

Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly

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THE similarities between V. S. Naipaul's Mr Biswas and H. G. Wells's Mr. Polly are too many and too close to be accidental. Both *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The History of Mr. Polly* deal with the slow struggle toward self-realisation of culturally underprivileged men, whose personal and educational deficiencies hinder them from achieving notable upward social mobility, yet whose innate sensitivity and adequate intelligence cause them to suffer considerable frustration when confronted with the narrowness of the lower-middle class society in which they seem permanently fixed. Both protagonists perceive or demonstrate the sterility of the public rituals and traditional mores of their families and social and religious groupings.

This broad, somewhat sociological definition of the central topics of the two novels does nothing to argue an especially close correspondence. James Joyce's Leopold Bloom and Arnold Bennett's Edwin Clayhanger might be seen as direct parallels, and the theme simply accepted as one with widespread appeal to the urban twentieth century. The "little tramp" of Charlie Chaplin is clearly a related figure.

But there are definite points of correspondence which argue a deeper relationship between Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly than could be established between any other pair in the group named. The main purpose of this paper is to outline the most important of these, before going on to consider the critical significance of the parallel.

Both Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly demonstrate their superior sensitivity and stunted creativity through their hand-

ling of words. Mr. Polly delights in ornamenting his conversation with mispronounced polysyllables:

He avoided every recognized phrase in the language, and mispronounced everything in order that he shouldn't be suspected of ignorance but whim.

"Sesquippledan," he would say. "Sesquippledan verboojuice."

"Eh?" said Platt.

"Eloquent Rapsodooce."¹

Mr Biswas demonstrates his attachment to words in two different ways. First he ornaments them lavishly as a sign-writer, and Naipaul lays some stress upon the fact that he paints *words*. He is no draughtsman, and has to find excuses to avoid work entailing complicated pictures:

'Like the Keskeidee Cafe,' the proprietor said. 'You see the sign he got?' He pointed obliquely across the road to another refreshment shack, and Mr Biswas saw the sign. The letters were blocked in three colours. Keskeidee birds stood on the K, perched on the D, hung from the C; on EE two keskeidees billed.

Mr Biswas couldn't draw.

Alec said, 'Course he could paint humming birds, if you really want them. The only thing is, it would look a little follow-fashion.'

'And too besides, it oldfashion,' Mr Biswas said.²

But lettering quite genuinely appeals to his sensitivity: "He thought R and S the most beautiful of Roman letters; no letter could express so many moods as R, without losing its beauty; and what could compare with the swing and rhythm of S?" (p. 69). Later, as journalism comes to fascinate him, it is through the hackneyed phrase, "*Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when . . .*" used as a prelude to his personal fantasies of success, that he actually becomes a writer, albeit only a poor, insecure reporter.

Through their command of language, both Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly wage impotent war on a hostile, insensitive world. Both bestow uncomplimentary nicknames and epithets on the philistines around them. Hanuman House becomes "the Monkey House" for Mr Biswas; his mother-in-law, "the old hen," and her sons, "the little gods." Mr. Polly nicknames his neighbour, a sportily-dressed saddler,

“the chequered Careerist,” and calls his legs, “shivery shakys.” He privately thinks of his friend Rusper’s head as an egg, and amuses himself when they argue by saying, mysteriously, “Boil it hard.”

The joke turns sour when Rusper’s wife overhears (much as a Chinese receptionist “overhears” Mr Biswas when he accidentally utters his uncomplimentary thought, “*Fish-face*”) and turns the friendship between the two men to enmity. Hincks, the saddler, also hears that Mr. Polly has been abusing him, and threatens him with trouble if he doesn’t stop “flapping his mouth.”

Mr Biswas, too, finds that his amusing gift for fitting words to people leads only to hostility. His brothers-in-law will not ally with him: indeed, Govind, with whom he tries to make friends, reports his ingratitude to his mother-in-law, and her sister’s all-powerful husband, Seth. Mr Biswas, like Mr. Polly, is publicly put down and humiliated, and at one point is publicly beaten up by Govind. (Mr. Polly, too, finds himself brawling on the pavement with a respectable defender of society). Both men are isolated and despised in the humble society of their equals. Mr Biswas sometimes manages to ingratiate himself by taking the role of licensed jester. And it was as an acknowledged “wit” that Mr. Polly first found his place in the Larkins family.

