

Old Age and Death : The Yellow House as Symbol in Saul Bellow's "Leaving the Yellow House"

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Saul Bellow's "Leaving the Yellow house" ends with the following paragraph:

How could that happen? She studied what she had written and finally she acknowledged that she was drunk. "I'm drunk," she said, "and don't know what I'm doing. I'll die, and end. Like India. Dead as that Lilac bush."

Then she thought that there was a beginning, and a middle. She shrank from the last term. She began once more — a beginning. After that, there was the early middle, then middle middle, late middle middle, quite late middle. In fact the middle is all I know. The rest is just a rumour.

Only tonight I can't give the house away. I'm drunk and so I need it. And tomorrow, she promised herself, I'll think again. I'll work it out, for sure.¹

The year after this short story was written Bellow published *Seize the Day*. The last part of both works gives the reader an impression that they are Buddhistic. The end of "Leaving the Yellow House" indicates the protagonist's refusal to identify herself with death, while that of *Seize the Day* implies the protagonist's agreement to identify himself with death. These two attitudes toward death seem to be diametrically opposite but are basically the same; the protagonist refuses to identify herself with death in "Leaving the Yellow House" to become strongly attached to life in order to have some knowledge of the borderline between life and death.

The book entitled *Sei to Shi no Kyokaisen* (*The Borderline Between Life and Death*) portrays Hiroshi Iwai's struggle to comprehend his

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mental and physical state just before entering the World of Death. Hiroshi Iwai, the former professor of medicine at St. Marianna University School of Medicine, died of cancer in 1986. Seigo Matsuoka noted what Hiroshi Iwai said about his mental condition till the day before his death. Even on that day the former professor struggled to make words with his lips so as to convey his feeling and sensation when he was crossing the borderline between life and death. The story of his struggle to comprehend that frontier strikes the reader as both agonizing and impressive.

The stage which Hiroshi Iwai reached is that of Buddhistic Shoji Ichinyo (the stage in which life becomes death and death becomes life). In many cases of death of old people, as in the case of the death of Grandma Orin in Ichiro Fakazawa's *Narayama Bushiko* (*An Interpretation of a song of Mt. Narayama*), death is a door always opened to them. The stage that Hattie reached in "Leaving the Yellow House" is much the same as that of Buddhistic Shoji Ichinyo.

Hattie, the 72-year old protagonist of the story, comes from Philadelphia to Sego Desert Lake. She stayed there with India, her late friend in the yellow house there, and has been its owner since India died. The story does not give a definite reason why she came to Sego Desert Lake, but it might be because she hated to live a dissolute life in the big city. India came to live there because she wanted to flee from her debauchery in New York. But even in Sego Desert Lake, neither India nor Hattie could give up the habit of drinking and promiscuity they had acquired in the big cities. They would often drink from morning till night and hang around in their slips.

Sego Desert Lake is about 500 miles from San Francisco and 200 miles from Salt Lake City. There are no trees but cottonwoods and boxelders, and sagebrush and juniper spread to the shores. Sego Desert Lake is an infertile land. The yellow house stands out in this desolation because there everyone except the Rolfes and the Paces live in shacks and boxcars. Bellow refers to Hattie's house as the yellow house and seems to give some special meaning to it.

The yellow house becomes very important to Hattie when she has the misfortune of breaking her arm badly. She feels that she cannot live long because of her old age and realizes how deeply India loved her. When Hattie is carried home, Helen Rolfes puts on her the comforter lain

on India's bed when she died. Noticing it with a fear, she draws it away from contact with her skin but allows it to keep her legs warm. Later India's phantom appears and talks to her :

Above the horizon, in a baggy vastness which Hattie by herself occasionally visited, the features of India, her *shade*, sometimes rose. India was indignant and scolding. Not mean. Not really mean. Few people had ever been really mean to Hattie. India was annoyed with her.

"The garden is going to hell, Hattie," she said. "Those lilac bushes are all shriveled."

"But what can I do? The hose is rotten. It broke. It won't reach."

"Then dig a trench," said the phantom of India.

"Have old Sam dig a trench. But save the bushes." ³

The phantom moves back and forth between life and death. It cannot find peace either in the World of Life or in the World of Death, but appears in front of the bereaved family whom it loves, advises, sympathizes and remonstrates. Hattie realizes that India was the only person who really loved her.

