

When the dances were held, the desks would be pushed up against the walls for the people to sit on. The babies and small children were put to sleep on desk tops. Beds were made of blankets, etc., and the children slept while the parents danced. The music was usually played by the Henker brothers, on an accordion or harp, Court and Otto on the violin, and Ernest, either violin, guitar or saxophone. Ernest was a natural musician. He never took lessons and could play almost any instrument. Mrs. William Sherman also played the violin. Bill Sherman was floor manager, as it was called in those days. He also called the different quadrilles. Other dances that were danced then were: 2-step, 1-step, waltz, 3-step, heel and toe polka, round polka, Spanish waltz, Comin' Thro' The Rye Waltz, 7-step or Buffalo Glide, waltz quadrille. At midnight a lunch was supplied. Each lady either brought sandwiches or cakes. The floor manager would call "Supper waltz", and each man got his wife, or, if single, his girlfriend. A wash boiler, kept for that purpose, was used to make coffee. The dances used to last till 3 or 4 a.m. When it was time to go home the last dance was always called, "Home Sweet Home Waltz." It was a lovely way to end a dance and evening, as all the men got their partners for it.

-p115, LEAVINGS BY TRAIL GRANUM
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CREATIVITY AND MOURNING IN THE WORK OF STAN ROGERS

by David W. Watts

Everyman creates unaware
Likewise he breathes
But the artist creates consciously
His act engages his whole being
The sorrow he yearns strengthens him.

Inscription sur le Musée de l'homme, Paris, par Paul Valéry (translation mine)

These words will evoke sympathetic vibrations in many a philosopher or artist struggling in a garret. Unfortunately, however, the role of suffering in the creative act has been all but ignored in the inundation of "creativity studies" this century. A remarkable exception is to be found in the writings of Melanie Klein, an analyst described as "perhaps the greatest psychoanalytic innovator since Freud".

Klein saw depression and sadness as an inescapable part of human life. She believed it grew out of the patient's inmate aggression, often expressed only in "unconscious phantasies" (the "ph" spelling distinguished them from conscious ones) against the very people and objects s/he most loved. (Most of us can recall at least one such experience in infancy: of momentarily wishing our parents dead, and then feeling a pang of apprehension, lest the fantasy be fulfilled.) Creativity, in Klein's view, was a form of reparation, of seeking to restore the people/objects that had been damaged or lost in reality or phantasy.

I spent almost seven years struggling to understand Klein, and through her myself, in a Master's thesis on her creativity theory. It has been an absorbing and at times wearisome task. As a reverant agnostic with respect to much Freudian dogma, I found myself alternately incredulous and intrigued by the interpretations she gave to children's play in her caserom. Does a three-year-old girl's hanging of a chain from a knob on a chest of drawers, for instance, have to indicate a phantasized action towards her mother's breast, or her asking for the key to the bottom drawer (you guessed it!) symbolize her desire for intercourse with her father? Yet after many reads, turn-offs, and come-backs to Klein, I have become convinced that her insights into creativity and mourning are uncannily "right on", regardless of the curious and at times convoluted way she arrives at them. They are borne out in the suprising popularity of many tragic songs - a popularity which many early childhood experts try to deny, but which I have observed among the young children with whom I have learned and sung over the past decade.

These were among the implications of my thesis. As an afterthought, I decided to try the theory out on the songs of Stan Rogers, English Canada's song-writing colossus of our generation. Stan, who died in an aircraft fire in June 1983, was a lusty man in the fullest sense of the word - solidly-built, forthright, and robust in his themes and characters and in his presentation of them on stage. At first glance, a less promising candiate for "creativity through mourning" can scarcely be imaged. Yet a closer examination of his work reveals otherwise.

Of the 45 of his own songs recorded on five albums, more than one-quarter deal with the sea and ships. Of these, four-fifths (20 per cent of the total) mourn losses, either a physical one such as a marine disaster, or a by-gone era or experience. In some of these his intentions for the song are quite explicit:

Come all ye lads, draw near to me
That I be not forsaken
This day was lost the Jeannie C.
And my living has been taken.
I'll go to sea no more . . .

"My God", I cried, as she went down
"That boat was like no other
My father built her when I was nine
And named her for my mother."
I'll go to sea no more.

And sure I could have another made
In the boat shop down in Dover
But I would not love the keel they laid
Like the one the waves rolled over . . .¹

In this song, as in "Fisherman's Wharf", "Blue-nose", "Flowers of Bermuda" and "The Last Watch", the loss is seen as irreplaceable; the song alone makes the object or way of life immortal.² In two notable exceptions, however, "The Blue Dolphin" and "The Mary Ellen Carter", the story centers on the theme of salvage (reparation), and Rogers is quite clear in his intent:

Rise again, rise again, that her name not be lost
To the knowledge of men
Those who loved her best and were with her till
the end
Will make the "Mary Ellen Carter" rise again.
[Emphasis mine.]

The theme of reparation is expanded from that of the ship to human loss in general in the final chorus:

Rise again, rise again – though your heart it be
broken
And life about to end
No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love,
a friend
Like the "Mary Ellen Carter", rise again.³

Lest I be accused of excessive Freudianism in limiting our survey of Rogers' songs to those of ships, with their obviously feminine association in the English language, it should be pointed out that a further 11 of his songs deal with mourning in other contexts, and these, together with the ship-mourning songs, make up more than one-half of his original lyrics. In two of these additional songs it is a lost or distant love that is mourned ("So Blue" and "Turnaround"); in three, lost success ("Night Guard", "Front Runner" and "Second Effort"); in one, lost youth and beauty ("Lies"—the loss in this case being manically denied); in two a lifestyle ("Make and Break Harbour" and

"Free in the Harbour"); and in two loss of or separation from friends ("California" and "First Christmas Away from Home"). In a final example, "Delivery Delayed", the theme of loneliness is traced back to the primal separation. This song so fully illustrates the Kleinian leitmotif that it is set out in full:

How early is "Beginning"? From when is there a
soul?
Do we discover living, or somehow, are we told?
In sudden paid, in empty cold, in blinding light of
day
We're given breath, and it takes our breath away.

How cruel to unformed fancy, the way in which
we come –
Overwhelmed by feeling and sudden loss of love
And what price dark confining pain (the hardest to
forgive)
When, all at once, we're called upon to live

By giant hand we're taken from the shelter of the
womb
That dreaded first horizon, the endless empty
room
Where communion is lost forever when a heart
first beats alone
Still, it remembers, no matter how it's grown

We grow, but grow apart –
We live, but more alone –
The more to be, the more to see,
To cry aloud that we are free
To hide our ancient fear of being alone.

And how we live in darness, embracing spiteful
cold
Refusing any answers, for no man can be told
That delivery is delayed until at last we're made
aware
And first reach for love, to find 'twas always
there.

¹ Stan Rogers, Turnaround, Fogarty's Cove Music, Hannon, Ontario, Canada, 1978.

² See Hanna Segal, in New Directions..., p. 388ff. on the quest for immortality through works of art.

³ Stan Rogers, Between the Breaks....Live, Fogarty's Cove Music, 1979.

⁴ Rogers, Between the Breaks...