
MISADVENTURE REGAINS HUMAN QUALITIES FOR SURVIVAL IS EMPHASISED IN THE BIRTHDAY BOYS BY BERYL BAINBRIDGE

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of human endeavours at times leads to their failures. Their efforts and trails to become successful is noteworthy. The novel The Birthday boys is a novel of perseverance. Here the author Beryl Bainbridge fictionalized the historical incidents of Antarctic Expedition in 1912. There were probably many such expeditions to the pole than what is popularly mentioned in the historical records. All expeditions to the pole during this era were predestined. The early expeditions were human centred, they even trusted in their fortune. Modern technology has altered the possibility of survival at the Polar Regions though it is incredibly difficult. The title The Birthday boys refers Robert Falcon Scott and his four companions. Each one narrates their experiences and confronts as a section of the book. This novel was a sad tale about an unfortunate voyage. Captain Scott's heartbreaking trek becomes an unforgettable historical event in this remarkable novel. Till the end of the novel, the crew members' hope and determination is unbelievable that touches the readers strongly. Even in the hard periods their mutual recognition and motivation help them to drag each others. Sturdy characters, reasonable situations and a well researched unreal account of a real event with an exploration of the psychological effects the doomed crew of Scott's expedition experienced on their final journey to the top of the world.

Keywords: *Antarctic, expeditions, fortune, historical and voyage.*

Postmodern literature is the literature characterized by trust on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the defective narrator. This is accepted as a style or an inclination which emerged in the post-World War II era. Both modern and postmodern literatures represent a turning point in 19th century realism. These two literatures analyse subjectivism and give importance to inner state of consciousness especially in character development. The major modernist examples can be witnessed in the "stream of consciousness" styles of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, or explorative poems like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. According to the literary theorist Keith Hopper, *The Third Policeman* written by Flann O'Brien is regarded as one of the first of

introducing the genre called the postmodern novel. Dame Beryl Bainbridge's books proved the style of post modernism in many of its features. In *The Birthday boys*, the five different tales told by each explorer differ greatly and makes the readers to distinguish the 'fact' and 'fiction'. The search of truth from the historical events confirms this novel as the postmodern one.

Historical fiction comes to renown in Europe during the early 19th century as the branch of the Romantic reaction to bring change. The Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott, influenced this genre, whose works were extraordinarily admired throughout Europe. Historical fiction is a special literary genre in which the plot takes place in the past. *The Birthday boys* are a historical fiction as it covers the incidents that happened in the Polar region exploration of Sir Falcon Scott, in 1912.

Dame Beryl Bainbridge was born on 21st November 1934 in Lancashire. She was educated at Merchant Taylors' School in Liverpool and initially worked as an actress at Liverpool Repertory Theatre. She was awarded a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) in 2000. Bainbridge's novels can be classified into two divisions. Before the 1990s she adapted her autobiographical details and exposes her life at Liverpool. Her first novel, *Harriet Said*, though it was written in 1950's it was not published until 1972. *A Weekend with Claud*, was her first published novel, appeared in 1967, and then she wrote many successful novels like *Another Part of the Wood* (1968), and *The Dressmaker* (1973), modified as a film in 1989. *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974) won the *Guardian Fiction Prize* and *Injury Time* (1977) won the *Whitbread Novel Award*. *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989) shared her experiences as an actress working in Liverpool during the 1950s and was tailored as a film. Her latest novels were based on real incidents and historical facts, including *The Birthday Boys* (1991), the story of Captain Falcon Scott's disastrous Antarctic expedition; *Every Man For Himself* (1996), portrays the sinking *Titanic* and the experiences of on board passengers; and *Master Georgie* (1998), narrating a young surgeon's adventures during the Crimean War. *According to Queeney* is a fictional account covers the last 20 years of Samuel Johnson's life, from 1764-84 and his friend Mrs Thrale. *Every Man for Himself* won the *Whitbread Novel Award* and *Master Georgie* won the *James Tait Black Memorial Prize*, the *WH Smith Literary Award* and was shortlisted for the *Booker Prize for Fiction*. Her recent novel *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress* was published in 2008. Her books were based on people's sufferings and various noticeable events so she received her success. She was nominated five times for *Booker Prize* and won *Whitbread award* twice. *The Times* included Bainbridge on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945". She was referred as "a national treasure" in 2007.

The Birthday boys are a historical novel and it is the fourteenth novel of Beryl Bainbridge. This novel was published in the year 1991 and it presents the fatal end of the British naval officer Sir Falcon Scott along with his four other companions. Sir Scott with his crew members went to explore the South Pole in the year 1910. This plot describes their return journey even after knowing their attempt as a failure one because Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen succeeded as the first person to reach the South Pole.

