

The Dichotomy of Hope and Despair in James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio"

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Instructor: Dr. Mary Sue Ply

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Student's Note:

As Martins Ferry is my hometown, much of the essay is based on personal knowledge and observation.

Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

In the Shreve High football stadium,
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Titonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
Dreaming of Heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.
Their women cluck like starved pullets,
Dying for love.

Therefore,
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
At the beginning of October,
And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" is a grittily realistic poem that pits the hopelessness and despair of growing up in a dying factory town against the seductive futility of the athlete's frantic attempts to transcend his destiny.

Wright begins the poem with the technically correct misnomer, "Shreve High." While that name is actually engraved in stone above the front doors of his alma mater, the school itself was never known by any other name than "Martins Ferry High School." However, by referring to it by its archaic name, Wright is able to evoke images of another form of the word, shrive: "to

hear the confession of and give absolution (to a penitent); to obtain absolution for oneself by confessing and doing penance ("Shrive"). The stark images in the poem have a penitential aura to them: "fathers (who) are ashamed to go home" (line 6), and "sons grow(n) suicidally beautiful" (10). The mention of shame is evocative of a confessional, and "suicidally beautiful" is an eerie juxtaposition of two normally very disparate words.

The first stanza contains words and phrases associated with destruction and debilitation: "gray faces," "blast furnace," "ruptured." The futility of the immigrants "nursing long beers in Tiltonsville" (2), perhaps after a long swing shift at Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel mill, draws attention to the rampant problem of alcoholism amongst factory workers in the Ohio Valley. The town of Tiltonsville, approximately seven miles upriver from Martins Ferry, is even tinier than the town of Ferry itself, and at the time of the poem's publication (and even today), the majority of the town's population descends from Italian, Polish and Greek immigrants. In 1963 when Wright published the poem, these factory workers were likely first generation Americans with little or no education or hopes of getting one. For these immigrants, the factory jobs represented an opportunity to seize the American dream. In "I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville" (2), Wright is able to convey that these simple immigrants are able to perceive the dichotomy that their salvation coexists within their damnation. That which saves them from a life of abject poverty and want also condemns them to a blue collar existence, because they haven't acquired the wealth or knowledge to rise above their stations in life. At the mill, in the mines, old prejudices die hard, and these sons of immigrants were left with the worst jobs of all. But on the football field, it didn't matter if your name was a veritable cornucopia of vowels. If you were big and strong, and most of all, if you possessed that intangible quality the coaches called "heart," that was all it took to even the playing field and become one of the season's golden boys.

Wrights' reference to "gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood" (3) implies that the unnatural grayness of their faces is a result of the ashes which constantly spew from the giant furnace in the plant across the Ohio River from Martins Ferry in Benwood, West Virginia. The African-American's natural hues of café au lait, mahogany, and ebony have been replaced by an unhealthy gray pallor, as if, over the years, they have ceased to be men and had instead become part of the machinery they tend. Together with the "ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel" (4), they are "Dreaming of heroes" (5). Already broken by life and decades of backbreaking labor, who will be the heroes for these factory men? Surely they will not rise from their own ranks, for "All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home" (6), where "Their women cluck like starved pullets, / Dying for love" (7-8). The fathers know too well what lies ahead: days and nights of working second and third shifts, coming off the shift at 7:00 a.m. and finding the riverside bars open and waiting for them with icy beers and strong whiskey, punching the timeclock each day and longing to hear the 4:30 whistle call an end to their labor, yet hating to go home to a wife full of wants with a paycheck already diminished by the gambling pools before they even get to the factory door. These fathers have set their sights on their sons to be their heroes, to save them all from a cradle-to-the-grave life of poverty, alcoholism, unpaid debts, strikes and labor disputes. The son can be the one who got out, who put Martins Ferry on the map and made them all proud. And football can be his one-way ticket.

