Clarke

Orality in Austin Clarke’s Short Stories

Austin Clarke’s achievement in becoming Canada’s leading writer of Caribbean origin is nothing less than dazzling; for Clarke arrived in Toronto from his native Barbados in 1955 at a time when West Indian writing was scarcely known internationally, and almost not at all in Canada; yet largely through his initiative and industry Caribbean-Canadian writing has established its integrity as a separate classification, and won plaudits of its own, for example, two Governor General awards so far, in poetry and biography. Clarke’s trilogy of novels - The Meeting Point (1967), Storm of Fortune (1971), and The Bigger Light (1975) - all set in Toronto, made the crucial breakthrough into Canadian literary consciousness by offering, for the first time, an imaginative interpretation of Caribbean-Canadian experience that is substantial, accurate and entirely credible. But while Clarke’s productivity in novels has never ceased, and there is no dispute about his distinction in this genre, one may make a case for the short story being his real forte. This essay will illustrate the outstanding success of one of Clarke’s stories “I Hanging on Praise God” and suggest that much of this success is due to oral elements in the story.

As an author of Barbadian origin Clarke comes from a society that is predominantly of African descent and one that has inherited a vibrant African oral tradition in many aspects of its culture, for example, in linguistic habits and artistic expression. This tradition which is generally contrasted with the written or scribal tradition of literature consists of such features as chants, rituals, riddles, sayings, aphorisms, myths, legends, songs, folk tales, proverbs and forms of expression that are non-linear, circular, digressive, discursive, episodic and anecdotal. Although in the past these two traditions, oral and written, were held to be different and indeed opposed, nowadays there is growing awareness of the extent to which oral features have influenced West Indian writing in general. More importantly, as we shall see in Clarke’s story, it may be argued that this influence is responsible for a good deal of the success of West Indian short stories if not of West Indian literature in general.
"Hanging on" has two protagonists, Barbadian women who knew each other in Barbados, and who meet up in Toronto, quite by chance, for the first time since they came to Canada. The women Pinky and Clementine are both domestic workers, and the structure of the story is based on their unbroken conversation as they are constantly on the move from the subway station where they meet, to the train itself, then the street car, until they reach Clementine's apartment where the conversation continues unabated between sips of tea. So constant is the flow of their conversational exchange that there is no need for description or commentary, and the women might very well be taken for actresses on stage enacting a play to which we readers form an audience listening to their performance in dialogue. What might be regarded as mere gossip and idle chatter is thus transformed into a dramatic performance that is at one time both hilarious and perceptive as it reveals fascinating information about the characters themselves, their relationships, careers, and entire lives as women, immigrants, domestics, West Indians, black people and virtually everything else. The oral structure of the story is inescapably part and parcel of its effectiveness in delivering both the humour of the characters' performance and insights into their life.

The oral structure of a chance encounter sets up the two protagonists in a situation which, by its casual and improvised nature, lures them into an exchange of views that surveys news about their previous and current experience and does so chiefly by means of humour. It is simply not a situation conducive to a long, serious conversation, or to bitterness or protest, so that even negative or complaining aspects of their survey appear in a humorous light, not exactly as trivial, but as said in haste, "en passant". They begin by expressing their discontent as impoverished, black, working class immigrants subject to the added discomfort of living in a cultural environment that is wholly alien to their West Indian experience and expectations. At first, Pinky complains about her employer's exploitation in over-working and under-paying her; yet later she boasts about a fur imitation coat given to her by her Missy. Evidently, she wishes to impress Clementine who, although a friend, is also a potential rival. Pinky scores a minor triumph when the fur coat elicits Clementine's comment: "You works for a damn fine lady then". But conscious of her self-contradiction in attacking her employer
earlier, she quickly covers up with: “She have her bad ways. But you can’t kill her. Live and let them live too.” p.197 Here again, the orality of the story, that is to say, its stage characteristics of dramatic rivalry between two friends help Pinky to save face, while at the same time creating humour and revealing a compassionate study of Pinky as an exploited, immigrant worker who nevertheless has enough self-respect to resist victimisation by trying to show that she is better off than her friend/rival. Pinky and Clementine may be down but they are not out.