The real source to this work is the different entries of the five explorers like the diary entries, their personal letters and personal accounts of one of the survivors Apsley

Cherry-Garrard. The significance of the title comes from the suggestion of one of the crew members for celebrating each one's birthday in the middle of the fatal days in Antarctica. This idea throws the youthful light on each character of Bainbridge. Heroism of each character in this novel represents the surface of British society and reflects the reality of human personality. The plot begins with their voyage in June 1910. They began their journey from Cardiff on the Terra Nova and finished with the terrible journey by sled back to the ship in March 1912. It was the celebrated journey by Sir Scott to Antarctica. Actually, it was Scott's second visit to the South Pole. The five explorers enumerate the experience of their journey in an emotional as well as physical landscape. Initially, it was a journey of pride but unfortunately that came to an end with high disappointment. The book has five sections; each section is narrated by each individual like a monologue. The crew members are Petty Officer Edgar (Taff) Evans, Dr. Edward (Uncle Bill) Wilson, Lieut. Henry Robertson (Birdie) Bowers, Titus Oates and Scott himself.

The crew members begin the expedition with high expectations but they were depressed by Amundsen. Disheartened and agonized explorers placed a Union Jack on the spot and took photograph then returned home. The plot discusses the misadventure the explorers met on their way back, especially the dreadful cold they suffer. In the first chapter Petty Officer Edgar "Taff" Evans, informs the readers about the reality of cold as,

To be cold is when the temperature sinks to -60 degree F and the mercury freezes in the thermometer. Petrol won't burn... and ever an Eskimo dog can't work, because its lungs will stop functioning....To be cold is when the snot freezes in your nostrils and your breath snaps like a fire-cracker on the air and falls to ice in your beard Evans says, recalling an earlier trip to Antarctica. (1991:9)

On their return journey, they thrashed by snowstorm and incapacitated by waning supplies they all died slowly, devastatingly and some would say disastrously. Bainbridge wins the favour of the readers by elaborating the tragic flaw behind the unsuccessful expedition. The first reason is they received inadequate fund. With that fund they arranged a ship of poor quality which was not sea worthy and it was leaking before its destination. It proves the lack of planning and poor leadership are the major causes for the disaster. The plot also describes the improper preparations are the cause for the failure. They decided to visit Antarctica without acknowledging the temperature. The reason for failure is the motorized machines used by Scott were ceased in the snow. Scott's worst decision of using ponies rather than sledge dogs were remained the second cause for failure. Scott's opinion about the use of dogs,

They were twisting on their traces for hour or more, and some undoubtedly suffered internal injuries. Even while they dangled, howling in agony, they still continued to bite and tear at one another. Such uncivilized behaviour went some way towards dulling compassion for their plight. (1991:100)

Ponies collapsed in the severe cold and couldn't support the explorers to carry the goods. The explorers were compelled to shot the ponies at last. Scott as the leader of the expedition insisted the men to do a march. The men carried the sledges instead of animals made them exhausted. In one particular section Lt. Bowers, a scientist, leads a

small group to collect some emperor penguin eggs and endures horrendous troubles. "It may be that the purpose of the worst journey in the world had been to collect eggs which might prove a scientific theory, but we had unraveled a far greater mystery on the way – the missing link between God and man is brotherly love." (1991:158)

The members of the expedition rely on the leadership of Scott to survive under those conditions. Scott, though brave and conscientious seems unequal to the task. The emotional lives and complex relationships of these five men are beautifully rendered with passages illuminated by the spiritual and pensive musings of each individual. Scott seems highly successful in hiding his fears and anxieties in the worst condition, but soon gets mentally dispirited and depressed. Each member had a kind of protective love for Scott, Capt Oates writes,

I still couldn't fathom why he had been so stupid as to disregard the overwhelming opinion that dogs were the only form of Antarctic transport. I still thought he was a poor leader of men in military sense, meaning he hadn't given enough attention to, strengths, capacity, terrain, superiority of the enemy... his heart was too big for his boots. (1991: 185)

The plot describes the sorrowful days spent together by the five men at the final stage. But the readers can witness the courage, loyalty and brotherly love from all these characters. The novel wins the sympathy for the unlucky explorers; they came with more excitement on scenic beauty and scientific discoveries. The four men decomposed along with Scott suffered frigid weather and miserable conditions of Antarctica and later they become aware of the callous certainty of their firm deaths. It is a difficult task to re-create disheartened and distressed lives of people, but the writer succeeds in conveying those feeling in an applauding manner. All the five men died at the end of the journey when they returned from the South Pole in 1912.

The novel clearly portrays Scott's unrealistic self confidence during the passage of trek, the crew members' faithful relationship and each ones trust on Scott. It is really noteworthy that Bainbridge's portrayal of characters, though it is a familiar plot, made the work outstanding. The novel focuses the powerlessness of human actions before the nature. The constant theme of Bainbridge's novels is the volatility of future and that is employed in the present novel too. Even in such situation the explorers behave with excellent kindness towards one another. It is noteworthy that their compassion and humanity increase, when their chances for survival decrease. Death comes in silence before the characters could partially realise it. They greet each other before realising their end.

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