughout with those patterns of interrelations and correlations ... subtle structures of recurrent leitmotifs, harmonies, and discords-the riddle of multiple identity, the weight of past sins, the search for equilibrium in an unstable world” (9). Lowry had no intention of creating a straightforward and typical novel, argues Perle Epstein: “what he personally strove to create was a poetic novel, something partaking of Sir Thomas Browne on the one hand and Wagner on the other” (4). By taking this information into account, the reader acquires the patience necessary

to complete the novel, as, though it strains one, it also provides an experience unlike any other.

III. The Garden in Ecocriticism

The concept of Fractals is helpful when analyzing *Under the Volcano*, as it aids in consummating the symbols with their representative realities. Gabriel Egan has defined a fractal as “a mathematically defined curve that also exhibits this principle of diminishing self-similarities: any part of it, when enlarged is the same shape as the original” (26). One example of such a fractal is this: “When a glass hologram is smashed, each resulting shard contains the full image rather than a fraction of it” (Egan 26). Throughout the essay, the concept of fractals, in tandem with the dichotomy of micro- and macrocosms, will be employed to outline connections between individual characters and larger themes.

Within ecocritical theory, gardens are viewed as a form of natural space which is controlled and manipulated by man. This definition serves to contrast gardens with other natural spaces, such as the depths of the ocean—into which man has never ventured—or uninhabited mountain ranges, both of which are categorized as wilderness. The varying degrees of nature (from ‘domesticated’ space to ‘wilderness’) serve as a framework to delineate the varying influence of culture versus nature in any space (Barry, ch. 13). From the perspective of *Under the Volcano*, the concept of the garden hovers about the text, coming up repeatedly and in this way, presenting the reader with a deeply meaningful symbol of societal realities.

Within *Under the Volcano*, the way in which the symbolic garden is used manages to unify the despairing elements of nature and man. Through the various meanings Lowry attached to it, he manages to bring culture to the wild and imbue the garden with wilderness. In doing so he is creating a multi-layered system which he implements to detail the varying degrees of physical and symbolical realities of the garden. Moreover, the theme of both the wild and the Garden of Eden are used in more than one way. That is, the wild is within the Garden of Eden, as the Garden of Eden can be found in the wild. This is done by meshing elements of the wild into a physically real garden, as well as representing a space which is wild as a paradise and, it will be argued, as a symbolic Garden of Eden.

Present in the novel, are two forms of the symbolic garden. First, the garden as a physical entity, that is, the garden that is part of the home of Geoffrey Firmin. The second one is the macrocosm of the physical garden, meaning, all of the earth. First, the physical garden at the home of Geoffrey and Yvonne is described as unkempt and in

need of a caretaker. “The tragedy, proclaimed ... by the tall exotic plants, livid and crepuscular ... perishing on every hand of unnecessary thirst ... struggling like dying voluptuaries” (Lowry 70). It is also a hostile place full of threatening natural elements, “leaf-cutter ants ... And flood” (Lowry 71). In effect, the physical garden at the home of Geoffrey and Yvonne has lost the qualities that define it as a place manipulated by and safe for humans. The repercussions of this are to bring elements of the wilderness into what is commonly defined as not being wild.

Secondly, on the macrocosmic level, the use of the garden symbol provides insight into Lowry’s depiction of the idyllic alternative life dreamed of by Yvonne and Geoffrey. They imagine a “northern country” (Lowry 42), to which they can escape and begin a new life. This theme of renewal will be detailed in greater depth later on, for now it suffices to assert, as does Richard Cross, that an entire region is encapsulated into a “Columbian Eden” (25), which serves as a possible alternative to “Lowry’s *Inferno*” (20). Though Lowry did not intend for *Under the Volcano* to be part one of his version of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—as he had “abandoned one such project in 1934” according to Bowker (8)—similarities do exist between the two since, “as in the *Commedia*, the vision of hell (in *Under the Volcano*) draws much of its force from a crosscurrent of celestial longing that runs just beneath the surface” (Cross 20).

