

Destruction of Landscape by the Forces of Commercial Industrialism in Maxwell Anderson's play, *High Tor*

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Abstract

This study examines Maxwell Anderson's play *High Tor* that is an aesthetic engagement with nature and dramatizes Anderson's environmental sensibilities. The play is a satirical fantasy in verse loaded with allusions, symbolism and philosophical meditation, dramatizing the end of America's pioneering tradition. *High Tor* refers to a mountain overlooking the Hudson River, only a few miles away from Anderson's home in New City in the district of New York. The name derives from Celtic lore and means a sacred and holy place where people commune with the gods. The area where High Tor stands is steeped in history, legend and the supernatural. There are many accounts of ghosts haunting this historical mountain and the surrounding areas. In this play, Anderson makes use of the aura of mystery surrounding this region to dramatize the story of the protagonist, Van Dorn, and his struggle against the advancing forces of industrialism and materialism that threaten his independence and the pioneering values, pastoral tradition and the Arcadian beauty of the American wilderness.

Keywords: American drama, the Great Depression, environment, American pastoral tradition, individualism

1. Introduction

High Tor (1937) is an American Depression-era environmental play written by Maxwell Anderson. Opened at Martin Beck Theatre, New York, January 9, 1937, the play was produced by Guthrie McClintic and ran for 171 performances. *High Tor* won Maxwell Anderson his second New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The play was adapted into a television musical twenty years after its original production. *High Tor* is a nature-oriented satirical fantasy in verse loaded with allusions, symbolism and philosophical meditation, dramatizing the end of America's pastoral and pioneering tradition.

As Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart write, "[n]ature has always been in art. ... Nature has always represented not only a major point of reference for art but also a substantial means to provoke politically and aesthetically." The authors maintain that "it is in great part through its engagement with nature that art has time and again proven that it can subvert the social and political *status quo*" (2005, 20). Anderson's *High Tor* is one such artistic effort in the realm of drama that tries to engage with nature and contemporary environmental issues and succeeds in raising awareness about an ecological disaster that was in the making. The play is, to use Giannachi and Stewart's words, performed not just "as visual landscape but as a haptic and audible *world* in which we are ethically involved." *High Tor* appears "as a conversation between different social groups and the world in which they are embedded, enabling them to narrativise a shared awareness of their belonging to and social and economic responsibility towards that world" (Giannachi and Stewart, 2005, 35).

The name "High Tor" refers to a mountain overlooking the Hudson River, only a few miles away from Anderson's property in New City in the district of New York. "High Tor" comes from Celtic folklore and means a holy place where people commune with the gods. The area where High Tor stands is steeped in tradition, history, and the supernatural. There are many accounts of ghosts haunting this historical mountain. Anderson makes use of the mysterious ambience surrounding this region to dramatize the story of Van Dorn's struggle against the forces of commercialism, industrialism and materialism that threaten to destroy both his independence and the pioneering values associated with the historically significant mountain of High Tor.

2. Discussion

At the beginning of the play, Anderson introduces John, the Indian, and Van Dorn, the woodsman-like pioneer, who are the last survivors of their doomed race. John speaks for the Indian race as the original dwellers of High Tor. There is a man and nature partnership between John and what is known as the "cultural landscape" (*Aboriginal Spirituality*, 2010). For him "landscape acquires a spiritual meaning and purpose" (*Aboriginal Spirituality*, 2010). To him landscape is, to use Baz Kershaw's words, a source of "spiritual renewal" and "rejuvenating contemplation" (2005, 71). Van Dorn represents the Dutch sailors who occupied the mountain upon their arrival in the New World. Van Dorn symbolizes pioneering values. John and Van Dorn inhabit a land that they inherited from their forefathers. However, the peril of annihilation and death looms over their land. Anderson starts the play with images that are associated with doom, death, darkness and destruction. The first scene of the play opens with a sunset and the Indian's prayer to it. The Indian

remembers the whispering of “the great spirit” about a young race praying to the rising sun and an old and dying race that “dies to live” (I.i.3). The play shows the Indian looking for a place to dig his grave (I.i.5). The curtain goes up in total darkness in Act One, Scene Two, enfolding the summit of the mountain, along with “a long cumbrous rolling” and “a crackling” and “a mutter dying into echo along the hills” (I.ii.27). Scene Three also opens in darkness and ends in crashes and thunders, all connoting that something sinister is about to happen (I.iii.36).

