
Robert Lowell's *Skunk Hour*: Verses on Existentialism

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Abstract:

Skunk Hour, Robert Lowell's penultimate poem in *Life Studies*, stands out as an anchor poem in its sequence and makes a strong statement on existentialism. The predicament of the modern man and his crisis of identity amidst a void created by a decadent society and the crumbling value system has left man dwarfed and 'ill' in a defunct and debased 'Wasteland'. Existentialism or existential attitude became popular in the post-war years, during the 19th and 20th century, an era characterised by scepticism, nihilism and moral relativism, when human existence itself was at peril. The spiritual, intellectual and moral vacuity had left man haplessly lonely and depressed. The void within and without necessitated a thought process where each individual felt the need to assert his identity and be responsible for giving a meaning to his life, irrespective of social and religious norms. The skunks in Lowell's *Skunk Hour* do essentially that. As they forage through the garbage pail, they lend vitality and richness to the air. They don't hide their true identity as compared to the poor humans who live in isolation, self-deprivation and is ill at ease with the circumstances around them. The skunks are neither intimidated nor terrified by the degenerating world around them. Unperturbed by their surroundings, Mother Skunk and her family assert their existential attitude, as against the human world, where man fails to find his sustenance. This paper makes an effort to perceive the existential echoes that sound the quintessential element of *Skunk Hour*.

Keywords: existentialism, scepticism, nihilism, vacuity, isolation, sustenance

1. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, as a popular philosophic theory, came into vogue in the 19th century. Dealing with human being as primary subject, it emphasises the existence of the human being not just as a thinking subject but as a sensitive, active individual who sketches his path and determines his own action. His action is guided by his individual will and it is he who gives a meaning to his life.

The term 'existentialism' was first coined by Gabriel Marcel, a Catholic philosopher in the mid 1940's, with respect to Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre in his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism* propounded existential idea. According to Sartre, the fundamental idea of existentialism is that "existence precedes essence". In other words, individuals are to be considered the most important, conscious and responsible entities, and that his existence matters more than any predefined catalogues, stereotype labels and roles that the person might fit into, that is his 'essence'. He asserted, "...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards." The true essence of a person is his 'self' and the actual life that he leads. However, extremist thinkers as Arthur Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer did not support this idea. To them the existence of an individual was built entirely on will with total denial of the environment around him as in Lowell's *For the Union Dead*, where the speakers try to hold on to their 'ideal' selves while defying social concerns. On the other hand, Prometheus, in *Prometheus Bound*, settles for Nietzschean power yet a part of him surrenders to environmental dissolution: "Think of life cooling. No, I think of fire."

In *Skunk Hour*, Lowell fuses both these schools of existential thought, where the isolated individual struggles to hold on to his identity in a dead vertical world yet finds himself a victim of the same- a corrupt, decadent society with empty, religious rituals. If human beings could act like the skunks, he could liberate himself from the 'ill' world and find sustenance and self-recognition.

Skunk Hour

Lowell's *Skunk Hour* opens in the Maine seacoast, in the village called Castine near Nautilus Island and Blue Hill, in New England. Here in the marine village is a motley crowd comprising of the hermit's heiress, the summer millionaire, the unnamed decorator, the unknown lovers in the car, the wandering narrator- all are portrayals of human beings trying to exist in their own private world, denying themselves honest living. The rich, eccentric heiress, "who longs for Queen Victoria's century" lives in safeguarded, "hierarchic privacy". She "buys up all/ the eyesore facing the shore/ and lets them fall". The son of the heiress, a farmer, is the first selectman in our village. The heiress, however, is a lady with certain character and integrity, Spartan and old-fashioned. She is a true representative of "existential falsity", trapped in the past yet seeking freedom by projecting herself into the future. "Falsity is both a limitation and a condition of freedom". In the process of self-making one often tries to cast oneself into the future while denying one's origin thus making one's existence seem inauthentic and eventually feel a vacuity much like the heiress.

Her successor, the "summer millionaire" has also crossed his prime but he seemed to leap from "L.L. Bean catalogue", an anonymous figure. He has died and his "nine-knot yawl was auctioned off to lobstermen". The picture of the town's decay become more evocative in the image of the gay decorator who converts things of everyday use- the fishnet, the cobbler's bench and awl- into art objects by painting them orange. He is even ready to marry, despite his homosexuality. In a way he tries to preserve the past, to attract tourist, by emptying the ordinary, functional objects of its reality.

