

## *Rites of Passage: The Truth of Colley's Death*

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*Rites of Passage* is a novel which is told in the form of Talbot's journal on the voyage to Australia to be dedicated to his godfather, and the letter of Colley, an Anglican Church clergyman, to his sister at home.

Now, I want to mention main characters of the novel. First, Edmund Talbot, a member of the aristocracy. He is on his way to Australia as an assistant to the Governor of the British colony. He has an unshakable pride and confidence in his class, position, and future office. Next, Robert James Colley, the hero of the novel. He is a parson who is on the way to his post in Tasmania. He is innocent and burning with eagerness and sense of mission in spite of a novice. His mysterious death on the ship is an important theme of this novel. Besides, Captain Anderson, who has been hating parsons, and supervises the ship as if he were an absolute monarch. Then, Summers, the first lieutenant, who was promoted to a naval officer from a common sailor. He always deal with incidents on the ship according to reason and good sense. These four are specially important characters. Besides, two lieutenants; Deverel, Cumbersham, and a sailor, "a young stalwart" (p.117)<sup>1</sup> called Billy Rogers. Also, Brocklebank an artist, and Zenobia his daughter. She is a beautiful woman of middle age and, in fact, a prostitute kept by Brocklebank. And, Miss Granham who is daughter of a late canon of Exeter Cathedral and on her way as a governess to Australia, and Prettiman who is an atheistic revolutionalist.

The important theme which is the truth of Colley's death is developed by these characters. Why did Colley choose death? This question is very important in the novel. Because the parson chooses suicide which is a grave sin in Christianity. But, in the novel, the cause of his death is not clearly stated. We can do nothing but infer from the circumstances suggestive of it. Summers says to Talbot about dying Colley as follows:

"Either his wits are gone or he knows nothing of his own religion."

"He is a parson!"

"The uniform does not make the man, sir. He is in despair I believe. Sir, I take it upon myself as a Christian—as a humble follower at however great a distance—to aver that a Christian *cannot* despair! (p.154).

Thus Summers also has doubts about Colley's death.

I want to develop the thesis by asking for the answer to this question.

First of all, I consider about reasons why Colley was made a victim of the rites of passage. It seems that an important factor is his visit to the Captain. Concerning the matter, I mention beforehand about "Standing Orders" (p.201) or "the Captain's Orders" (p.203).

The Captain always stays at the quarterdeck, and going there without an invitation of the Captain is prohibited as is stated in the "Standing Orders". It also states that "[p]assengers are in no case to speak to officers who are executing some duty about the ship" (p.203). Passengers are asked to read the Captain's Orders when they go on board the ship, but both Talbot and Colley fail to read them because of seasickness.

Therefore, each of them thinks of visiting the Captain at the quarterdeck. First, I want to refer to that of Talbot, because he visits the Captain before Colley.

Talbot is dissatisfied with his cabin, and also he thinks that he has an obligation to see the Captain. For these reasons, he goes up to the quarterdeck which is prohibited by the Orders. Moreover, he talks to "the officer of the watch during his hours of duty" (p.204), which is also prohibited. Exasperated by these transgressions, the Captain appears to attack him, but Talbot suppresses the Captain's aggressiveness by "producing [his godfather's] name and that of His Excellency [his] brother, much as one might prevent the nearer approach of a highwayman by quickly presenting a brace of pistols" (pp. 30-31).

In this way, although Talbot makes the Captain angry, he suppresses his anger by the names of the noblemen. But, it is different in the case of Colley.

Colley also thinks to visit the Captain. Because he has felt alienated by people since he came on board the ship, and he fears the cause of the situation is that he has not yet introduced himself to the Captain. But he is wrong. One of the reasons of his alienation is, "it was thought among the common people that a parson in a ship was like a woman in a fishing boat—a kind of natural bringer of bad luck" (p.193). Another reason is that the Captain hates a parson because of his background,<sup>2</sup> and his subordinates feel it. Without knowing the matters and without reading "Standing Orders", Colley goes up to the quarterdeck. The Captain is outraged and drives Colley out of the quarterdeck because he had already his pride hurt and humiliated by Talbot. Nevertheless, Colley wants to protest to the Captain about no worship made on the ship and sailors drinking rum. So that he goes up to the quarterdeck again on the pretext of apologizing for having gone up there without the permission. Colley also talks to "the officer of the watch" (p.204) at the time.

The Captain feels his authority violated by Colley, and he again turns back Colley from the quarterdeck. Later, Colley reads "Standing Orders". He realizes his mistake, and goes up to apologize for it once and again. The Captain's anger reaches its peak; he thrusts Colley over and puts him out without listening to his excuse.

