

The Transformation of Hazel Quarrier in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*¹

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The plot of Peter Matthiessen's novel *At Play in the Fields in the Lord* revolves around religious, cultural, and philosophical clashes between Christian missionaries, mercenaries, local authorities, and native tribes in the Amazon rain forest. The author has created an array of characters with strong archetypal features and symbolic names which serve a specific purpose in the interpretation of the story. Each of the characters in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* undergoes a metamorphosis, and no character will leave the story with the same traits as when first introduced. Although seemingly of minor importance to the story, the character of Hazel Quarrier, one of the protestant missionaries, has a greater purpose. Her character is representative of the comprehensive theme of the story: cultural, environmental, and personal atrophy. The complexity of Hazel Quarrier's character and the destructive transformation of her psyche loudly echo the cataclysmic fate of the cultural corruption brought on by the missionaries' neocolonialist efforts.

Matthiessen seems to have carefully selected the first name of Mrs. Quarrier, Hazel, just as he seems to have deliberately named other characters and locations in order to add another dimension to the plot. The good-hearted missionary, Martin Quarrier, arrives with his wife Hazel and son Billy to a remote South American missionary station run by Leslie Huben and his wife Andy. According to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, the definition of the noun

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quarrier is associated with work in a stone quarry (“Quarry 2”). By selecting the name of Quarrier, Matthiessen seems to emphasize the arduous work for which the family is destined but also to foreshadow the Quarrier’s mission to break new ground in their new environment. The name also serves to forebode their destiny. “Quarry,” according to the aforementioned dictionary, also means “prey” which suggests that the family will not leave the story unscathed (“Quarry 1”). Hazel predicts their destiny prior to their arrival in the jungle as she ponders upon the family’s future: “Nevertheless, it seemed appropriate that they should undergo some sacrifice and even hardship in the performance of their Christian duty” (4).

At this point, Hazel does not realize the magnitude of the sacrifices that her family will endure. Her son Billy will fall victim to tropical disease, and her husband Martin will receive a fatal blow from the machete of the shifty Tiro Indian appropriately called Yoyo (Matthiessen 340). Hazel will be the only member of the Quarrier family to survive. Billy’s name, a diminutive to match his young age, brings forward images of innocence and purity which correspond to the sweet and goodhearted nature of the child. Literary critic Bruce Bawer describes how young Billy, due to his pure nature, is the only Caucasian the Niaruna tribe will embrace (Bawer). Martin Quarrier is not only named after Martin Luther, the priest who initiated the Protestant faith, but more importantly also after St Martin De Porres, a Peruvian martyr recognized in the Catholic faith as the patron saint of social justice and interracial harmony (Center of Dominican Studies). Martin Quarrier, by his name alone, is an indication that the Quarrier family arrives in the jungle with the intention to work hard and to succeed in building a bridge between cultures and eventually to reform, or rather convert, the native Indian tribes. The family will pay the highest price for their endeavor.

In contrast to Martin Quarrier's name, which so strongly hints at the nature of his faith, Matthiessen's choice of the name "Hazel" seems at first odd as it does not hold any clear religious connotations. Hazel is a name directly derived from the natural world: a tree, a color, and a medicinal plant. Trees are symbolically associated with life, growth, and immortality (Guerin et al. 189). Although Hazel's future will remain uncertain due to her inescapable mental collapse, she will be the only survivor of the Quarrier family at the story's end. She thus embodies the concept of immortality. The name's connection to life and growth is also apparent in Hazel's revered motherhood. Hazel's devotion to Billy is clear and evident. However, as the story progresses, her maternal love and care is rapidly transformed into overprotective, destructive, and even abusive actions due to her catatonic fears and inability to adapt to her new environment.

Hazel's name is also appropriately chosen since the medicinal plant witch hazel shares properties with Hazel's personality. According to the *Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine*, witch hazel is an astringent, and also a plant that is commonly used by Native Americans ("Witch hazel"). A parallel can be drawn between Hazel Quarrier's personality and the properties of the topical medicinal plant. Matthiessen has endowed Hazel with the ability of making remarks that are strikingly caustic, pungent, sharp, and penetrating – all dictionary definitions of the word astringent ("Astringent").

Hazel's character remains a stark contrast to that of Andy, the other female missionary. Andy's androgynous name does not correspond to her feminine disposition and attractive appearance. Andy appears to be of almost angelic beauty, "the pretty one," whereas Hazel is described as "a big girl, with black hair" (49). Hazel finds comfort in projecting her own feelings of jealousy and inadequacy by confronting Andy: "You were very jealous of me [...] weren't

you, honey? I mean, being barren before God?” (349). Hazel’s veneration of motherhood is important as she seems to have found her own identity and self-respect with Billy’s birth: “The only time in my whole life I didn’t hate this big lecherous ugly body of mine was when I remembered that somewhere inside, it must be clean and beautiful, or my beautiful Billy could not have come from it” (349).

At the loss of both her beloved son and her husband, Hazel seeks comfort and a new identity in their perceived martyrdom. In Hazel’s disoriented mind, Billy becomes a Christ figure and his death of higher purpose. It is in that perceived purpose that Hazel finds a place for herself. She enters the role of the Holy Mother, and begs for veneration and respect. With the histrionics of an impostor, she proclaims, “Our Father in Heaven...alone made my beautiful little Billy, and caused him to walk this cruel earth so that one glorious day his death might be...the instrument of the savages’ salvation” (349).