The images of darkness and death that appear in the exposition of the play refer to a whole tradition that is disappearing. The imminent death of the Tor’s original inhabitant and the danger of the advancing commercial industrialism that is about to destroy this legendary mountain indicate the demise of an idealized and pastoral tradition that, as Leo Marx indicates, “has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery” and “has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination” (1967, 3). These images of darkness and gloom connote the end of America’s pastoral tradition and the Arcadian beauty of the American wilderness. They not only indicate the end of an era of peaceful coexistence with nature, but also point to the emergence of the age of commercial industrialism that threatens to destroy the bucolic existence of American wilderness. With the dying Indian, the last defender of “rugged individualism” is Van Dorn, who must struggle against the penetrating new age in order to save his independence and this pastoral landscape.

During the 1930s, also known as the Great Depression, with the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and the rise of Fascism and communism in the United States of America, the old American myth of “rugged individualism” faced a huge crisis. In 1930, in his book, *Individualism Old and New*, John Dewey called American individualism, a torn and “ragged” individualism (1931, 14); he also called individualism “a dying echo” (76). Dewey wrote about the “tragedy of ‘the lost individual’” (78) and “the bankruptcy of the older individualism” (77). Dewey declared that while bureaucracy, money-mad people and a powerful minority control America’s resources, individuality becomes impossible. In this book, Dewey lamented that, “The spiritual factor of our tradition, equal opportunity and free association and intercommunication, is obscured and crowded out” (21).

In fiction, in his story of the plight of migrant farm workers, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck showed how capitalism can render individualism obsolete and absurd by reducing individuals to slaves unless these individuals organize themselves and fight for their rights. In his novel, *To Have and Have Not* (1937), Hemingway showed the inadequacy and fall of the isolated individual in the story of Harry Morgan, who tries to survive by turning to illegal trade, but finally realizes that a man alone does not have a chance of succeeding in this cutthroat world. In his trilogy, *U.S.A.* (1938), John Dos Passos depicted the degradation and exploitation of individuals in a decaying capitalism. In his film, *American Madness* (1932), Frank Capra’s failing individual, a bankrupt banker, is saved only by the good will of the community who rally behind him to save his failing business. King Vidor’s collectivist views are revealed in *Our Daily Bread* (1934) which pictures the possibility of creating a utopian communal cooperative farm as a couple leave the city to work a plot of land along with other disenfranchised Depression-stricken victims. As one writer wrote, “In a society economically and morally bankrupt,” writers “would have to find a substitute for the old individualism by renewing their faith in the masses” (Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 1961, 207).

The individualist, Van Dorn, is modelled after Anderson’s neighbour, Elmer Van Orden, who resisted the sale of High Tor to commercial companies (Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson*, 1976, 115). After the opening of the play, in March 1937, Anderson and Burgess Meredith (who played the role of Van Dorn in this play and displayed “the pungent independence of an American youth” by giving “his most dynamic and persuasive evocation of character, putting a solid foundation under the play” (Atkinson, “Maxwell Anderson’s High Tor”, 1937)) invited Elmer Van Orden to see the dramatization of his life. Backstage, the “odd and crusty and idiosyncratic” Van Orden (Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell*, 1983, 152) expressed his dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the play and told Anderson that the hero should never have sold his land to the land-developers (Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson*, 1976, 116). Like Van Orden, Van Dorn is the descendent of the early Dutch sailors and lives the life of a pioneer by hunting and fishing. Van Dorn belongs to a dying generation that is hostile to and disgusted with the commercialism of the new generation. He is in love with the traditional way of living. His girlfriend, Judith, believes that Van Dorn is madly in love with his mountain (I.i.25). Van Dorn makes love to a ghostly woman of the past who emerges with the ghosts of the Dutch sailors (I.iii.56-8). At one point, he even doubts whether he is a kind of ghost too, trying to hold an age back with his hands (II.ii.113). In other words, Van Dorn’s efforts to save his mountain is, to use Garrett A. Sullivan’s words, “real” and “symbolic” (1998, 4).

In this play, Anderson shows Van Dorn coming into conflict with the forces of commercialism, which have, to use Sullivan’s words, ascribed “commodity Status” to his land (10). The tension here is between people who see land as an “exploitable resource” (Sullivan, 1998, 11) and “the landscape of absolute property” that “understands a forest as uncultivated and thus *vacant* or *reclaimable* land” (14) and Van Dorn who regards it as a the “landscape of custom” and sees land “as the site of traditional economic activities such as wood gathering (14). As Sullivan puts it, “land, like a wedding ring,” is supposed to acquire “a social meaning” and “efface its commodity status”. In the past, “land formed the basis of a social world; to identify it as first and foremost a commodity was to expose the fragility of that world, or, at least, to dislocate land from the moral economy that was supposed to be inseparable from it” (Sullivan, 1998, 10). Van Dorn tries single-handedly to preserve the past and his pioneering existence. Like McClean in Anderson’s other Depression-era play, *Both Your Houses* (1933), Van Dorn clashes with greedy, corrupt, and money-grubbing organizations and the repressive forces of commercial industrialists whose only motive in life is their pursuit of wealth

and power. Once more Anderson dramatizes his cynicism concerning organization and authority and his faith in individualism, this time in the story of a one-man-war against consumerism and industrial capitalism.