The Captain abhors a parson because of his background, and it seems now that his hatred for Colley has increased because of the incident. At the end Colley has a tragic end, but the tragedy began when he went aboard the ship of the Captain Anderson. And after he has exasperated the Captain by his ignorant and stubborn behaviors, Colley is forced to be a victim of the rites of passage, which is conducted when the ship passes under the equator.

All passengers except Colley, Talbot and Zenobia gather on the afterdeck and even on the quarterdeck at this time. Colley notices that he is an only outcast. He comes out into the lobby, and he hears "a confused murmur" (p.233) from Talbot's cabin. In fact, Talbot is making love with Zenobia. However, Colley mistakes the murmur for Talbot's prayer. So, though he wants to ask Talbot for protection, he goes to the waist alone. There he sees a splendid sight, which makes him wonder what to say. When the ship passes the equator, "[o]n her right hand the red sun was setting and on her left the full moon was rising, the one directly across from the other" (p.233). Soon, the moon begins to control night in place of the sun as if a pair of scales tilted, and a look of the ship changes completely. Colley describes it in his letter and adds as follows:

The people moved about forward and hung lanterns by the dozen from the rigging, so that I saw now that they had erected something like a bishop's *cathedra* beyond the ungainly paunch of tarpaulin. (p.233)

At this time, Colley dreads "both God and man" (p.234), and he goes back to his cabin and begins to pray. And then one of the two lieutenants knock at the Colley's door, and says; "Robert James Colley, you are come into judgement!" (p.235), and they take him out for the dreadful rites of passage called "badger bag" (p.79). "[The] name is given by Sailors to Neptune when playing tricks on travelers on first crossing the line."<sup>3</sup> Colley is made to kneel before the "throne" (p.237), and is grossly questioned one after another. Then he is pushed down "with extreme violence into the paunch of filthy water" (p.238). After that, such a sound as something exploded resounds,<sup>4</sup> so that the rites are broken off and Colley is saved from filthy water.

Colley is brought back to his cabin, falls into sleep and is plagued by a nightmare for a long time. In due time, he recovers his consciousness, and thinks that the insult put on him is a blasphemy not so much to him but to God. So that, next day, he goes up and protests to Captain Anderson, the person ultimately in charge of the incident. He thinks further that it is his duty as a parson to preach to the people in the fo'castle to get them penitent. He goes across the white line which separates the gentry and lower-class people. Colley's letter does not make anything clear that happens to him in the fo'castle.

Colley appears from the fo' castle without his ecclesiastical garments, wig, breeches, stockings, and shoes. He is supplied with "one of the loose canvas garments that the common people wear about the ship" (p.116) instead of his clothes. Moreover, he is terribly drunk and singing a popular song; "*Where have you been all the day, Billy Boy?*" (p.115). Then he comes past the mainmast, stands on splayed feet and flings out his arms as if to embrace everyone. He says with delight; "Joy! Joy! Joy!" (p.117), and then pisses against the bulwark in front of ladies and gentlemen. After this, Colley raises his right hand and speaks:

"The blessing of God the Father Almighty, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost be with you and remain with you always." (p.118)

Such acts and words of his mean that he is quite out of his senses because of drunkenness. According to Talbot, "[h]is eyes moved indifferently, as if taking no print of what they saw" (p.117).

Colley is brought back to his cabin, falls into the bed and stays there for a few days. He does not eat or drink with the result of his death.

Talbot thinks that Colley cannot choose the death only because of his disgraceful behavior on the waist. When Talbot visits Colley to encourage him to live, he notices Colley's papers on the flap in his cabin. The papers become an important key to the mystery of the death.

They are the letter which Colley wrote to his sister in England. The letter states about himself from the time of his recovery from seasickness to the time when he forgives two naval officers, Deverel and Cumbersham who apologize to him for the "badger bag".

We can read his unconscious love for Rogers from part of the letter. I will give some examples. A mug of rum is treated to sailors everyday. Colley states about the matter that the liquid is so strong and harmful that the custom should be prohibited from use, and that ale is enough. But, on the other hand, he expresses that, though he does not have to withdraw the opinion, he cannot but modify or mitigate it "*here* on the bounding main, under the hot sun" (p.216). His modification or mitigation comes from the fact that he is attracted by Rogers, a young fellow, "a narrow-waisted, slim-hipped yet broad-shouldered *Child of Neptune*" (p.216). In Colley's eye, Rogers is of "the giant breed" and reminds him of "the legend of Talos, the man of bronze whose artificial frame was filled with liquid fire." Colley regards rum, "an evidently fiery liquid", as the "*ichor*" (the supposed blood of the Grecian Gods) for Rogers, a being of "such semi-divinity, of such truly heroic proportions" (p.216).