Hazel Quarrier’s character is a prism through which traditional female archetypes are reflected. She is initially portrayed with archetypal features associated with the “Good Mother” (Guerin et al. 187). However, she will gradually lose her nurturing qualities with her character eventually approaching and embodying the archetype of the “Terrible Mother” with nearly demonic features (Guerin et al. 187). Although her demeanor remains amusingly unpleasant throughout the story, her psychological state drastically changes and spirals down into the depths of insanity. Her mental degeneration is an analogy of the world which surrounds her.

Hazel Quarrier arrives in the jungle unprepared for the sights and experiences which await her, and she soon grows both fearful and resentful of native customs. Her fear of unknown customs and practices will eventually lead to her mental collapse. However, Hazel Quarrier’s role in the story serves to mirror and also to comment upon the behavior and beliefs of the native

Indians. Her name is connected to the natural world, which is also a motif often threaded through Indian names. This fact presents an interesting parallel, for her name links her with the Indians in the story, who also have names derived from nature. For instance, the Cheyenne Indian is named Moon and the fierce native Indian is known as “the great Ocelot of the River Tuaremi” (Matthiessen 270).

Hazel’s refusal to accept local customs is indicative of an ethnocentric standpoint. When her son Billy falls ill with malaria without any efficient western medicine available, Hazel will deny him a potion offered by the Indians, therefore possibly denying him the cure that would have saved his life (203). Hazel’s rejection of the Indian medicine is without doubt a reflection of her ethnocentric narrow-mindedness and cultural xenophobia. Bruce Bawer argues that Matthiessen is biased in his opinion by stating that the author views American ethnocentrism as a “mark of naiveté and arrogance and corruption” whereas in Indian tribes “the same ethnocentrism is a virtue, a sign of integrity” (Bawer). However, Matthiessen seems to contend that Hazel’s behavior is in fact universal. The same situation occurs when a sick child reappears later in the story. This time illness plagues an Indian child who will eventually succumb to the flu virus due to his parents’ refusal of “the white man’s drugs” (320). Hazel’s arrogant, haughty intolerance of a foreign culture is a reflection of the same prejudicial attitude among the native Indians. Hazel’s character is instrumental in highlighting behavioral similarities between two seemingly different cultures.

The development of Hazel Quarrier’s psychological state echoes both the cultural and ecological effects that arise as a result of the clash between western imperialism and Indian animism. Rebecca Raglon has thoroughly examined how Matthiessen’s writing envelops itself around a genuine concern for ecology and the natural world. Raglon also investigates how

Matthiessen's interest in Zen Buddhism and the spiritual world defines this literary work by including topics that effectively connect the human mind with nature. Raglon further illustrates how Matthiessen "has consistently striven to find ways to express the interrelationships of life" (Raglon). Each character in the narrative has a personal perception of the jungle. Billy, for example, is able to fully integrate into his new environment and sees beauty in every aspect. Andy appears to find a Garden of Eden by the pond where she bathes (Matthiessen 259). Moon, who seeks his identity, finds his home in the jungle. Hazel finds her own vision of hell. Her vivid description of two frogs "squatting half buried in the fecal muck" of the latrine hints at the clash between the western culture and the native Indians (135). Hazel seems to equate the frogs' squalor with her own living conditions. An objective interpretation might reveal Matthiessen's comment on the effects of the westerners' cultural, religious, and commercial invasion of the native tribal lands which, in turn, brings nothing but waste to the indigenous people. The town, which is also the location the missionary headquarters, is described as "a yellow scar in the green waste" (5). With these words, the author clearly points at the destruction of the Indians' virgin land by the intrusion of western, modern civilization.

In his essay, Richard E. Patteson has examined the imperialist idea in this novel. He argues that the act of civilizing a people is only a euphemism for neutralizing them (6). This argument is also clearly apparent in Matthiessen's characterization: the missionaries, mercenaries, and local westernized authorities are driven by a variety of more or less dubious motives, whereas the Indians are portrayed as driven instinctually by the quest for their own survival. Hazel, from her pessimistic and perhaps truly realistic viewpoint, serves as the author's witness of the negative and destructive effects of the western neocolonial and missionary efforts in the South American rain forest.

Melissa E. Barth further develops Matthiessen's engagement in environmental and ethical issues. According to Barth, Matthiessen attempts to make readers aware of the effects of bringing the modern age into the lives of indigenous people in, for instance, South America (Barth). Hazel Quarrier's behavior helps to facilitate the understanding of the near ludicrous attempts in civilizing a people according to fundamental and puritanical norms. The indigenous people in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* will not benefit from Hazel's attempt to hide their nakedness but rather lose their innocence. Nakedness, according to the Holy Bible, is not a sin until innocence is lost: "And he [the Lord] said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?' The man said, 'The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it'" (Gen. 3.11-12). Hazel Quarrier's strict view of morality keeps her closeted from both the civilized and the natural world.

As a result of this seclusion, mental collapse is the only possible outcome for Hazel Quarrier as she herself is her own antagonist. She has lost both her son and her husband. She is no longer a missionary wife, no longer a mother. Although Hazel Quarrier survives physically, her mental collapse is absolute and incontrovertible. Hazel's character and her downward journey into the depths of insanity are instrumental in exposing the destructive effects of imperialistic and religious attempts to subdue a perceived primitive culture. Through Hazel Quarrier's eyes, western neocolonialism shows its true, dull color scheme. Her predicament must be interpreted as the universal degeneration of mankind when ethnocentric, expansionist beliefs are unleashed. Hazel Quarrier's destruction serves as the key metaphor for the irreversible disequilibrium and entropy of colliding cultures and people due to religious, cultural, and philosophical proselytism.

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