This “Columbian Eden” is most prominently defined by its simplicity and wholesomeness, “the old kettle, the new kettle, the teapot, the coffee pot, the double boilers, the saucepans, the cupboard. Geoffrey worked outside” (Lowry 272). This is coupled with endearing elements of nature, “as she worked she would see a seal rise out of the water, peer round, and sink soundlessly. Or a heron ... would flap past heavily, to alight majestically on a rock” (Lowry 273).

The alternative life presented by both Geoffrey and Yvonne is one in which the natural sphere is physically balanced, working as a healthy space. It is an embodiment of the symbolic garden as it should be, though not in the ecocritical definition of the word garden. It is a wild space which has been endowed with the attributes of an earthly paradise. Effectively, by blending the culturally organized with the inherently wild, Lowry is extending the responsibility of humans beyond the confines of the garden, to encompass all of the earth. Lowry was, in Bowker’s words, “striving for mental tranquility through an affinity with nature” (10). His vision was one he felt was should be shared by all. “Being a moralist, Lowry portrays his neuroses and mankind’s

neuroses, especially the mental instabilities precipitated by material forces uprooting and destroying our natural world” (Bowker 10).

Within the text is a voluminous interweaving of references to other authors and their work that reading the text once or twice does not suffice to become aware of them all. MacLeod, in her essay, “The Eclectic Vision: Symbolism in Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*,” provides a concise overview of the most prominent and relevant ones: “Alignments with figures such as Prometheus, Christ, Noah and T.S. Eliot’s ‘Fisher King’ ... quotations from ... Dante’s *Inferno*, Jean Cocteau’s *La Machine Infernale*, Marlowe’s *Faustus*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*” (1). These references are used in concert with a variety of symbols, which together create “a world which is viewed narcissistically, a world of which it is demanded that it should mirror the self” (MacLeod 4).

Following the argument of one human’s reality as a microcosmic representation of the reality of the whole world, is the projection of one person’s psychological inner turmoil onto his surrounding environment. The clearest example of this can be found in a comparison between chapter four and the large majority of the other chapters. In one of many hallucinated scenes, Geoffrey experiences nature as being against him, “the stains of murderous mosquitoes, the very scars and cracks of the wall, had begun to swarm ... the whole insect world had somehow moved nearer and now was closing, rushing in on him” (Lowry 152). As Chris Ackerley notes:

In chapter four the continued portrayal of the garden as a wild and dangerous place serves as the embodiment of betrayal. Despite its beauty, the unweeded garden is a wreck: the *bougainvillea* is an emblem of deceit, the fragrant pink and white flowers of the oleander are highly poisonous; and the flowerbed is strangled by “a coarse green vine”—*convolvulus*—used consistently as a symbol of something that chokes proper growth. (97.1).

Here, depictions of symbolically charged plants, ‘deceitful’ *bougainvillea* and ‘poisonous’ flowers, with other plants that inhibit the growth of organisms, embody the fissure in trust between Yvonne and Geoffrey. Whereas before, “Yvonne comments that her garden was ‘like Paradise,’ but it is now in all senses a fallen landscape” (Ackerley 97.1). From this we see the way natural elements are used to connote the loss of trust and therefore, the loss of love as well.

Continuing with chapter four, after meeting in the garden, Hugh and Yvonne

head off, to what ends up being an idyllic afternoon riding horses through the outskirts of the town. Before this happens however, they encounter a goat which, “is a materialization of the Consul, who has called himself a *cabrón* (meaning goat). The sudden change, the patriarchal contempt, the destructive urge and Machiavellian eye embody his malevolent feelings, which, as here, too often have the effect of driving Yvonne closer to Hugh” (Ackerley 99.8).

Through both these symbols of the garden, and the goat, chapter four detaches itself from Geoffrey and with that a change in the depiction of scenery ensues.

On a gentle slope to their left now, colts with glossy coats were rolling in the grass ... behind the stables on level ground where tall English looking trees lined either side of a grassy wheel-rutted avenue ... a sweet smell of milk and vanilla and wild flowers hung about the place. And the sun was over all. (Lowry 108).

And later,

The new lane ... beautifully reflecting the sky, wandered on between clumps of trees and broken hedges screening indeterminate fields, and now it was as though they were a little company, a caravan, carrying for their greater security, a little world of love with them as they rode along. (Lowry 110).