The activity both men take seriously — their reading — is only acceptable to their peers if it can be reduced to the level of a slightly disreputable eccentricity. Miriam resents Mr. Polly’s secret purchases of books, and his tendency to abandon his shop when auction sales with lots of books are advertised: Shama is ashamed of her husband’s habit of retreating to his room to read Marcus Aurelius, when he can stand no more of the Tulsi family.

Marriage underlines the spiritual unhappiness of both men, as small shopkeeping, at different stages in the books, demonstrates their economic insufficiency. Both men are propelled into marriage when they incautiously exercise a

smattering of the amorous adventurousness they feel to be proper to young manhood, and then find it seized eagerly by families with unmarried daughters for disposal. Mr Biswas, caught in the act of passing a trivial love-note to a girl in a shop, is summoned before her mother and uncle, and has his will to escape sapped when they, amazingly, seem keen to put him at his ease.

Seth laughed. 'Nothing to be ashamed about.' He clenched his lips over the cigarette holder and opened the corners of his mouth to laugh.

Mr Biswas was puzzled. It would have been more understandable if they had taken his word and asked him never to come to their house again. (p. 80)

He does not understand what he is being led into as he answers questions about his family, admits that he likes "the child," and is pushed into agreement that he is not being forced into anything. After all which, he has no liberating response left when he protests that he is too poor to marry, and at last meets with the severity which his love-note had deserved. "He felt trapped," (p. 82) and the feeling is in no way inappropriate.

Mr. Polly, by comparison, traps himself. He discovers very quickly that his Larkins cousins respond avidly to any piece of jocularly that might be interpreted as leading up to a proposal of marriage. But this form of audience response in itself seems to lead him on into dangerous situations. He receives a broad hint from his cousin Annie; almost proposes to his cousin Minnie when "his sense of a neat thing outruns his discretion" (p. 158); and finally embarks on a "conversational ice-run" with cousin Miriam, which carries him without the accompaniment of his determined will, to "the conclusive step":

"Well, you and me, Miriam, in a little shop, with a cat and a canary — " he tried too late to get back to a hypothetical note. "Just suppose it!"
 "You mean," said Miriam, "you're in love with me, Elfrid?"

What possible answer can a man give to such a question but "Yes!" (p. 163)

And Mr. Polly and Mr Biswas both enjoy mixed feelings about their sudden commitment to marriage. Both feel, once the alarming words have been said, that despite their private anxieties about their particular cases, they are on the threshold of something important. Mr. Polly "had a curious feeling that it would be very satisfying to marry and have a wife — only somehow he wished it wasn't Miriam" (p. 164). Mr Biswas "actually felt elated! . . . But now the elation he felt was not that of relief. He felt that he had been involved in large events. He felt he had achieved status" (p. 83). Both men are brought down to earth by relatives who regard their engagements as folly, and claim (without being intended to convince the reader fully) that their own plans for the protagonists would have proved more profitable. Both find that marriage dispells the aura of romance that their own imaginative temperaments have cast over the idea of themselves betrothed. Both are, in short, unhappy in marriages with wives who feel that they compare unfavourably with their own families. In both cases, the stressed relatives to whom the wives appear close, are sisters. Both men find that entertaining their wives' families on ritual occasion leads to undesirable expenditure: Mr. Polly at the funeral and the wedding, and Mr Biswas at the blessing of his shop.

Both men keep shops for important passages of their married lives. Both fail, partly through an inability to associate easily with their neighbours. Both escape from shopkeeping through conscious acts of arson, although there are ancillary quasi-exculpations in each case: Mr. Polly *intended* to kill himself as well; Mr Biswas was guided to "insuranburn" by the unscrupulous Seth. The resultant fire is the climax of *The History of Mr. Polly*: a subsequent fire, accidental, but equally enjoyable to bystanders, and quite destructive of Mr Biswas's life in his first completed house, provides the narrative climax to Naipaul's book.

Both Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly lose one parent in childhood, and witness the decease of the other with a sense

that they have not cared sufficiently for them. Bipti and Mr. Polly senior are not demonstrated by their authors to have deserved markedly more love and attention from their offspring than they receive, but their central sons feel similar grief and near-remorse at their deaths.

