

The State of the South in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*

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1. Introduction

The South—when I was a high school student, I first recognized these words in English class. At first, I could not believe that there was a society judged by the color of skin in the world. But the cruel state of the South was described more and more unbelievably in Erskine Caldwell's *Kneel to the Rising Sun*.

In Keiwa College classes, I have read 'The Visitor' and 'The Strawberry Season' by Erskine Caldwell, the Southern writer. Scenes of love are described in an orchard in 'The Visitor' and in a strawberry field in 'The Strawberry Season.'

My first impression from these stories was that Caldwell wrote of bright images. But *Kneel to the Rising Sun* was quite different. This story was so dark and cruel that my first impression of Caldwell was transformed. This story was divided into three parts, and there were cruel situations in each of these parts. In the first part Arch Gunnard is a plantation landowner who cuts off the tail of Lonnie's precious dog. Lonnie is one of the poor whites and a sharecropper who works for Arch. Lonnie's father, old Mark Newsome, is completely devoured by Arch's hogs in the second part. And in the third part Henry Clem, a brave Negro, is killed. This story is quite different from other Caldwell works I have read. It is quite frightening and powerful. The story describes the dark state of life in terms of human cruelty or misery. By reading this story, we can realize about the harsh situation of sharecroppers who work for a nasty landowner. The sharecropper's life is miserable, and his social standing is very low in the South. The landowners demand fidelity from whites and demean and mistreat Negroes. James Gray comments on this story as follows:

The story that gives its name to the new collection of Erskine Caldwell's stories of the good life in Georgia is one of the most painful and impressive I have ever read. With the extraordinary economy of means that characterizes the best of Caldwell's work, he packs into this tale all the wretchedness of the sharecropper's existence, all the piteousness of the Negro's plight, and all the insensate brutality of the South's new tyrant, the landlord.¹

Erskine Preston Caldwell was the son of the Reverend Ira Sylvester Caldwell and Caroline Preston Bell Caldwell. His father, a Protestant minister who served as secretary of his church, was required in his duties to move frequently, and until

Erskine Caldwell reached the age of twenty, he rarely stayed in any one place longer than six months. With his family moving around so often, Caldwell seldom had a chance to attend a single school for very long. He went to a primary school in Virginia for one year, attended grammar school in Tennessee for one year, and studied at a high school in Georgia for about one year. His mother taught him the rest of the time. In this way he could hardly be called educated in any normal sense of the term because he moved from place to place in the South until he entered Erskine College and the University of Virginia, but that was enough for him to realize the realities of the South.

Caldwell worked in a variety store, played professional football, managed a lecture tour for a British soldier of fortune, sold building lots, and worked as a newspaper reporter. Such a life helped him experience many things, and he especially became knowledgeable about the problems of poor tenant farmers in the South. Included in this "education" was what could be called the agriculture economic problems of "poor whites." Caldwell adopted a humorous pose managing such serious themes as the problems of poor farmers of the South and the question of Negro equality. This tone is characteristic of all of Caldwell's works.

Caldwell's violent characters in his stories resulted from cultural conditions in the South as well as Caldwell's own early experiences. He inherited a fiery and humorous temperament from his father's violence. Caldwell gives an almost superstitious faith to his characters who are described as being in miserable circumstances, but Caldwell's humor alleviates much of the pain of his readers.

The characteristic of his writing style is short sentences and repeating them again and again. Because Caldwell aimed at Hemingway's style, he used his own short and repeated style. Caldwell uses the expression "Mr. Arch, I..."² ten times in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*. He wants to impress his readers by using the expression many times. It emphasizes that Lonnie can only say to Arch "Mr. Arch, I..." because Lonnie is a pitiable man. When he opened his mouth, the words refused to come out.