Wright mentions women in his poem only as an aside, likening them to "starved pullets, / Dying for love" (7-8). In the game of football, women take on the secondary role of cheerleader; there is no equivalent sport for them to shine. Yet these golden, bouncy, hopeful cheerleaders will grow into women, learn firsthand the disappointments these former gridiron stars are capable of becoming. One day their boisterous cheers will be reduced to the "cluck" of a "starved

pullet" when they realize that the dream they were sold years ago is made of slag and ashes, and the love they believed would last forever has turned into an alcoholic, hazy violence. Yet they, too, will turn out in force at these games, cheering on their sons, in whose own heads and hearts the dream has been instilled.

It's no accident that the whole town, indeed the whole Valley, worships the Friday night football games played in the stadium beside the river. No matter how long a shift was worked that day, come Friday night, they are there. Doctors, lawyers, policemen, millworkers, miners, businessmen . . . they all show up to watch the spectacle. Of course, there are baseball and basketball seasons, but those don't really count. Only football really matters. Football makes the dynasties, generations of men with names like Bruney and Suriano, whose grandfathers and fathers played and coached and yelled from the sidelines. Football turns pimply-faced adolescent boys into gods for a season, turns them into something more beautiful than they have ever become. These boys know, too, what lies ahead: the giant maw of the mill, ready to crush and sever, eating its own with alarming regularity, as if it needs a steady diet of sacrifice to keep it alive; the vast depths of the mines and the black-lunged miners with lamps on their helmets and soot on their faces. This future lies ahead if football fails to be their ticket out. Wright ties together the intrinsic unity of the hope and futility of growing up in a dying steel town with his one-word line, "Therefore" (9). There is much power in his conclusion; it is the power of predestination. Because the fathers work so hard for so little that they have nothing left to give to their women waiting at home for a spare crumb of affection or love, "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, And gallop terribly against each other's bodies" (10-12). They will take the abuse of the coaches, running up and down the stadium steps in the August heat and humidity until they puke, do whatever it takes to give themselves a shot at escaping the

destiny that beckons just over the wall of the football stadium: the mill. That which gives the town its life also slowly strangles it, until the industry, like the town itself, dies an economic death.

In 1980, Martins Ferry High School had a perfect football season, something that has only been done by the Purple Riders thirteen years since 1908. They went 10 - 0, beating archrival Bellaire in the last twenty-one seconds of the game, when tailback number "21" Jimmy _____, raced down the field and made the winning touchdown. The frenzied fans spilled out onto the field. The townspeople and teammates hoisted Jimmy onto their shoulders and carried him off the field a hero. Fights and near-riots with the Bellaire fans erupted as the Ferry players and fans tried to leave Bellaire. Back in Martins Ferry, the volunteer firemen drove the victorious Purple Riders throughout the streets of town on their fire engines, sirens wailing. People danced and partied in the streets. Jimmy was a hometown hero; his number was retired and his jersey was placed in a display case in the main hallway of the high school. A scholarship was awarded, and Jimmy made it out of Ferry. But he was unable to transcend the stigma of the Valley. He didn't graduate from college and make it to the pros. He didn't make everyone proud and become another Lou Groza. He fathered a couple of illegitimate babies and dropped out of college. He went to work at Alcoa, and another dream died.

But they still play each Friday night of autumn, down in the same stadium beside the river. Forty years after Wright wrote his hauntingly beautiful poem about his hometown's native sons, Martins Ferry is still dreaming of its heroes, waiting for the one who will make it out alive.

Works Cited

"Shrive." *Webster's Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1984.

Wright, James. "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." *Literature: Reading, Reacting, and Writing*. Ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandel. 5th ed. Boston: Thomson, 2004. 871.

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Dr. Ply's Comments: *Betsy grew up in Martins Ferry-hence her choice of and insight into the poem. I was **greatly** impressed by the power of her style and depth of her understanding of the poem and of humans caught in the traps of a mill town.*