Brief as they are, the character sketches of Pinky and Clementine are astonishingly rounded and full of information. These two protagonists are far from being simple or passive victims. We have already seen how Pinky, at least momentarily, sets herself apart from Clementine. Similarly, both women set themselves apart from their fellow domestics from Jamaica who are dismissed as pushy and aggressive in demanding higher wages for inferior services. There is also an implication that the Jamaicans are lower in morals or at least in ethnic pride, for they think nothing of having sexual relations with white men. If, one of the main reasons for the success of “Hanging on” is its compassionate study of character, it is predominantly through oral devices of structure and speech that both protagonists are able to reveal themselves, not only as victims, but as fully rounded human beings with their own idiosyncrasies, frailties, and plausible mixture of good and bad traits.

No doubt the short story form itself limits the author from engaging in deep or protracted character analysis, yet it is astonishing how much information we get about Clementine and Pinky despite this limitation. In addition to dissatisfaction with their working conditions and Canadian culture in general, we learn of their nostalgia for the Caribbean, and their views on sex and religion. Again, because of the flexibility of the story’s oral structure, the two protagonists can reveal their innermost thoughts through shorter stories or anecdotes that fit credibly within the main event of their chance encounter. Pinky, for example, relates an episode in which she sends money regularly to a man in Barbados who writes her long love letters and faithfully promises to join her in Toronto, only to abscond in the end to another woman waiting for him in the US. No wonder Pinky nurses embittered views about men. The episode helps to explain the
tough-minded, once bitten-twice-shy attitude she has now developed, self-protective perhaps, but practical, unblinkered, realistic, even cynical. She can now stand up for herself, as we see when she expresses strenuous objection to her employer, Mrs. Bergenstein, who intrudes into the privacy of her (Pinky’s) room. Clementine’s role, through the narration of these incidents, is that of a patient interlocutor or listener as well as an occasional rival. The story would not be as successful without this dramatic interplay between two friends and the insights into character that emerge largely out of oral qualities of narrative that consist mainly of the improvised situation of a chance encounter, and improvised remarks, made in haste, as it were, without due thought about their serious implications.

So far as its genre is concerned, the story of Pinky and Clementine readily qualifies as anecdotal. It is, after all, a self-consciously fragmentary narrative that makes no attempt to provide strict, causal connection between its elements. It bears all the lineaments of experience that is impermanent, transitory, fleeting; for not only do the protagonists meet by chance: they are on the move most of the time in one form of transportation or another. The transitory or truncated nature of their meeting is emphasised by Clementine who thinks it necessary at one stage of their journey to introduce a cautionary note to Pinky: “Don’t let we pass the stop.” (p.193) Transitoriness is an essential aspect of oral conventions which, by definition, tend to report experience that is impromptu or improvised. An oral genre either encourages or readily accommodates itself to fluid, physical movement or changeable behaviour patterns and attitudes. That is why, in this case at least, the short story form with oral elements of composition proves to be so effective in conveying black, Caribbean-Canadian immigrant experience; for this experience is essentially one of victimisation, and discursive, anecdotal, oral techniques seem to be ideally suited for representing the flexible, equally shifting, fragmentary gestures that must be adopted in order to cope with the pressures of being a victimised immigrant.

The fluid or oral nature of the genre also serves to illuminate themes in the story. As in much of Clarke’s fiction, both stories and novels, the main theme in “Hanging on” is a contrast between one culture - Canadian - that is money-driven, materialistic, hyper-
ordered, cold or unfeeling, and another - Caribbean - culture that is regarded as warm, relaxed, instinctive, and tolerant. Throughout their story Pinky and Clementine complain of intense loneliness and dissatisfaction in an alien environment that forces them into a blind and soulless routine of constantly working and working, and even getting sick from it, just to eke out a living. They miss the familiarity of relaxed, spontaneous, uncomplicated living in the warm climate of Barbados, the simple relaxation of strolling leisurely in the evening or going for a bus drive: “and let a little o’ Silver Sand sea breeze blow in we face” (p.192) They lament that in Canada they can’t even enjoy the more instinctive style of religious worship or social life to which they are accustomed. As Pinky asks her friend with cutting irony: “Where it have a place for me and you to enjoy weselfs? The Granit Club? The Yacht Club?”(p.197) What is more, both women feel threatened and unsafe: they conclude; “This place is bad, it wild, savage. You can’t trust nobody. We in barrack. Permanunt barrack” (p.197) It is doubtful that either the comprehensiveness or intensity of their sense of alienation in Canada would have been as successfully communicated were it not for the oral genre of the story in which the ironic contrast between their casual, humorous banter and their condition literally as prisoners highlights their sense of entrapment, and drives home their plight as black, Caribbean immigrants in Canada.