As I indicated earlier, this story shows human cruelty. We can imagine those scenes by the writer's detailed description and the characters' figures, houses, and actions. Harold Strauss comments on Caldwell's works:

His is the time-honored method of microscopic observation, brilliant selectivity of detail and careful understatement.³

2. The State of the Sharecropper's Life

The poor life of a sharecropper is described in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*. Edwin T. Arnold comments on the life of a sharecropper:

When the crops were harvested and sold, the landowner would then subtract the cost of whatever supplies or material goods he had provided to the sharecropper and then would “share” the remaining profits with him. If the crops failed to sell at a good price, or if the landowner were dishonest and overestimated his expenses, then the poor sharecropper might not get any money at the end of the year, or, worse yet, might even owe the landowner money, in which case he would be obligated to work another year, already in debt before the seeds were ever planted.⁴

The sharecropper’s life in *Kneel to the Rising Sun* is miserable because the landowner is quite a cruel person. We can understand how the hero Lonnie lives a poor life by looking at Lonnie’s face. The expression is written in “his sharp chin”⁵ in the second sentence. This expression symbolizes the poor life of the sharecropper working for the nasty landowner as well as Lonnie’s characteristic. Clem says to Lonnie about Lonnie’s face:

“...if you worked for Arch Gunnard long enough, your face would be sharp enough to split the boards for your own coffin.”⁶

Also, there was the another example by which Clem expressed the fact that Mark was savagely hungry:

“Maybe he was too hungry to stay in the bed any longer,” Clem said, “When I saw him yesterday, he said he was so shrunk up and weak he didn’t know if he could last much longer. He looked like his skin and bones couldn’t shrivel much more.”⁷

Mark had been stone-deaf for the past twenty years, and Hatty, Lonnie’s wife, was already broken down from hunger and work in the fields. All the members of Lonnie’s family were frail because they did not have enough to eat. Lonnie tried to ask Arch many times to get food, such as a slab of sowbelly, some molasses, and some corn meal. Arch would let nothing stand in his way when once he had set his mind on what he wished to do. But Lonnie could not ask Arch to get food because he knew Arch had led him into a hard life, and if Lonnie made Arch angry, something bad would probably happen. Lonnie could only say to Arch, “Mr. Arch, I...” because his words were frozen on his tongue. Lonnie tried at first to ask Arch for enough sowbelly and molasses, but, after all, he asked Arch for only a little piece of sowbelly and some molasses. In this way he was a pitiable man because he could not have the courage to speak up to ask Arch for necessities.

We can further understand that Arch is a terrible man by his actions to

Negroes: "The Negroes who had heard Arch shuffled their feet in the dust and moved backwards."⁸ We can also understand that Negro sharecroppers were in a bad condition merely by seeing their houses. Arch's house is depicted as his "big house,"⁹ and Negro houses are referred to in terms of "Negro cabins."¹⁰ Arch's big house is a symbol of wealth. Arch, the landowner, was well off in his big house, but Negroes were destitute in their small cabins.

In the second part of the story, we can perceive the poor life of Lonnie and Hatty by their actions and property. They wake up in bed, and both are trembling in the cold night of October. I guess they have only a blanket over them because they live such a poor existence that they cannot eat a full meal. Lonnie gets up and lights a lamp, but it cannot warm his feet. He ties his shoelaces in hard knots because he cannot see in the faint light, his hands quite cold. On the other hand, we cannot know if Arch is trembling because of cold when he wakes up. When he goes out carrying a lantern, he is described in the following way: "The lantern that Arch was carrying cast long flat beams of yellow light over the ground..."¹¹ The sharecroppers who work for Arch are in a desperate state, and their position is low as seen by their figures, houses, actions, and property.

3. The Fidelity toward the Landowner and Whites

The fidelity toward the landowner is described in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*. Clem gives Lonnie the following advice: "If you knew you wasn't going to get none at all, you could move away and find a better man to sharecrop for, couldn't you?"¹² Lonnie says, "I've been loyal to Arch Gunnard for a long time now. I'd hate to haul off and leave him like that."¹³ These words are Lonnie's real intention and the reason Lonnie stays on the land even if Arch makes a fool of him. When the tail of Nancy, Lonnie's dog, is cut off and Lonnie's family is destitute because Lonnie cannot get paid, and when Lonnie's father dies because of hunger, Lonnie tries to continue working for a landowner who has troubled Lonnie and Lonnie's family. I cannot believe how loyal Lonnie is to the landowner.