The loss of trust and the ensuing loss of love between Geoffrey and Yvonne make it so that they are unable to experience the simple pleasures and beauty of nature when together. Therefore, in chapter four, Catherine Macleod argues, the depiction of nature in the absence of Geoffrey changes so that it is no longer a “narcissistic view of the world ... demanding that it should mirror the self” (4). Instead, nature in this chapter is portrayed in a more positive and idyllic way.

In nearly every other chapter it is noticeable that the use of landscapes is overwhelmingly a device used to mirror the inner self-destructive reality of Geoffrey. This effectually equates Geoffrey’s own poisoned ecosystem as a mirror for a poisoned landscape, one that is unhealthy and in the process of being destroyed. Conversely, as has already been outlined, the natural scenery depicted in relation to the “northern country”, is lacking all negative connotation. Its representation is that of a stable and healthy place, which leads to the assumption that such a tranquil and wholesome environment could potentially alter the inner turmoil of Geoffrey

IV. Garden of Eden

“¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDIN?

¿QUE ES SUYO?

¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!“

(Lowry, 132)

Geoffrey experiences his reality as being not on earth, but an earthly hell. This earthly hell however, is not a physical place on earth, but rather a condition of the mind and body. “Horrors portioned to a giant nerve! ... this is how I sometimes think of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land ... but the name of this land is hell. It is not Mexico of course but in my heart” (Lowry 41, 42). Extending from this sentiment, as well as various other instances in which Geoffrey’s physical and mental state is depicted as a living hell, is a resulting reality of Geoffrey experiencing himself as outside of the protected regions of Eden, and thus, as Macleod notes, “Although hell may be very well all around, primarily, the much more insidious hell is the one within” (Macleod 52).

This representation of Geoffrey as having fallen from Grace, places him outside of the protected conclave of God, and situates him instead in the wild: “the very earliest of documents of Western Eurasian civilization ... depict wilderness as a threat ... After the ejection from Eden, the wilderness is a place of exile ... the wilderness is associated with Satan” (Garrard 61).

The symbolic Garden of Eden at the home of Geoffrey has, according to Cross, “gone to seed” (20), and become altered, as Greg Garrard argues, so that it is now a place of wilderness, which is “a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture” (60). Yet, this wild garden is still entrenched in an Eden-like reality. There are distinct signs in the text of things associated with Eden. The most obvious, possibly a “snake ... rustling off into the bushes” (Lowry 131). In effect the Garden of Eden is still symbolically present within the physical garden, yet it has simultaneously been penetrated by the wild. Substantiating the assertion that Eden is symbolically still present comes about when Geoffrey expresses his concern of God having left Eden, “What if Adam wasn’t really banished from the place (Garden of Eden) at all ... what if

his punishment really consisted ... in having to go on living there, alone ... unseen, cut off from God?" (Lowry 137).

The possibility of God having left Eden, and in turn having abandoned Adam and Eve, is here connected to the original sin in its own way. Geoffrey prides himself greatly on his "genius" (Lowry 133), which he feels makes his deserving of "love" (Lowry 133). The theme is of knowledge as sin, which can lead to damnation, "Misusing knowledge to desecrate Eden, we risk expulsion from it" (Bowker 10).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the mystical elements present in *Under the Volcano* it can be useful to explore the presence of the occult, the living dead and the supernatural, which are employed frequently throughout the novel. The drive for humans to participate in supernatural rituals could stem from our inherent fear of death, or from the audacity of entertaining the idea of defying natural laws and realities. The Mexican Day of the Dead (November 1) in this novel is emblematic of mankind's need to impose cultural practices on one of the most natural realities of life, as without death there cannot be life. Moreover, the influence of religion, and specifically the Cabbala, both on the main characters and the general theme and tone of the novel is noticeably important, as Epstein has noted: "Lowry managed to endow his brand of magic with essentially Christian overtones of sin, purgatory, and redemption" (9).