"The season's ill". The entire human civilization is ailing as it were. The ruined millionaire, the inglorious heiress and the failed decorator are all demented and isolated. Even nature has tarnished and is covered with stain. The 'stain' brings the idea of blood to the mind and accentuates the poem's focus on death and decay: "Sterility howls through the scenery". In fact, the town and its inmates are a projection of Lowell himself. They constantly live in a state of self-denial, wishing to be something they are not. They live in a state of privatisation, always in fear of something. Theirs living is what may be defined as inauthentic existence, what Sartre defined as 'bad faith'. Sartre opined that what defines human beings is their actions and are responsible in crafting their identity. One can reform oneself by transforming himself from an essentially cruel person to a good one and in this way his action has a positive, therapeutic effect on him. In the same way, when men project themselves as what they are not, like the characters in Lowell's work, they mask their very identity and hence their very existence may be termed as 'inauthentic'.

The detached verbs "the heiress still lives/ her sheep still graze", "she buys up all/...and lets them fall" and the use of end half-rhyme in cottage/village/ dotage suggest that things are falling apart; no harmony exists among things. The sense of disintegration and emptiness is further accentuated after the narrator's voyeuristic prowl as he witnesses the scene of perverted love. For Lowell, the emptiness without is a reflection of the emptiness within- "My mind is not right", "my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell". He perceives himself as "the skull of death", "an empty hull" that doesn't bring about resurrection but an "existential death, yielding nothingness". Existentialists would define this state as loss of hope or despair when one is unable to define one's own being, a complete loss of self-identity. On seeing the love cars the narrator is gripped by "existential angst" as well, that is accompanied by dread, anxiety or anguish for it reminds him of his own incapacities and unhappiness.

To James E.B. Berlin, in the fifth and sixth stanzas of the "*Skunk Hour* abruptly shift from ironic account of a disintegrating town to the 'dark night' of a personal ordeal." Lowell unmasks his core self- "unseen and all-seeing" and makes a cruel statement of self-recognition in a demonic and diabolic vein:

"I myself am Hell
Nobody's here."

The lines are quite alike Satan's pronouncement in *Paradise Lost* "I am hell" or Sartre's famous quote in *No Exit*, "Hell is other people"- "if I am Hell and Hell is other people, then there is no escaping hell". It calls to mind the existential theory of the absurd, "the incompatibility between human beings and the world that they inhabit." Existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard opined that such absurdity is limited to actions and choices of human

beings as they spring from individual freedom.” Literary works of several noted authors as Soren Kierkegaard, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Dostoevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus describe characters that belong to such an absurd world. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is by far the finest example of existentialism: “Does Godot exist?” It is a disturbing question that remains unanswered even by the end of the play. Vladimir and Estragoan, the two tramps, wait endlessly for Godot an unknown, unseen figure, who may or may not exist. The absurdity of such a situation makes us confront another existential question of the importance of his existence in the universe. Gregory Samson, the protagonist in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* suffers from ‘existential crises’ as he wakes up to find himself transformed into a bug. He is helpless and forlorn and can in way control his metamorphosis. He has no control over his fate and eventually dies of starvation: “I have to fast, I can’t help it.” Much like the skunks, in Lowell’s ‘Skunk’s Hour’, Gregory, the bug, is a metaphor that reflects Kafka’s belief that he is isolated and unwanted in a world created by him. Talking about *Skunk Hour* Lowell wrote, “This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember St. John of the Cross’s poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An existential night.”

However, Lowell’s poem does not end on a note of narrow subjective despair. As the narrator stand on the top and watches the skunks forage “the garbage pail”, he finds in them an image of sustenance and survival. The skunks manifest the persistence of a fiery life and assert their existence fearlessly, in a corrupt, disintegrating, ordinary world. They “will not scare” as the mother skunk and her kittens devour a cup of sour cream. They are honest and fearless in their endeavours, unlike the humans who are shy and live in a state of personal privatisation, indulging in self-deprivation. The skunks are true as well as rich, as they don’t hide their true, existential selves. The image of the church at the very climax of the poem seems to suggest that the answer to all loneliness and despair could be found by “synthesising the power of the corporal skunks with the spiritual”. As the speaker steps back to watch the skunk unflinchingly, a moment of catharsis is reached. In a way, it makes sense that the last poem of Lowell’s *Life Studies* ends in a vein of partial, if not complete resolution.

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