The fidelity toward whites as well is described too. Clem is a brave man who can tell Arch to give him his pay without fear. Lonnie, a poor white, always relies on Clem for help when Lonnie is involved in trouble and wants to behave like Clem. When Arch tries to cut off the tail of Nancy, Clem is the only person who will help Lonnie. Lonnie thought that Clem was the only one who might try to stop Arch. Clem also helped Lonnie to look for Lonnie's father when Lonnie's father disappeared. With a singletree in his hand, Clem struck one hog over the back of the neck with sufficient force, and Clem helped Lonnie when one hog snapped at Lonnie. Later, Clem was shot to death because Lonnie told Arch where Clem was hiding, though earlier Lonnie had promised Clem not to tell his hiding place. Lonnie knew that Clem would be killed, but Lonnie broke his promise to

Clem. The story shows that Lonnie cannot take sides with a Negro openly even if Clem helps him because Lonnie is a white man. No matter what happens, he cannot stand to think of turning against Arch to save Clem's life. At this point, Lonnie obviously regards Clem as a Negro and not as Lonnie's friend. Lonnie chooses the fidelity toward white people rather than friendship toward black people. Moreover, Lonnie joins the surrounding circle to lynch Clem. Yet Lonnie realizes the importance of breaking Clem's promise and becomes quite confused. I felt the human cruelty by Lonnie's strange actions toward Clem.

4. The Position and Treatment of Negroes in the South

The entire concept of slavery was based on the assumption that the black race was less human than the white. Edwin T. Arnold, professor of Appalachian State University, experienced this in his boyhood in Georgia:

The schools I attended in Georgia were always segregated: only whites were allowed to attend. The Blacks in my town had their own separate school in another part of the town, but the city did not give them as much money to pay their teachers or to repair their buildings or to buy their books as it gave to the white school I attended. If Blacks went to the movie theater to see films in my town, they had to sit upstairs, in the balcony, while the white people sat downstairs in the better, more comfortable seats. Whites and Blacks had their own separate churches, clubs, restaurants, and stores. My father was a medical doctor, and he treated Black patients, but while I was growing up, he had a separate waiting room for Blacks to sit in, away from the room in which the whites waited. This was simply the way our society was set up.¹⁴

There are weird words by Arch toward Negroes in the second part of the story. "I sometimes wish niggers had tails,"¹⁵ and "I'd a heap rather cut off nigger tails than dog tails. There'd be more to cut, for one thing."¹⁶ Because Arch is making fools of Negroes, he treats them like slaves, and he cruelly treats Clem as a Negro.

Lonnie always relies on Clem for help when Lonnie is in trouble. But Lonnie also looks at Clem with segregation eyes as a Negro. We can understand it by an early sentence: "Even if Clem was Negro, he never hesitated to ask for rations when he needed something to eat..."¹⁷ The following sentences also are revealing:

Lonnie was on the verge of getting up and leaving when he saw Arch looking at him. He did not know whether Arch was looking at his lean face, or whether he was watching to see if he were going to get up and go down the road with Clem.¹⁸

The lynch law is described in *Kneel to the Rising Sun* as an example of violence of white people against Negroes. The lynch law is the lynching whites do to Negroes in the South. If a Negro rapes a white woman or shoots a white man, it is not rare for Negroes to be lynched. But Clem does not do anything that justifies his lynching. He merely talked back to Arch with his hat on. Because Arch has been angry with Clem for a long time, Arch explodes with anger at last by talking back to him. Although Clem told Arch the truth, Arch was angry enough at Clem not to stop at anything short of lynching. I felt the fact that a society that recognized lynching was cruel, terrible. Later it was Arch's thought to kill a Negro:

Nobody had ever seen him kill a Negro, but he had said he had, and he told people that he was not scared to do it again.¹⁹

I feel that Arch committed murder without any defiance and is waiting for the opportunity to kill a Negro. After Arch and other whites shot Clem dead, they again shot at the body hanging from a tree. If their purpose was to kill a Negro, they did not have to fire in succession at the body. They enjoyed killing a Negro as much as they enjoyed shooting a wild animal because they fired in succession at the body.