First, the self-sufficient and independent-minded individualist, Van Dorn, struggles with his girlfriend over her get-and-spend policy in life. Judith insists that Van Dorn find a regular job, purchase a car and give up his rustic way of life. But this kind of life-style will choke Van Dorn to death (I.i.9-10). Judith thinks that if a man works hard he will be safe and secure. Van Dorn, however, cannot be convinced. He is the embodiment of the man-nature friendship who has simplified life. Following the rules of his Thoreauvean life-style, he works only for three weeks in a year and hunts and fishes all throughout the rest of the year. Judith, Van Dorn's girlfriend, finally threatens to leave him because she has no intention of living with a man like him (I.i.17-18). Judith lives in the present age and does not appreciate Van Dorn's frontier habits. Unlike Van Dorn, who makes love to a ghost of the past, she resists the advances of a ghostly Dutch sailor (II.i.80).

Second, Anderson shows Van Dorn in conflict with the forces of commercial industrialism and, to use Anderson's own terms, "the march of industrial machinery" (qtd. in Avery, *Dramatist in America*, 1977, 126). At the beginning of the play, we realize that industrial capitalism has already penetrated into the region. Van Dorn looks at the Chevrolet factory and the Sing Sing prison and says that, to him, there seems to be no difference between a car factory and a prison (I.i.10-11). Later on in the play, Van Dorn describes how the advancing industrial forces have destroyed the beauty of his mountain. A new road, trails, the crusher dumping rocks into barges, a tunnel that "belches its trains above the dead lagoons" and the "damned shovel" have all defaced the mountain (II.ii.112-3). The machine, therefore, appears as an intruder disturbing the tranquillity of Van Dorn's mountain. This is a familiar theme in American literature. Leo Marx observes that the image of the machine disturbing the peace of a quiet countryside is characteristic of many American writings: "The setting may be an island, or a hut beside a pond, or a raft floating down a river, or a secluded valley in the mountains, or a clearing between impenetrable walls of forest [...]" but the motif is always "the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (29). The tragic vision of the destruction of nature by the forces of industrialism also dates back to the depiction of the tension between the lone individual and civilized society in novels by James Fenimore Cooper (such as *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)) and Mark Twain (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)). Cooper's depiction of the sequence of doom that involves the destruction of noble individuals such as Uncas by vicious New Englanders also relates the annihilation of the hero to the destruction of the landscape.

The encroachment of the machine and commercial industrialism on nature and pioneering ideals becomes more evident in the play when we learn that a trap-rock company is planning to purchase High Tor and "chew / the back right off" it (I.i.12). The company's shovel has already trespassed on Van Dorn's land (I.iii.36). Van Dorn, who wishes to completely destroy the machines, knows that this company will raze the mountain for profit. The mountain is more than just a piece of land to him. The mountain is humanized and, often, when Van Dorn talks about the mountain, he personifies it. The mountain stands for a frontier whose inhabitants are ghostly or dying. It symbolizes an American pioneering manhood that is on the verge of extinction. Jo Mielziner's spectacular design of what Atkinson refers to as a "serious of hard-bitten mountain peaks, with the bays of the river glowing below the majesty of the heavens beyond" added to the symbolic significance of this historical place (Atkinson, "Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor*", 1937). Van Dorn knows that the crooked representatives of the company, Biggs and Skimmerhorn, would "move in with a million dollars worth of machinery and cut the guts out of the mountain" (I.i.20). Van Dorn tells them that High Tor is not just "raw material." He believes that there is something in this mountain that does not like greedy "pirates" like them (I.i.24).

