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Relationships Defining Us: *Sweetland*

In the novel *Sweetland* Michael Crummey tells a story of a man who resists leaving his island home to the extent that he stays behind when everyone else has abandoned it, attempting to fend for himself. Sweetland, the main character of the book, is forced to confront the necessity of community. He discovers that he cannot live without community, the island, and his family. The novel outlines the importance of relationships built throughout our lives, how these relationships define who we become, and how they stay with us even after they have terminated.

Sweetland engages with the community as he resists the government's offer for payment to leave the island. Sweetland is the only one holding out against the change, and the community pressures him to accept the deal: "The question I'm supposed to have answered is, What's it going to take to bring you on board?"¹ Sweetland is hesitant to leave for fear of losing the community itself: "His conviction even more firmly anchored as the holdouts dwindled, as if to offset the loss in numbers with a blind certainty".² Eventually Sweetland accepts the offer,³ but changes his mind once his grandnephew dies and is buried on the island.⁴ Sweetland feels that the community he is afraid to leave is buried on the island itself:

He'd been the unofficial custodian of the cemetery for years, mowing and raking the plots and keeping up the fence and straightening headstones tipped by frost heaves. He never named it as a reason for staying behind on the island, though it sat at the back of his mind beside all the other reasons he never articulated. Watching over Jesse's grave.⁵

¹ Michael Crummey, *Sweetland*, (Canada: Anchor Canada, 2015), 48.

² Ibid, 49.

³ Ibid, 135

⁴ Ibid, 156

⁵ Ibid, 203

After everyone leaves the island, we discover that Sweetland he also relies on his community to survive not only physically but emotionally. He is unaccustomed to total silence from human company: “He rationed the use of the radio to save the batteries... He’d never sat inside without that company. ... Even French-language stations from Montreal and St. Pierre he could listen to for hours at a time, just for the impenetrable music of their conversation”.⁶ Without company, Sweetland becomes “blindsided by an apocalyptic loneliness...”.⁷ Near the end of the book, he hallucinates a visit from the Priddle brothers and takes comfort in their presence: “He squeezed Keith’s hand once more and let it loose of his own. And before he knew it, he was gone”.⁸ This interaction helps Sweetland to accept his upcoming death. Sweetland is afraid to leave the island because of losing the connections that are dear to him and he does not allow himself the opportunity to create new relationships and a new community. As a result, he dies alone amidst the ghosts of his past relationships.

Sweetland has an intimate relationship with the island and that relationship defines who he is. He maneuvers the island with skill: “There was a warm spell in the lead-up to St. Patrick’s day that Sweetland didn’t trust for a second”.⁹ He considers the island home, identifies as a resident, and thinks of it as beautiful:

He looked up at the hills surrounding the cove, sunlight making them ring with meltwater. He’d always loved that sound, waited for it each spring. Hearing it made him certain of the place he came from. He’d always felt it was more than enough to wake up

⁶ Ibid, 195-196

⁷ Ibid, 197

⁸ Ibid, 316

⁹ Ibid, 280

here, to look out on these hills. As if he'd long ago been measured and made to the island's exact specifications.¹⁰

However, Sweetland also recognizes that the island may not be objectively beautiful: “‘That’s a beautiful view,’ the government man said. ‘I can see why you don’t want to leave it.’ ‘You didn’t strike me,’ Sweetland said, ‘as an ass-kisser’”.¹¹ Sweetland has only decided to leave the island twice in his life, and both times he has lost something dear to him. The first time he leaves he loses his potential fiancé, his vitality, and half of his face.¹² The second time, when he decides to leave, his grandnephew dies. Sweetland is incapable of leaving and existing in the outside world, not having left the island in years. He ends up staying on the island because he decides that he would not be able to adapt to another location, to the new world:

There was a new world being built around him. Sweetland had heard them talking about it for years on the Fisheries Broadcast- apocalyptic weather, rising sea levels, alterations in the seasons, in the ocean temperatures. Fish migrating north in search of colder water and the dovekeys lost in the landscape they were made for. The generations of instinct they’d relied on to survive here suddenly useless. The birds and their habits being rendered obsolete, Sweetland thought, like the VHS machines and analog televisions dumped on the slope beyond the incinerator. Relics of another time and on their way out.¹³

Sweetland’s decision to stay on the island is a result of his fear of being incapable of having the same connection to another location, feeling that to die alone on the island is preferable to being displaced, and ultimately he takes solace in the remnants of the community that is left behind:

¹⁰ Ibid, 280

¹¹ Ibid, 11

¹² Ibid, 252

¹³ Ibid, 277

“And he was surprised to find he was more or less content with his predicament now, with his place on the abandoned island with Loveless’s little dog and Jesse’s grave”.¹⁴ Sweetland has an important connection to the island, but it is insufficient; his real connection is with the traces of the community.