The relevance of the occult and Cabbala, an ancient form of Jewish mysticism, is based on two things. First, the Cabbala helps us to understand the fate of Geoffrey. Secondly, its teachings shed light on the significance of the garden as a symbol in the novel.

The Cabbala is used for poetic ends because it represents Man's spiritual aspirations. The Tree of Life, its emblem, is a complicated ladder whose summit is called Kether, or Light ... the spiritual domain of the Consul is probably Qliphoth, the world of husks and demons, represented by the Tree of Life turned upside down. (Epstein 6).

In reading the novel we are aware that Geoffrey is himself interested in things which qualify as mystical. He has for some time been writing a book about the subject, a project which he seems unable to finish, "Geoffrey said something this morning about going on with his book ... I don't know whether he is still writing one or not, he's never done any work on it since I've known him" (Lowry 122).

Geoffrey is not only interested in mystical topics on an intellectual level; evidence exists which enables one to view him as a “black magician”. A “Black magician is an occult term designating those highly gifted, often charming individuals who, for egotistical purposes, have elected to follow the left-hand path through the dense stages of matter that lead eventually to hell” (Epstein 8). At one point in the novel, Hugh jokingly says that perhaps Geoffrey is a “black magician” (Lowry 122). For Lowry however, this joke could have had more serious meaning when he was writing *Under the Volcano*, a “black magician is a man who has all the elements of the world (not to say the universe) against him” (Epstein 7). Epstein goes on to state,

The implication is that an analogy is drawn between Man today on this planet and a black magician ... The Consul implies his war ... is against the very elements themselves and against nature. This is a war that is bound to be lost ... The Consul has thus turned into a man that is all destruction. (Epstein 7).

Viewing Geoffrey’s inner turmoil, his physical and psychological plight, in light of this information provides more cohesion between the “narcissistic world view” presented earlier and the general plight of mankind.

Adding to the relevance of the Cabbala, and its use in the understanding of the novel is the fact that, “In the Jewish Cabbala the abuse of magic powers is compared to drunkenness or the abuse of wine, and is expressed ... by the Hebrew word ‘sod’” (Epstein 6). Seen this way, Geoffrey’s alcoholism is another facet of his abuse of mysticism, and yet another way in which he distances himself from God. “As an alcoholic, he injects himself with the evil which will bring about his downfall,” claims MacLeod (34). Significantly, the word ‘sod’ can also be used to signify a “neglected garden” (Epstein 6), which brings the symbolic and physical gardens into perspective as yet again Geoffrey is posited as a fraction, or a microcosm of a larger sphere. Making this statement even more valid is the idea that, “the Cabbala itself is sometimes considered as a garden” (Epstein 6).

V. A Convoluting Biological System

“Now I blessed the condition of the dog and toad ... for I know they had no soul to perish under the everlasting weight of Hell or Sin ... yet that which added to my sorrow was, that I could not find with all my soul that I did desire deliverance.”

- John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners*

It has been argued that Geoffrey represents concepts and themes which are larger than his person. Another way in which Geoffrey can be viewed is through concepts defined by biological realities. Peter Barry suggests that in performing an ecocritical analysis, it can be useful to employ the perspective of biological manifestations of order and chaos. “They (ecocritics) extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world – concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources” (ch. 13).

The Penguin Classics edition of *Under the Volcano*, published in 2000, starts off with an introduction by Michael Schmidt. In the introduction Schmidt states,

Chapter 12 was composed in 1937 and more or less completed in 1940. Thus the book knew almost exactly where it was going for the last four years of its composition: the final crisis had to shudder its way back through what had come before, had to reconfigure with all its complexity the ‘inevitability’ that led to it and nowhere else. (xii).

We can therefore assert that Lowry first killed off his main characters and later adjusted the narrative accordingly. The message the author was most intent on sending was that of death. The ultimate goal was to depict the mental voyage of a man who, on the most important day of his life goes blundering—in and out of conscious reality—through a sequence of events, which ultimately lead to his death. The novel was to impart a vehicle through which one views out of the window the passing frames of a story telling of how and why a death happened.

It is striking how important the preordained deaths are to the reading of the previous eleven chapters. Through them the necessary arrangement of images and

impressions are presented so that the reader can fully encounter a broken individual. His potential, his demise, and ultimate self-afflicted implosion were inescapable.