Perhaps the most extraordinary of the similarities between the two heroes is the dyspepsia afflicting both of them. In each case it goes back to childhood. In each case it becomes a barometer of strain and tension in adult life. And in each case it is intensified by the culinary short-comings encountered in married life, Miriam's cooking and "Tulsi food" alike being represented as unpalatable and indigestible.

At the outset of *A House for Mr Biswas* it seems that we are being deliberately reminded of *The History of Mr. Polly*. The outstanding joke of a baby's bathing and swaddling, all described while the baby rejoices in a weightily honorific "Mr" is repeated. And similar conclusions are reached about infancy:

A regal time that was, and four-and-thirty years ago; and a merciful forgetfulness barred Mr. Polly from ever bringing its careless luxury, its autocratic demands and instant obedience, into contrast with his present condition of life. (p. 15)

and

And there Mr Biswas's importance steadily diminished. The time came when even the daily massage ceased. (p. 18)

The first word of *A History of Mr. Polly* — "Hole!" — is echoed by Mr Biswas when, in similar circumstances, he finds himself trapped in marriage, and likens it to a hole.

The similarities are cumulatively overwhelming. One need only compare Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly with Mr. Bloom to see that they represent more than the inevitable consequence of a similar theme. The only clear parallels with details of Bloom's life that might be suggested are his mild obsession with certain words and phrases (though even this might be seen as appertaining more to the creator

than the character), and, perhaps, his uneasy recollection of his father.

But the existence of such parallels does not mean that Naipaul can or should be accused of plagiarism. It is evident that he intended the comparison to be drawn: that he deliberately took Wells's theme to the Indian community of Trinidad, and almost certainly expected this to be recognized. He challenged comparison with his predecessor — not quite as explicitly as Richard Hughes did by openly referring to Conrad's *Typhoon* in the course of *In Hazard* — but quite decisively. He has thereby taken upon himself the responsibility to meet the challenge, and, it should be said, has done so. He has varied his plotting from that of Wells; has extended the scope and range of his novel considerably; and, most important of all, avoided the potentially sentimental trap of the idyllic ending Wells used. Mr Biswas, sacked and dying in his jerry-built house, and economically outstripped by his daughter, is a truer representative of human happiness achieved through the mature adjustment to reality than Mr. Polly, snugly ensconced in the Potwell Inn, having solved his original problems by abandoning them.

It is extremely surprising that there is no published reference to this important parallel.³ The first preoccupation of critics in the Caribbean has been the search for a Caribbean parallel. This has led to the classic contradictory disagreement of L. E. Brathwaite, who sees *A House for Mr Biswas* as the first West Indian novel "whose basic theme is not rootlessness and the search for social identity,"⁴ and Kenneth Ramchand, who describes it as "The West Indian novel of rootlessness *par excellence*."⁵ The seeming irrelevance of this dispute to the novel surely lies in the erroneous comparison with other West Indian writing, when Naipaul's almost explicit literary roots are extra-Caribbean. Gordon Rohlehr gives a far more central account of the book's concern, when he notes that it "moves far beyond preoccupations with race or the Hindu world in

Trinidad, and depicts a classic struggle for personality against a society that denies it."⁶

Rohlehr, too, however, might have gained strength from the comparison with the existing classic which appears to have been in Naipaul's mind. The rhapsodic account Rohlehr gives of Mr Biswas—"an archetypal figure . . . stranger, visitor . . . wanderer . . . the clown . . . the rebel . . . man the artist"⁷ — though true in its details, is confusing cumulatively. It might have sounded less like Hamlet, Melmoth and Reilly rolled into one, if Rohlehr had been able to add, "like Mr. Polly."

NOTES

¹H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (London: Nelson, 1910), p. 40. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

²V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Russell, 1969) p. 68. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

³I am indebted to Dr. W. A. Beckles for the information that he had seen the parallel between the two novels noted in Anthony S. Boxill, "The Novel in English in the West Indies, 1902-1962," Diss. University of New Brunswick 1965, pp. 361-62. Shiva Naipaul, in *Fireflies*, also makes one humorous reference to *The History of Mr. Polly*.

⁴L. E. Brathwaite, "Rocts," *Bim* 10, No. 37 (1963).

⁵Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber, 1968).

⁶Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach," in *The Islands in Between*, ed. Louis James (London: Oxford, 1968).

⁷Rohlehr.