

# The Shift in River Symbolism

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The passing of time brings about change. As the seasons go by, the colors of the leaves change. As the years go by, infants become children, and children become adults. As time goes by, many different elements of life undergo change. Such a change happens with the symbolism of rivers as time goes by as well. The symbolism of rivers has shifted from positive to negative, and an examination of *A River Runs Through It* shows that the same shift can be seen in the story through the way in which Norman is affected by the river as the story progresses.

As inhabitants of the earth, mankind has a responsibility to live life while engaging with and relating to nature. Understanding the symbolism of rivers is one key way to go about living life in such a way, and that is why understanding the symbolism of rivers and its shift in symbolism is so important. Rivers have served as symbolic agents in many ways through religion, culture, stories, and its nature. However, over time, rivers have changed from being a beneficial symbolic agent to a damaging symbolic agent, which can be seen in different examples throughout history to the present day.

One of the earliest examples of a positive, beneficial symbolism of rivers is presented in ancient Greek religion through the story of Acheloös, who was a powerful river god. According to Greek mythology, Acheloös was the god of the longest river in Greece, the Acheloös River, and he was depicted as a bearded man in woman's clothing, holding a cornucopia in his left hand.<sup>1</sup> The feminine characteristics added onto Acheloös, combined with his own excessive masculinity, symbolizes balance. Furthermore, this combination has "the special effect of bringing about increased fertility, 'each sex receiving something of the powers of the other,'"

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<sup>1</sup> Mireille M. Lee, "Acheloös Peplophoros: A Lost Statuette of a River God in Feminine Dress," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 75, no. 3 (2006): 317-318.

thus emphasizing the river's abundance and life-giving aspect.<sup>2</sup> This particular river was also believed to be the “the source of all seas, rivers, and springs, and [even] appears in classical literature as a synonym for water.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Acheloös River proves to be a symbol of fertility and is a source of life.

Another example of a positive symbolism of rivers can be seen in Hindu religion. According to Hindu culture, especially ancient Hindu culture, large rivers are sacred, and bathing in them can cleanse one of their sins and lead one to salvation.<sup>4</sup> Rivers are also seen as a “sacred bridge to the divine,” because according to Hindu scripture, “rivers originate in heaven and [flow] vertically from the lake of divine waters down to earth.”<sup>5</sup> In such ways, rivers in India have been symbolized as something that cleanses and leads people to heaven.

However, even these Indian rivers that have been considered as something so divine, are now seen as something that is dangerous and perverted. Over time, the flooding of rivers, being the most common natural disaster in India, has affected the lives of people in India in such a negative way, as it has caused and continues to cause “tremendous human suffering and economic loss.”<sup>6</sup> These events that follow a flood lead to a high-level consensus on the need for river control, because the idea of a river having “perverted behavior” makes people feel uncomfortable and fearful towards rivers.<sup>7</sup> Because of these characteristics, rivers are seen as a

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, 324.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>4</sup> Govindasamy Agoramoorthy, “Sacred Rivers: Their Spiritual Significance in Hindu Religion,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 3 (2014): 1081-1082.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1082.

<sup>6</sup> Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, “Imagining Rivers,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 27 (2000): 2395.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2396.

threat, and some people even liken rivers to a wild horse that needs to be harnessed, tamed, and controlled.”<sup>8</sup>

Another example of a negative symbolism of rivers can be seen through an observation of contemporary China. China’s transboundary rivers, particularly the Mekong and Brahmaputra, are not managed well by Chinese leaders. “China lacks a comprehensive policy for managing its transboundary rivers,” which causes downstream countries to experience economic and ecological consequences.<sup>9</sup> These consequences that downstream countries experience are a direct result of China’s lack of cooperation to abide by internationally accepted norms of behavior.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, because of China’s lack of cooperation, there is the potential for transboundary water disputes. World leaders are concerned that fierce competition over scarce water resources are a possible source for future wars<sup>11</sup> and “political instability and conflict short of armed violence continue to be security threats.”<sup>12</sup> In such ways, in contemporary China and surrounding countries, rivers prove to be a source of fear.

A shift from positive to negative symbolism can also be seen through the conflicts over dam removal and river restoration in New England. Though advocates believe that dam removal is key to restoring river systems in the area, many members of the community reject dam removal proposals. This is because, to the people of the community, dams have become a part

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2399.