Aside from the stylistic restrictions to growth and the possibility of thriving, other aspects of the novel, such as the theme of alcoholism, create a recurring source of failure in the life of Geoffrey. Moreover, as a form of habit, he seems to manage repeatedly to convince himself of needing a drink for one good reason or another. In effect, he cannot function without alcohol; when he realizes the effect of alcohol is dissipating he must take action and find his next drink “the pleasant evanescent feeling of tightness was wearing off” (Lowry 73). In this way, we are also introduced to several physical maladies he deals with because of his alcoholism, “It’s really the shakes that make this kind of life insupportable. But they will stop: I was only drinking enough so they would. Just the necessary, the therapeutic drink” (Lowry 54). Additionally, we often encounter voices in his head which he calls his ‘familiar’,

‘- She might have said yes for once’, a voice said in the Consul’s ear at this moment with incredible rapidity, ‘for now of course poor chap you want horribly to get drunk all over again’ ... the voice he recognized of a pleasant and impertinent familiar. (Lowry 73).

It is therefore readily apparent that Geoffrey is an individual who is physically and mentally unstable. Both his body and mind are subject to act against itself, or rather, his being is unable to function properly. Because of this, he is unlikely to thrive as a being on earth.

Possibly the most disturbing form of defectiveness found in Geoffrey’s person is his inability to love, or in the very least, act upon his love. This inertia is caused in large part by the physical imbalance present in his body. His constant inebriation in this sense acts as a pollutant in the ecosystem of Geoffrey, which hinders his ability to function in a healthy manner. In a scene in which Dr Vigil and Geoffrey discuss Geoffrey’s alcoholism, as well as his physical state and that of his ‘soul’, they liken his physical dysfunctional being to that of faulty wiring.

‘Mesh. The nerves are a mesh, like, how do you say it, an eclectic systemē’ ... ‘you mean an electric system.’ ‘But after much tequila the eclectic systemē is perhaps *un poco descompuesto*’ ... ‘A sort of eclampsia as it were,’ ... and it was as though bits of his eyelids had broken off and were fluttering and jittering

before him, turning into nervous shapes and shadows, jumping to the guilty chattering in his mind ... a picture of his soul as a town appeared once more before him, but this time a town ravaged and stricken in the black path of his excess and shutting his burning eyelids he had thought of the beautiful functioning of the system in those who were truly alive, switches connected, nerves rigid only in real danger, and in nightmareless sleep now calm, not resting, yet poised: a peaceful village. (Lowry 148, 149).

From this scene we are shown, through this metaphor of broken wiring, a 'mesh' of the biological system, which is then transposed by Geoffrey onto his soul, seen as a town which is in the depths of despair. His dysfunctional physical being, a 'mesh' of biological wiring, is caught in a perpetual state of turmoil, a living hell. Being in this hell, Geoffrey is, paradoxically frozen, or inert, incapable of growth. He is incapable of love; he is living the opposite life of his envisioned 'peaceful village'. A meaningful phrase from the novel comes to mind, "no se puede vivir sin amar" (Lowry 11), which in English translates to: it is impossible to live without love.

This vision of the 'peaceful village' within the 'functioning system' is an appropriate starting point for the next phase of this section. Within his thought process, Geoffrey transposes his hell onto the image of a larger entity, that of a town, which is a community of several beings. The reality faced by Geoffrey is therefore moved from one individual to encompass several, and in doing so moves from the concept of micro- to macrocosm.

Following this argument, we can assert that the physical state of Geoffrey—as a perpetually inebriated man—, whose biological system is all a 'mesh', can be considered an example of a microcosm, or a fraction of a situation occurring at a larger scale. "The drunkenness of the Consul is used on one plane to symbolize the universal drunkenness of mankind during the war (WWII) ... and what profundity and final meaning there is in his fate should be seen also in its universal relationship to the ultimate fate of mankind," (Hama 61). If Geoffrey represents a broken system, a smaller version of the entire world, then in the context of the garden, the broken system of the world is incapable of being a responsible caretaker of the symbolic garden.