Ironically enough, with Hattie's subconscious will to death comes the breath of life to infertile nature :

Heavy rains had fallen while Hattie was away. The sego lilies, which bloomed only after a wet winter, came up from the loose dust, especially around the marl pit ; but even on the burnt granite they seemed to grow. Desert peach was beginning to appear, and in Hattie's yard the rose bushes were filling out. The roses were yellow and abundant, and the odor they gave off was like that of damp tea leaves. ⁴

The landscape reflected in the eyes of those who are aware of their coming death shines brightly. Victor Emil Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, was deeply moved when he witnessed the prisoners in the concentration camp in Aushwitz come to the windows and exclaim at the

beautiful view of the sun setting in the west. Those aware of the inevitability of their death, whether it will come in one year or two, will become very sensitive to the true, the good, and the beautiful. Bellow writes that an infertile land has become a rich land and implies that Hattie is destined to die in a year or two.

Bellow describes the way Hattie is born, becomes ill, goes through the process of deterioration by death, and comes to nothing. This depiction is very Buddhistic :

So she stood up and, rising, she had the sensation that she had gradually become a container for herself. You get old, your heart, your liver, your lungs seem to expand in size, and the walls of the body give way outward, swelling, she thought, and you take the shape of an old jug, wider and wider toward the top. You swell up with tears and fat. She no longer even smelled to herself like a woman. Her face with its much-slept-upon skin was only faintly like her one—like a cloud that has changed. It was a face. It became a ball of yarn. It had drifted open. It had scattered.

I was never one single thing anyway, she thought.
*Never my own. I was only loaned to myself.*⁵

E. Cupula Ross, the author of *On Death And Dying*, mentions that man recalls just before his death the people who have really loved him in his life-time. Just before her death, Hattie realizes that India is the only person who really loves her, and therefore the yellow house inherited from her has become very important. She tries to think of an appropriate person to whom she can leave the yellow house, but can't. Instead, she is disappointed to find everybody she knows seeking his or her interests and even trying to drive her away in order to get the yellow house.

With what meaning does Bellow intend to equip the yellow house? Hiroshi Iwai mentions in his book entitled *Iro to Katachi no Shinso Shinri* (*Psychology of Color and Shape*) that yellow is a color of the Buddhist Elysian Fields and Nirvana. According to Ad de Vries's *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* the meanings of yellow are numer-

ous, but this statement of Hiroshi Iwai just before his death is very persuasive. To Hattie, who has been forsaken by everyone, the yellow house is the only thing she can trust. With her death approaching very close, Hattie wants to enjoy the house as long as possible. In her will, she leaves the yellow house to herself, an extremely strange thing for her to do. The yellow house has become the object of her solace in death. It has become her Buddhist Elysian Fields and Nirvana.

Hattie, who struggles to come as close as possible to death and give finishing touches to her life, reminds the reader of the Japanese sufferers from cancer who succeeded in climbing Mont Blan after years of physical training in the face of their incurable disease.⁶ Her achievement is as tragic and heroic as that of those successful climbers. Her achievement as well as theirs distinctly reveals a Buddhist principle called Shoji Ichinyo that life becomes death and death becomes life.

Notes

1. Saul Bellow, "Leaving the Yellow House," in *Mosby's Memoirs And Other Stories* (New York : The Viking Press, 1968), P.42. Subsequent citations are to this edition.
2. *An Interpretation of a song of Mt. Narayama* is a story of old men and women abandoned on Mt. Narayama by their sons because of their old age; it is based on an old Japanese folktale. The 70-year-old Grandma Orin, the protagonist, wants to go to Mt. Narayama to die, as old people are expected to do when they are 70 years old. Orin Knows how poor her family are and that the day has come when she should go there. She breaks her good teeth to look old and volunteers to go to the mountain. But her son and his wife are both reluctant to let her go. The day before he goes there she invites her neighbors to come to her house and serves them the food and Japanese sake she has stored away for this occasion. The next day her son carries her to Mt. Narayama on his back, weeping. Fortunately for her, it is snowing. On the same day an old man named Matayan who is reluctant to go there is bound with ropes, carried on his son's back, and dropped into the deep valley on the way. Matayan's reluctance to go to the mountain means his cruel death and Orin's acceptance of death leads to her acceptance of life and peaceful death. She can enjoy the company of her family and neighbors until her departure for the mountain to die.
3. Saul Bellow, P.17.
4. Saul Bellow, P.20.
5. Saul Bellow, P.33.
6. In summer, 1988, seven Japanese sufferers from cancer tried to conquer Mont Blan, the highest peak of the European Alps and three of them succeeded. Their success inspired many Japanese suffering from the same dreadful disease to live a more meaningful life.

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