Moreover, there was a rule on use of language in the South. Edwin T. Arnold comments on racial manners in the South:

Good manners can mask angry feelings or hide injustice. This is especially true in terms of racial manners. Blacks were always expected to show extreme respect to any and all white people, using such titles as "Mr." or "Miss" even with children; whereas whites rarely used such formal titles with blacks, so that white children could call grown black men and women by their first names or by such generalized terms as "Uncle" or "Granny" —Uncle Remus, for example—although there was no actual kinship between them. Failure to follow these racial rules could result in severe punishment.²⁰

Only Lonnie used "Mr." to Arch in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*. Lonnie used "Mr." to Arch to show extreme respect because Arch is the landowner to Lonnie. But Clem is a Negro, and he did not use "Mr." to Arch at all. Clem used "You" when Clem spoke to Lonnie. When Clem spoke to Arch and Clem talked back to Arch with his hat on, Clem was very brave, offended as he was against such obsequious customs.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between the races is complex in the South. It is also true that the South has since the 1960's often led the way in social change in the United States, although discrimination still exists in the South today. Laws cannot end all personal prejudice. Blacks live in an atmosphere of frequent anxiety. Also, poor sharecroppers who work for a landowner live in fear every day. *Kneel to the Rising Sun* is a very strong work because the tail of Lonnie's father is completely devoured by hogs, and Clem is lynched. The tail of Lonnie's dog is cut off, and Lonnie and people connected with Lonnie are troubled and killed by Arch one by one. But Lonnie cannot bear a grudge or betray Arch, and he obeys Arch through fidelity and kindness toward Arch.

Although Lonnie and Hatty are very poor, Lonnie is gentle with her. I felt that the gentleness softened their poor life and helped them. I can learn more clearly the state of the South by Caldwell's expressions. I could not believe that things described in this story happened because I live in a society where I feel free and peaceful. It is not easy to settle the problems of discrimination. In Japan, there is still the discrimination of social standing or sexual discrimination. This discrimination is being settled little by little, but then laws cannot end all personal prejudice. I hope that we will look back to understand the history of the South once again, and the South will make a completely free and peaceful country in which the same things will not happen again.

Erskine Caldwell said of his works:

My work consists of words. I am a story teller. I have spent my life writing stories as I find them in life. I try to delineate, elucidate, specify what people do, what people say, how people live. I am an ordinary person. I talk about simple things of life.²¹

In this way he wrote his works based on his experience. I think that he wanted to tell his readers the state of the South through his experience in *Kneel to the Rising Sun*.

Notes

1. James Gray, "Review of *Kneel to the Rising Sun*," in *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell*, ed. by Robert L. McDonald (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.58, ll.1-6.
2. Erskine Caldwell, *Kneel to the Rising Sun And Other Stories* (Great Britain: The Windmill Press Ltd, 1935), p.207, l.14.
3. Harold Strauss, "Erskine Caldwell's New Short Stories," in *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell*, ed. by Robert L. McDonald (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.56, ll.18-19.
4. Edwin T. Arnold, "What Is the South?" p.5, ll.2-10
5. *Rising Sun*, p.206, l.2.
6. *Rising Sun*, p.206, ll.10-13.
7. *Rising Sun*, p.222, ll.17-21.
8. *Rising Sun*, p.216, ll.16-17.
9. *Rising Sun*, p.215, l.15.
10. *Rising Sun*, p.215, l.14.
11. *Rising Sun*, p.229, l.10.
12. *Rising Sun*, p.223, ll.1-3.
13. *Rising Sun*, p.223, ll.4-6.
14. Edwin T. Arnold, "What Is the South?" p.8, l.31-p.9, l.9.
15. *Rising Sun*, p.216, l.9.
16. *Rising Sun*, p.216, ll.11-12.
17. *Rising Sun*, p.206, ll.16-18.
18. *Rising Sun*, p.215, ll.17-22.
19. *Rising Sun*, p.230, ll.24-26.
20. Edwin T. Arnold, "What Is the South?" p11, ll.16-25.
21. Vivienne Kenrick, "Personality Profile," *The Japan Times*, 29 November 1971.

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