Making matters worse is the inertia wrapped around every problem faced by Geoffrey. He is unable to act, or feel the need to act on knowledge which he knows should alter his behavior. When first seeing the sign in the garden, warning against the

destruction of it, the consul thinks. "Simple words, simple and terrible words ... were nevertheless unproductive of any emotion whatsoever ... a white agony" (Lowry 132). In effect he is frozen and unable to act; or rather he is unable to enhance himself, so that he may control any given situation. Tragically, in the end, Ken Moon believes Geoffrey seems almost possessed, "In a way the Consul provoked his own death ... he did this towards a contrary impulse toward life and love – as if some force were controlling him and directing him against himself" (39).

VI. Rebirth

In the section ‘The Garden in Ecocriticism’ a concise overview of the image of a northern paradise was outlined. Now, a more detailed presentation of the “Columbian Eden” will present the way in which the theme of rebirth and a return to love was woven into *Under the Volcano*, serving as the glimpse of hope for the characters.

Geoffrey and Yvonne both imagined an alternative place to live in, set in a “northern country”. Geoffrey expressed in a letter written for Yvonne which he never sent, “I seem to see now between mescals ... visions of a new life together ... living in some northern country, of mountains and hills and blue water” (Lowry 42). Yvonne dreams of starting a new life with him somewhere other than Mexico, “Well, what’s to stop us from going to Canada, for instance?” (Lowry 123), and in chapter nine Yvonne imagines a detailed vision of a future in the possible idyllic Canada. “But it was not a shack – it was a home! It stood ... between the forest of pine ... and tall slim birches, and the sea ... Daffodils and snowdrops grew in the little garden ... The sea was blue and cold and they would swim everyday” (Lowry 271).

Based on this we can see a clear connection between Lowry’s use of Canada as an idyllic alternative to the hellish reality of Mexico, for as Nicholas Bradley notes, “British Columbia represents an earthly paradise that offers the possibility of redemption to those who have suffered Mexico’s earthly hell” (2). The theme of a northern land as a paradise is also present in other work by Lowry, some of which was published posthumously. Among his other work is a piece called *The Forest Path to the Spring*. This novella, situated in a place that is reminiscent of the sought after “northern country” Geoffrey and Yvonne dreamed of, and, Cross claims, “*The Forest Path* was designed to be a testament of hope” (25).

For Lowry, life in British Colombia was a remedy to his otherwise destructive character. Lowry lived in Canada while he completed the writing process of *Under the Volcano* as Bowker has recorded: “In Canada in 1940, he ... moving into a squatter’s shack at Dollarton, British Columbia ... – his ‘Eridanus’. There life was idyllic, and ... Lowry remained sober enough to finish his book (*Under the Volcano*)” (7, 8). Again, his personal reality is seen within the structure of the novel. His own life in Canada was an inspiration for the Eden on earth he depicts. As with other relevant symbols in *Under the Volcano*, it is used often, Macleod states, “Lowry’s habitual, even obsessive reinforcement of his symbolic network, whereby any one symbol is perhaps more

significant for its multiplicity of meanings” (67). Indeed, the symbolic garden is no exception. Yvonne’s dream of moving with Geoffrey and starting anew is similar to the reality Lowry and his wife experienced. As Geoffrey was supposedly writing a book himself, “Geoffrey’s long-deferred study of arcane wisdom might still be written” (Cross 22).

Returning again to the concept of wilderness, its implications are not simple. The wild, in addition to symbolizing hell, has an alternative function, argues Garrard, “The Judeo-Christian conception of wilderness ... combines connotations of trial and danger with freedom, redemption and purity” (61). Therefore, considering that the wild is present both in the hell of Mexico and in the paradise of British Colombia, Geoffrey is finally unable to accept the path to redemption and acts in a way that prevents the possibility of a new life. The implication is that “The Consul’s inability to love has even more resounding ramifications, like the abuse of mysticism, and of wine, the inability—or perhaps refusal—to love carries a severe spiritual penalty” (MacLeod 94). Though Lowry may not have consciously been preaching that humanity needs a form of spiritual evolution, one which would promote love, he certainly conveyed the message that, at the least, it is impossible to live without it.