The dead members of Sweetland’s family still define who he is. The dead remain with him: “He raised his face to the ceiling, fighting the ridiculous sense they were all standing in the darkness beside him, his mother and Ruthie and Hollis. Jesse”.¹⁵ The relationships continue to influence his actions in his life. He celebrates Guy Fawkes day because although “It was pouring rain and cold on the morning of the fifth and it was only the thought of disappointing Jesse that kept him from skipping the event altogether”.¹⁶ Sweetland feels an obligation to remain with his relatives because ““People been fishing here two hundred years of more. I expect my crowd was the first ones on the island””.¹⁷ Sweetland lives out his last days on the island in an attempt to complete the generational familial ties to the location. He resists leaving his family behind. The death of Sweetland’s brother, Hollis, influences the way that Sweetland decides to be there for Jesse, who is afflicted with a similar condition as Hollis: “Sweetland saw his living brother in that expression, the look that came over him when he was buried in some story in the old school reader or hauling at the oars beside him on their way to check the traps in their father’s coat. Blank but animate”.¹⁸ Sweetland regrets his inability to save Hollis: “woke from a dream of Hollis staring at him through cold fathoms of water, the white of his face fading as he sank down and swiftly down and no way of God’s earth to reach him”.¹⁹ Because of this regret, Sweetland

¹⁴ Ibid, 243

¹⁵ Ibid, 202

¹⁶ Ibid, 212

¹⁷ Ibid, 9

¹⁸ Ibid, 308

¹⁹ Ibid, 153

is unwilling to leave Jesse's body in the water: "Jesse's body rolling in the same swell, his hair wet and plastered to his dead face. Sweetland pitched the grapple toward his underhanded as the sea receded and he came up short. He hauled the grapple in and pitched... 'I'm not leaving him here'".²⁰ Even though Ruthie has died, Sweetland is still affected by his relationship with her and the strain that their relationship had manifests itself in the relationship that Sweetland has with Clara. The conflicts that Sweetland and Clara have mirror the ones that Sweetland had with his sister: "Clara laid a hand across her eyes and there was her mother, Sweetland thought. Clara had almost nothing else of Ruth in her, but that subtle gesture of exhaustion or anxiety or annoyance was Sweetland's sister to a T"²¹. This mirroring suggests that Sweetland's past relationships are affecting his current and future ones, as well as his actions. Each death seems to further paralyze Sweetland and prevent him from moving forward. The death of Sweetland's mother also makes him afraid to let go of relationships and move forward: "Mother, he said, but she was already asleep. And dying among strangers, for all he tried to save her from it".²² In his attempt to hold onto past relationships, Sweetland loses his relationships and dies among strangers, just like his mother. "Sweetland anonymous among that congregation. He felt of a sudden like singing".²³

There is a sense of the uncanny in the ending. Among the congregation that Sweetland joins are the living, like Reet: "A squat form in rubber boots just ahead of him, a shapeless gansey sweater swaying almost to the woman's knees".²⁴ In the congregation are also the dead like Jesse: "A boy brushed past him as he hesitated and Sweetland almost called out, thinking he recognized the child by the seashell whorls of a double crown, a rogue lick of hair".²⁵ We are

²⁰ Ibid, 155

²¹ Ibid, 27

²² Ibid, 228

²³ Ibid, 318

²⁴ Ibid, 318

²⁵ Ibid, 318

able to recognize the people in the congregation but Sweetland himself is unable to. Because of this ignorance, Sweetland is able to find his place because he is no longer hindered by past relationships. In the shock of not being able to recognize he finally sheds his inhibitions: he is free to be anonymous and thus accepts the change of leaving the island. He sheds the individuality that the island provides and embraces the anonymity that the mainland requires.

Sweetland outlines the fear of losing one's place in the world in the face of great change, and follows one man as he attempts to maneuver this challenge. Sweetland, as the main character in the novel, chooses not to leave the island with the rest of the community because he is afraid to lose the connections built on that island, because he does not believe he is capable of cultivating the same connection to the land somewhere else, and because he is reluctant of leaving those who are buried on the island. In the end, Sweetland finds that community is what creates a place in the world and without his community loses his connection to those that once lived on the island, to the island itself, and to those buried there. In his final moments this becomes clear as he 'joins the community of the dead' and once again feels as though he has found his place in the world.

Bibliography:

Crummey, Michael. *Sweetland*. Canada: Anchor Canada, 2015.