But Pinky and Clementine do not yield completely to nostalgia or lose sight of balance in assessing the consequences of their immigration. They realise that all is not sweetness and light in Barbados, or else why would they have left? They acknowledge that in material terms they are better off in Canada than they could ever be Barbados. As they say: “You can’t ask for more comforts” in Canada. What they object to is the inward price they have to pay for the outward comforts. Canada: “ain’ have peace and happiness.” Although other themes exist, for example, female solidarity versus male exploitation, the contrast between Canadian and Caribbean culture is as dominant in this story as in Clarke’s novels. In Storm of Fortune, for example, the middle novel in his Toronto trilogy, Boysie Cumberbatch provides an elaborate analysis of the cultural contrast between Canada and Barbados. A short story like “Hanging on” has no scope for such analysis. Instead what we get are glancing references to the contrast, and
inarticulate expostulations about the hardships that Caribbean immigrants face in Canada; yet, in oral terms, these appear as ritual chants or laments rather like the call and response routine heard in some African-American churches; and, as such, they serve to heighten the emotional appeal of the story.

By far the most effective oral element in the story, however, is its creole speech idiom which is spiced with the wit, irreverence, banter and humour that is characteristic of everyday Caribbean social intercourse. The question and answer structure of the dialogue creates an almost choral performance that appeals as much to ear as to the mind, that is to say, we take equal delight in the sound of their speech as in the meaning of what Pinky and Clementine say. Their speech is like a musical performance in public as they themselves suddenly realise when Pinky is in full flow subconsciously taking in the passengers on the street car as part of her audience. Clementine has to retrain her with: “Shh. The whole street car ain’ talkin to you woman.” (p. 193) Besides irreverent expressions like “whore” and “niggerwoman” which frequently pepper their exchange, the two women let loose a flood of highly flavoured expressions with the aphoristic or jocular taste of informal and playful, oral communication, for example: “blood more thicker than water” (p. 194), “more cold than what John read bout”, “I spraining my brain”. “bittle”, “lick we mout again” (p.198) and “Dog my age ain’t no pup” (p.198) These expressions are not only amusing: they communicate their meaning more directly and forcefully than less informal writing or “scribal literature” would do. They are a vital part of the repertoire of oral techniques which Clarke employs in his story.

It is not too much to claim that the oral features of the story are its chief reason for success; for “Hanging on” achieves success largely through humour, and as we have already seen, almost all the oral techniques so far discussed are notable for their humour, none more so than the creole speech idiom, a weapon that Clarke wields with remarkable dexterity. After admitting deception by her lover who fled to the US, Pinky strenuously avers that the deception has taught her a lesson: she therefore stoutly resolves never to have anything more to do with men; but the creole idiom in which she expresses this resolve makes all the difference. She says with dismissive but potent brevity: “I out-out man outa my life, honey” (p.194) Her combination of superbly compressed reticence
with absurdly exaggerated repetition of “out”, in one form or another, underlines Pinky’s absolute conviction in the completeness and finality of her decision to abstain in future from sexual relations with men. It is hard to imagine a standard English expression that will likely match the intensity and power of Pinky’s creole idiom. Besides, through its humorous violation or manipulation of the rules of standard English spelling and grammar, Pinky strikes the right unconventional or revolutionary note of plausibility by saying exactly what we would expect to hear from someone of her educational and social background, and in her victimised predicament. Again, it is the oral aspect of her reaction, and chiefly its humour that expresses her wounded pride, steadfast resolve, and feelings as a victimised immigrant with such magisterial conviction and plausibility.

It is impossible to deny the presence of oral modes of composition in “Hanging on” for they are evident in the story’s structure, characterisation, genre, themes and dialogue. Nor can one deny the vital role these modes play most of all in creating humour, but also in promoting a sensitive examination of the plight of West Indian immigrants in Canada, and in providing superb entertainment. Perhaps oral techniques such as improvised situations and attitudes, episodic and discontinuous narratives, or speech with irreverent wit and humour are particularly effective in representing West Indian experience which, by its very history, contains fundamental features of fragmentation, powerlessness, dependence, discontinuity and ready laughter as a survival mechanism in responding to ever present adversity. Although oral techniques also exist in novels, they are evidently best suited to short stories because of the short or fragmentary nature of the form. This is why some critics argue that the short story is the natural form of West Indian literature, and indeed its foundation genre. This also why one might claim that, although Clarke has written highly successful novels, in many of which he employs oral techniques as expertly as he does in his short stories, it is several volumes of short stories that both exhibit these techniques to perfection and constitute his finest artistic achievement.