Anderson uses bestial and diabolical imagery and names to describe these exploitive "pirates" in the play. Anderson highlights what Tony Speranza refers to as the "devolution" of modern man (26). First, one of the land-developers is called Skimmerhorn. He wishes that they had wings but says it is the last thing that may grow on his friend Biggs. He "might grow horns, or a cloven hoof, or a tail", says Skimmerhorn about his friend, but not wings (I.iii.61). Later on, when they are about to be trapped in their own steam shovel, they duck in their heads "like turtles" and "creep forward on hands and knees" (I.iii.62). In addition, one of the ghosts of the ancient Dutch sailors refers to the sleeping realtors as "demi-semi-devil" who have "four legs and two faces, both looking the same direction" and calls them a kind of "centaur, as big one way as another, no arms, and feet the size of dish-pans" (I.iii.47). Later, he curses them and calls them "a two faced double-tongued beast [...]" (I.iii.49).

These knavish and money-hungry small-town realtors, played by what Atkinson describes as the "infectiously comic" Harold Moffet and Thomas W. Ross ("Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor*", 1937), who become the modern equivalents of Stephano and Trinculo of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Krutch, *American Drama Since 1918*, 1957, 304) unite their corrupt forces as they stretch out on the rocks and sleep together under a coat (I.iii.46). They are caricatures of land-developers and speculators, providing a comic relief in the play. Their fatness indicates their insatiable greed. There is no honesty or trust among them. When they find the bag of money stolen by some gangsters, they quarrel over who found the money first and how it must be divided between them (I.iii.51). They even go so far as to bargain with the creator of the world. When they are trapped in the shovel they promise God that they would put candles on the altar of His church and fix a falling Church (I.iii.69). Later on, the head of the trap-rock company, the senior Skimmerhorn, expresses his capitalist faith that "every man has his price. I've heard it said / God has his price, if you'll go high enough" (III.126). Van Dorn refers to these realtors as "thieves" and people who "kick out the props under men / and slide 'em on the relief rolls (II.i.90). "Two thieves, a probate judge / and a manipulator, hand and glove / to achieve

what they can get”, says Van Dorn, “They’ve got High Tor / among other things, and mean to carve it down, / at three cents a square yard” (II.i.89). Anderson shows these crooked businessmen working side by side with corrupt lawyers who ride over people and get “rake-offs” by usurping their power (I.i.16). The young Skimmerhorn, who is a probate judge, tries to buy Van Dorn’s property at a lower price than the one offered by the trap-rock company hoping to pocket the profit. He has also other plans in mind if Van Dorn refuses to sell. He warns Van Dorn that he can hold him incompetent in court by claiming that the will Van Dorn’s father left is faulty (I.i.21-2). He is even thinking of getting a warrant for Van Dorn because he thinks that Van would be easier to persuade in jail (I.iii.37).

Forces of capitalist industrialism, crooked lawyers and gangsters besiege America in *High Tor*. High Tor is no longer a place for representatives of America’s past and the stranded ghosts of the early Dutch sailors who remind one of the short and square-built Dutch fellows with their antique Dutch outfits, appearing with a rumbling of thunder on the Catskill Mountains at a time of transition in Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle”. As in Irving’s story, the appearance of the Dutch sailors, Hendrick Hudson and his crew, indicate the end of an era and the beginning of a new era in America’s history. The end of American pastoral tradition and pioneering ideals is dramatized in this play by this ghostly crew, who have been left stranded on High Tor for centuries, and by their desire to return to the Old World. The Dutch sailors’ determination to go back to their own country poses a serious challenge to the myth of the American Dream. The early sailors who came to America hoping to find a better place in the bright new world of this new continent are now disillusioned with it and wish to go back home. Lise, the wife of the ghostly Captain, for example, is thinking about the return of Henry Hudson’s ship, “Half Moon” and going back home (I.ii.28). Lise wants to go back because she thinks they are not safe in America. She says to the crew that even if they get drunk and break the mountain apart “these new strange men come build it up again; / and giant shovels spade the mountain down” (I.ii.29). Lise wants to go back home “where earth is earth” and they may live before their “blood be shadow only, in a dark fairy land [...]” (I.ii.30). Another ghostly crewman, Asher, challenges the American Dream by describing: “The land and sea / about us on this dark side of the earth” as a land “thick with demons, heavy with enchantment, cutting us from home” (I.ii.30). Asher knows that their existence is inextricably bound with the existence of High Tor. He knows that when the mountain goes they shall go too (I.ii.32).