In today’s world, and possibly even at the time when *Under the Volcano* was written, the influence of man has managed to affect even the most remote parts of the planet. Though this theme may not be something that seems obvious when reading the novel, it is a sentiment that Lowry shared and worried about, particularly in relation to the effect human societal encroachment had on the area he chose to live in during the later phase of his life, on the shores of Vancouver, in Canada, as Bowker notes: “he was formulating another (theme) for the post-war era – the menace of material ‘civilization’. Concerned about the inroads of suburban Vancouver into the pristine forest around Eridanus, he had turned environmentalist. Few writers of fiction offer as pronounced a Green message as Lowry does” (9).

Though Yvonne never was able to reclaim her love for and life with Geoffrey, the vision she has when dying resembles the language used to depict the “Colombian Eden”.

... towards the stars, through eddies of stars scattering aloft with ever wider
circlings like rings on water, among which now appeared, like a flock of

diamond birds flying softly and steadily towards Orion, the Pleiades ... (Lowry 337).

Unfortunately, Geoffrey's last moments do not represent a similar tone to those of Yvonne.

Suddenly he screamed, and it was as though this scream were being tossed from one tree to another, as its echoes returned, then, as though the trees themselves were crowding nearer, huddled together, closing over him, pitying ... Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine. (Lowry 376).

In Geoffrey's last moments, elements of wilderness close in on him, which in turn shows that the elements of nature are still against him, even at his death.

The many ways in which the garden is used come together in the conceptualized and dramatized northern place. This paradise fulfills the demands of all the composite parts of the garden symbol. In it we find a wild place, following the rhythm of nature, which is simultaneously a "Columbian Eden". It embodies the hope for a renewal of the relationship between Geoffrey and Yvonne as well as representing the chance of rebirth for all of humanity. "We finish *Under the Volcano* feeling that the Consul with all his defects is the cosmos – and that he is also Malcolm Lowry. This is perhaps a way of saying that Malcolm Lowry and his hero are romantics" (Spender).

VII. Conclusion

Malcolm Lowry was an overwhelmingly subjective writer, using people he knew and places he lived in as inspiration for his work. The garden symbol in *Under the Volcano*, with its many implementations, ultimately represents Lowry's criticism of human culture, as well as creating an alternative reality, essentially a dream of an Eden on earth.

In ecocritical literary theory, gardens are defined as a natural space under the care of humans. It differs from wild natural spaces only because of the human impact of responsibility. In *Under the Volcano* the concept of the garden is extended to encompass both humanly controlled and wild elements. Another aspect within ecocritical theory implemented on the study of the novel is that of fractals. In using this concept, and applying it to the characters and themes of the novel, several connections and resonances can be inferred. Geoffrey's inner battle is an expression of an ecosystem gone wild, much like the physical garden. Additionally the inner turmoil of Geoffrey, through a "narcissistic world view" is broadcasted onto all the surrounding landscape. This narcissism could potentially be quelled by going to the dreamed of Eden on earth.

The themes of sin and penance are present in the novel and validated by the clear connection of the physical garden with a symbolic Garden of Eden, one which has gone to seed. It is possible to view the symbol of Eden as a comment on God's absence, rather than the commonly known version in which Adam and Eve are ousted from the garden. By looking at the mystical themes, which are ever present throughout, it is possible to infer that Lowry thought of Geoffrey as a "black magician", who has abused his magical powers and in effect has turned the entire universe against himself. The relevance of the Cabbala to the symbol of the garden is paramount, as the Cabbala itself can be thought of as a garden.

Continuing with the concept of fractals, Geoffrey is outlined as a physical entity which has become biologically inoperable, and linking him on a larger scale as representative of larger communities, it can be inferred that, since Geoffrey is a broken biological system, so is all of civilization. Finally, the "Colombian Eden" in the north represents the possibility of rebirth and a return to purity. Through the depiction of natural elements, mainly cold water, coupled with a respect for nature and its rhythms, Lowry offers the possibility of redemption for his characters. In effect, he points to the need for the redemption of mankind.

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