<sup>9</sup> Selina Ho, “River Politics: China’s Policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra in Comparative Perspective,” *The Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2014): 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

of the area's history and identity.<sup>13</sup> These people do not like change,<sup>14</sup> and often react with "anger, distress, and ... concrete social actions to defend the place under duress."<sup>15</sup> To the people of the community, rivers have lost their symbolical significance and now only symbolize change, which is a concept that they really seem to dislike.

A single treatment of rivers in a literary work, *A River Runs Through It*, also shows how the symbolism of rivers have changed from positive to negative, as the River serves as a dominant symbol in the novel. This shift in symbolism proves to be evident through an observation of Norman's life, as he describes his life from childhood to adulthood in the novel. There are many examples of how the River has proved to be a positive symbol in his life throughout his childhood and even as an adult, but eventually, after a specific event, Norman's relationship with the River changes.

To Norman, and his brother Paul, the River was a significant part of their childhood. His father, who was a preacher, often took them out to the River to go fishing, and he taught them how to fish well. Fishing at the River was the one thing that brought the three men together, as their differences were great.<sup>16</sup> Norman at times even felt excluded, as it seemed like his parents, especially his mother, loved Paul more. For example, Norman tells Paul to call their mother instead of calling her himself, because "she loves to hear [him]."<sup>17</sup> Also, at dinner, Norman notes how his mother was especially nice to him, "since she hadn't paid much attention to [him] so

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<sup>13</sup> Coleen A. Fox, Francis J. Magilligan, and Christopher S. Sneddon, "'You Kill the Dam, You are Killing a Part of Me': Dam Removal and the Environmental Politics of River Restoration," *Geoforum* 70 (2016): 93.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>16</sup> Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78.

far,” but soon brought fresh rolls to the table and only buttered Paul’s.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, whenever the family is in conversation, most of the time they only ask or talk about Paul. For example, while Norman and his father were talking after dinner, his father asks him, “Did you hear what Paul did lately?” and proceeded to carry on the conversation without asking Norman anything about himself.<sup>19</sup> However, when the three men are at the River, they all have something in common and they are all in place. Therefore, in this sense, the River symbolizes unity and belonging.

The River also symbolizes growth, as it is at the River where Norman and Paul improve in their fishing skills, their relationship, and develop their characters. Their characters can be compared to the River as well. Paul represents rough rapids, as he is daring and reckless in nature, while Norman, on the other hand, represents flowing streams, as he is calm and in control of his life.

Norman’s positive symbolism for the River takes a sad turn due to a very unfortunate event, however. Paul died and that changed everything. “I am haunted by waters,”<sup>20</sup> Norman says, as now the River is a constant reminder of his brother’s death and the failure that he sees in himself for not being able to help his brother. Norman had thought of ways to help his brother, as Paul was always getting into trouble, and tried to offer him help a number of times. However, Paul never really accepted Norman’s help, and now Norman’s hope to help his brother is completely crushed. Furthermore, now there is no more potential for growth and belonging, as they cannot be by the River together anymore.

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<sup>18</sup> Maclean, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 104.

The way in which Paul is remembered by Norman in comparison to the river shows a negative symbolism of the river as well. Although Norman is often lost in the beauty of the river and the nature that surrounds it as he fishes, and though their father sees the river as a place of love and tradition, to Paul, the river is a force to fight and a negative thing to be conquered. Norman describes Paul as beautiful, but not the river and not the way in which Paul fishes at the river. Though Paul is able to find relief from his violent life through the River, he is able to do so only by inflicting violence on the river. Overall, Paul is remembered by Norman in not a calm and reflective way, but in an active and competitive way, and in a way that lacks peacefulness.

In such ways, the symbolisms of rivers prove to show a shift from positive and beneficial to negative and damaging. Examples throughout history and throughout Norman's life show that rivers are originally perceived as something that is positive, but certain events that occur can change how mankind perceives rivers forever. Such events happen constantly and many are inevitable. Therefore, as long as time passes and as things happen around the world, one can see that symbolisms are not constant. Just as the symbolism of rivers show, symbolisms change over time. This positive to negative shift does not necessarily have to end with negativity, however. The key to make good use of this shift in symbolism is to learn to adapt to these changes so that one may tackle life better. Taking advantage of the benefits and learning from the damaging aspects can surely provide one with a stronger outlook on life.

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