In the end, the pressure on Van Dorn to sell the mountain is so strong and the fight to preserve the mountain so futile that Van Dorn finally decides to give up his fight and sell the mountain to the senior Skimmerhorn who offers him a better price than the realtors did in the first place. At this stage in the play, the downfall of the “dying race” becomes complete. What Tony Speranza calls the “symbol of an American pioneering manhood” is vanished (19). Van Dorn’s refuge from “the march of industrial machinery” disappears. The end of Van’s Thoreauvean way of life is, indeed, the beginning of a new age and a new cycle of creation and ruin. The selling of High Tor is not a new story. It is a cyclic phenomenon. The Indian recalls how, in the first phase of the cycle, the brave and young men of the Indian tribes tried to keep their land by their blood and still had to sell at a very low price (III.127). Now, in the second phase, the descendents of those European explorers who took the land from the Indians have to sell to a new generation of profit-makers and realtors. As the Indians anticipated, this will not last long either. The Indian recalls the wise Iachim looking down at the railroad and “the bleeding earth” saying that there is nothing made by this new generation “that will not make good ruins” (III.142). This indicates that this cycle will continue as the new generation occupies the land. Anderson dramatizes this cycle in the cyclic structure of the play. The dying race is introduced in the exposition. The exposition leads to a complication in which the conflict between this dying race and a new race is captured, a complication that finally ends in a resolution in which the new race that takes over is expected to meet its end in the near future just as the dying race of the first phase has.

Despite the surrender of the old to the new, in this play, Anderson’s American hero emerges, not just as a representative of a vanishing generation like the Indian, but as one whose adaptability will enable him to find a new home in a new frontier with promises of a fresh start. Unlike Rip Van Winkle who escapes from female domination, Van Dorn gives in to domesticity. This adaptability of the American pioneer indicates Anderson’s faith in the survival of American individualist hero, albeit in a different shape. After giving up the mountain, Van Dorn is expected to begin a new and different life out in the West. After the collapse of traditional and pioneering values, Anderson’s note of optimism in *High Tor* lies in the new frontier out in the West that offers individuals like Van Dorn a new beginning and a new way of life compatible with the demands of a consumer and industrial society. As one writer notes, to Anderson, the West offers “the comfort of an open frontier” (Flexner, 1969, 126). The Indian tells Van Dorn that out in the West the land is wilder and “there are higher mountains” (III.139).

This sense of loss and gain can be examined in the light of the uncertainties of life experienced during the thirties. Speranza notes that, during the 1930s, American men faced

an uncertain economic future. With industry failing and the likelihood of economic independence dwindling, the country looked for leadership to a physically challenged father figure. Economic collapse challenged the traditional independent, pioneering ideal of American manhood (1995, 17).

3. Conclusion

As Speranza believes, in *High Tor*, Anderson “finds a way to reconcile this traditional American manhood with the demands of industrial capitalism” (1995, 20). Speranza quotes other writers in substantiating the point that, during the Depression, the “separation of men from America’s pioneering tradition” was “due to increased leisure time and the growing economic and cultural power of women” which hardly existed in the preceding centuries (20). The so-called decline of the male in the thirties was due to the active role women played in keeping the family together through years

of economic hardship. Despite lack of opportunities and unfavourable public opinion, women's presence in the labour market increased in the late 1930s (Filene, 1986, 150-151). Career women were even accused of taking jobs from unemployed men. In a situation like this, where men felt their economic independence threatened by women and also by the relief brought to them by the New Deal, *High Tor* had a wide appeal on the public and the critics. Speranza writes that the play was praised because it pointed to "the renewed popularity of an independent, self-sufficient manhood and to the belief that modern forces were robbing men of their individuality" (1995, 24). By opening up a new frontier out in the west for the American individualist to continue his existence, Anderson tries to resolve the crisis facing the American hero. This crisis is best expressed in this play by Lise who asks Van Dorn, "In these new times are all men shadow? / All men lost?" (I.iii. 57-8). In other words, Anderson shows the flexibility of American individualism and dismisses his earlier pessimistic stance expressed in plays such as *Both Your Houses* and *Winterset* that pointed to the downfall of individualist heroes in the face of corrupt organizations. In this play, Anderson finds a means for his self-reliant hero to escape extinction by adapting himself to the demands of the new generation. The hero has no choice but to sell out because he realizes that the commercial forces have penetrated into his mountain and built up roads and trails. The hero finally gives up his fight against the corrupt forces of industrialism and ends up by accepting the modern standards and values of society.

In reality, however, the owner of High Tor never capitulated to forces of commercialism. After his death, Anderson, the cast of *High Tor*, and many other celebrities managed to save part of the Tor from greedy realtors by raising funds that enabled the Hudson River Conservation Society and the Rockland County Conservation Association to purchase the land and give it to the Palisades Interstate Park (Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell*, 1983, 154-5). *High Tor* is not about death but about death and resurrection for, as it chronicles the death of one way of life, it also points to the birth of another.

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