



Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*

In this short novel, Denis Johnson weaves a mixture of Native American folklore, superstition and magic realism into a fascinating tale that is enriched with lyricism. He depicts the natural beauty of the Midwest in a way only a poet can, describing the life of day laborers during the modernization period, using almost surreal imagery.

David Lodge in his book titled, *The Art of Fiction* states that magic realism happens “when marvelous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative...” In *Train dreams*, real life episodes are seamlessly mixed with supernatural phenomenon, leaving the reader with a sense of awe. The story begins with a Chinese man screaming “voluminously” as he wiggles like an animal, “like a weasel in a sack,” (3) and ends with the howl of a wolf-like creature, both sounding like a song.

This work stands above everything else Johnson had written prior to this novella. It is almost of the same caliber as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. In a fashion similar to Steinbeck's unforgettable novel, Johnson covers the trials and hardships, as well as the accomplishments of workers who took part in the prosperity of the nation during the economic boom of the 1920s.

Johnson's writing style, in a manner quite reminiscent of Steinbeck's, contains colloquial language and slang within the framework of literary writing. Arizona's

unbearable heat, for example, is described by one character as if they were “only eleven or twelve miles from the sun.” “It was a hundred and sixteen degrees on the thermometer, and every degree was a foot long. And that was in the shade. And there wasn’t no shade” (16).

The story is not linear or plot based, but rather shaped by ideological details. Written in third person, Johnson depicts as the main character, a fellow by the name of Robert Grainier who associates every calamity in his life with the curse laid upon him by a “Chinaman” he once mistreated. Orphaned at childhood, Grainier has no idea about his birth parents or where he came from. He only has some fleeting memories of the past. He is a naive, unsophisticated character who seems to be drifting, following the crowd without any determination of his own. He is “carried...away like a seed in a wind” (8).

Grainier is a *Forest Gump* type character who is never proactive, just waits to see what life has in store for him. He is an accidental hero who happens to save the captain’s young son, Harold from a “mutilated death” (20). Everything happens to Grainier by accident. He accidentally meets William Coswell Haley who is dying and ends up hearing the most intimate details of his life. He doesn’t look for a wife, Gladys just happens to show up one day. Initially, he doesn’t even try to find himself a dog, rather the dog finds him. Life for him as in *Forest Gump* is a “box of chocolates.”

With concise, yet potent descriptions, the story reveals an episode in American history when the country was coming of age during the turbulent period between the two world wars. At times, the narrative depicts scenes that are easy to visualize with hard working laborers struggling from “sunrise to suppertime” and sleeping in tents that once belonged to Union soldiers during the civil war; tents that still had “stains of blood on the

fabric” (15). Grainier is drawn to this life where “swarms of men did away with portions of the forest and assembled structures as big as anything going, knitting massive wooden trestles in the air of impassible chasms...” (12).

Johnson uses an effective method of capturing the attention of the reader by giving clues about the fate of characters ahead of time. For example, Kate’s ultimate destiny is referred to in the very first chapter; “in the dark he felt his daughter’s eyes turned on him like a cornered brute’s” (9).

To appreciate the quality of Johnson’s writing, all one would have to do is to try to rewrite the opening paragraph any other way. It makes one realize that nothing will come even close to the concise and effective language of the book, which takes the reader to the heart of the story from the very beginning.

In his 2002 book titled “Seek,” as well as his work of fiction titled “Jesus’s Son,” Johnson makes repeated religious references, sometimes appearing to be questioning fundamental Christian thought. In *Train Dreams*, however, belief in life after death or in sin and redemption is not questioned, but accepted. He even writes about how tossing the Bible is the cause of the misfortunes that befall the family of Grainier. Also, the power of nature as a destructive force is repeatedly referred to throughout the book. Nature is portrayed as being more powerful than human capacity or resolve.

Johnson succeeds in engaging the readers, enabling them to easily associate with the main character, even though Grainier is a hermit and is not aware of modern modes of communication. “He liked the grand size of things in the woods, the feeling of being lost and far away, and the sense he had that with so many trees as wardens, no danger could find him” (14). When he died, “he’d had one lover—his wife, Gladys—owned one acre

of property, two horses, and a wagon. He'd never been drunk. He'd never purchased a firearm or spoken into a telephone..." (113).

The book ends dramatically with the *wolf-boy's* voice penetrating "into the sinuses and finally into the very minds of those hearing it, taking itself higher and higher, more and more awful and beautiful, the originating ideal of all such sounds ever made..." (116).

Truman Capote once wrote, "To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the music the words make." Denis Johnson has music in his words as he describes, with intense lyrical beauty, the pasture where Grainier proposes to Gladys. The scene quickly changes, however, from pure bliss to unbearable tragedy, as all that he ever loved is destroyed in a forest fire that is described in the very next page. By juxtaposing these two extreme scenes, Johnson succeeds in creating one of the most memorable moments in this remarkable work of fiction.