Because of these descriptions in his letter, we gather Colley's homosexual feeling, though he seems unconscious of it as such. Colley also remembers Mary,

Queen of Scots, of whom he read in the history of the union:

It was recorded that her throat was so slender and her skin so white that as she swallowed wine the ruby richness of the liquid was visible through it to the onlookers! (p.217).

Colley identifies Rogers with Queen Mary, and Rogers is none other than "the king" (p.218) to Colley, who yearns to kneel before him.

Such descriptions in his letter let us infer that he has a homosexual love for Rogers. There is a more important matter about this. It is expressed in the words, "to get a chew off a parson" (p.273). These words are told to a sailor by Rogers about Colley. Prettiman and Miss Granham overhear the words when two sailors talk about it and, taking these words literally, say that Colley was a sinful, degraded priest. But Talbot notices that the words, "to get a chew" are a homosexual slang which means "*fellatio*" (p.277) and they did not understand the true meaning of the words. Talbot supposes that Colley did *fellatio* for Rogers unconsciously because he drank rum and lost his conscious mind. Ashamed of the act, Colley chose death. Talbot states in his journal that "[m]en can die of shame" (p.278).

Are these words true about Colley? Surely *fellatio* which Colley is thought to have done is a shameful act, and he probably was ashamed of it. I think, however, we cannot deal with the cause of Colley's death easily only by Talbot's words, because suicide which he chose is a grave sin in the Christian society. Colley is a serious parson, so that I cannot think that he died only of the shame.

Therefore, I will consider about suicide and homosexuality in Christianity to find out the cause of his death.

Suicide is a sin against God in Christianity, because it is believed that life is given by God. A man's life is not his and a man's body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God".<sup>5</sup> Therefore, suicide means that a man breaks the temple, which is an insolent act of treason against God that gave life to man. That is the reason why suicide is forbidden in Christianity.

But, although Colley can judge easily that suicide is a grave sin, he commits the sin. What is the reason Colley committed the sin? I think that the answer is his consciousness of the sin, *fellatio*.

In Christianity, homosexuality is thought abominable and the act is punished by capital punishment in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> In Christian sexual ethics, sexual intercourse between man and woman means marriage, and having a baby is "natural intercourse". Needless to say, homosexuality is not "natural intercourse", therefore it is blamed.

Colley knows that suicide is a grave sin. Similarly, he understands that homosexuality is punished by capital punishment. So when Colley, waked from dead

drunkenness, remembers that he did *fellatio* he chooses suicide, but he knows well enough about its sin. Colley probably has to die to atone for his act, homosexuality, because he is a serious parson. Talbot thinks that Colley died of shame, but I cannot think like that. Men cannot die only of shame. It is difficult for me to think that he, a parson, disobeys the Church and kills himself because only of shame. Although Colley was out of his senses at that time, he recognizes later what he did is a homosexual act, which is a mortal sin. Therefore he obeys the rule of the Holy Scripture as an earnest observer of the Testaments. Thus the truth of his death emerges. Colley's suicide is a punishment which he has inflicted on himself for his own homosexual act.

## Notes

1. William Golding, *Rites of Passage*: first published in 1980 by Faber and Faber Limited. All subsequent references are to this edition.
2. The Captain has a brother born of a different mother. After his father lost his wife, he “had in keeping a lady of great sweetness of disposition, much beauty...” (p.267). But he had to get married to a different lady because of the bad family finances, so that he walked out on the lady. He left the lady and their baby to his heir’s tutor in exchange of one of the three livings that the family could give. The baby grew up to be a navy man. And he was promoted to Captain because of the “casual interest of his real father” (p.267). He is Captain Anderson. For that reason, he hates parsons.
3. Virginia Tiger, “William Golding’s ‘Wooden World’: Religious Rites in *Rites of Passage*” in *Critical Essays on William Golding*, ed., James R. Baker (Boston, Massachusetts, G.K.Hall & Co. 1988), p.144.
4. It is the sound when Summers discharged Prettiman’s weapon over the side of the ship. Summers did that to prevent the “the rites of passage”, and Colley is saved by the order of Summers.
5. See, I Corinthians 6.19. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and you are not your own?
6. Cf., Leviticus 18.22. You shall not lie with male as with a woman; it is an abomination. 20.13. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

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