

# Melancholy, Water, and an Internal Struggle in the Poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott

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**Abstract:** This essay's goal is to examine the intrinsic beauty within the emotional and melancholy poetry of poet Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott's poetry captures the essences of loneliness and solitude, extracting from both a subliminal beauty that is bound in the pleasant and captivating rhythm of water. Scott's focus is predominantly on the unassuming splendor of nature, and the partnership between it and humanity. The three poems of interest are "The Piper of Arll", "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon", and "At Scarboro' Beach". Each piece is centered around water, finding within it replenishment, solace, or simply using it as a source of comfort; a comfort that, unfortunately, cannot be found in the presence of another human being.

Poetry is the final product of infinite characteristics, some of which are identifiable, and yet others, which are not common, cannot be defined; combined, they arouse sensations, create sublime and picturesque images, and evoke an emotional response as they play with the reader's state of mind. Poetry is comprised of various levels of art, imagination, beauty, and mystery, revealed in fragments but never fully disclosed. Many pieces of poetry offer a range of poetic devices, images, and significant themes, and yet a certain amount of discovery is designated for the reader's individual interpretation. The power in the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott lies in his noted ability to identify deep longing, melancholy and the polarities of security and freedom, specifically in "The Piper of Arll", "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon," and "At Scarboro' Beach". The earth is laden with sublime magnificence, and an abundance of life. Beauty is present especially in nature, which is Scott's predominant focus. The collection of Scott's work reveals a great interest in the complexity of an escape from the mundane world and suggests that perhaps there is a possibility for the completion of the self through transcending expression, such as song. This liberation, however, requires a return to the familiar, where one is most securely attached and at ease.

In "The Piper of Arll", the consistency of Scott's song-like rhyme scheme romanticizes the familiar beauty of the sea for anyone who has ever had the pleasure of experiencing its serene qualities. The little cove that the lone piper calls home is an embodiment of perfection, and yet, he suffers within himself. He suffers from weariness, lack of human love, and "longed-for death" (36), and the solemnity of Scott's poem is reminiscent of a melody, rising from "God's ocean, clear and deep" (16) to offer him solace. Although his surroundings are blissful, and a place "one would love, / [i]f he were longing for the sea" (3-4), the piper is no longer satisfied, nor is he content; he wallows in sorrow, for he lives in complete solitude. He is overwhelmed with the self, and yearns for the other to complete him. His only companion is music, which effectively carries his melancholy and "tranquil melody" (35) over the water. The song he plays is familiar to him, and not until he hears the "alien song" (42) from a nearby ship does he truly consider an escape from his own life. His escape would enable him to familiarize himself with the temporary desertion of what seems to be a permanence of self in the life he lives.

Scott tells the story of a man who is disheartened by the ordinary and desires a release. This desire is fuelled by the knowledge

that humans are social beings who require social interaction and companionship; there is little pleasure and meaning to a life that is spent in solitude. Not only is the piper undergoing an intense longing, but the sailors on the ship in the distance are melancholy as well. They sing their own tunes of lamentation which express their "longing...of home" (32). The sailors must endure a similar struggle as the piper in that they are stranded at sea, surrounded by the lonely lapping of the waves which cannot fully console their aching misery. Interestingly, even though the sailors feel alone, they share their heartache collectively as a group, while the piper endures his pain alone. Also, it is remarkable that the piper seems to be longing for home, when, really, he is at home throughout Scott's poem. Scott is referring to the intense disassociation with oneself when one is forced to deal with a "broken will" (76) and dejected spirit. The piper cannot even appropriately communicate his distress while his "lips [move in] desperate speech" (63) he is inaudible over the sound of the sea's "eerie tune" (40). The sea is a temptress that attempts to erase all previous thoughts and memories. The sailors can neither cry nor move in its presence, for "[t]hey [feel] the lure from the charmed sea" (114). Unbelievably, the sailor's thoughts of love and home "or any pleasant land to be" (116) are erased by the gentle, hypnotic cadence of constantly moving water.

The poem itself is like the song. The piper plays on his pipe to keep himself company, filling his emptiness with melodies. The melodies trail across the sounds and smells of the sea, maintaining a constant rhythm that is never monotonous, but unusually soothing and inviting. The piper himself appears to be almost uncivilized when compared to the sailors on the ship; he sleeps "upon the beach" (47) while the sailors "[slumber] round the mast" (48). Although he seems to cope well without any real luxuries, the piper's sorrowful tune reveals the true emptiness in his soul. His outer appearance is that of any common man, but in reality he possesses the magnificence of the "lost prince of a diadem" (156). Scott is able to extract the beauty in things not immediately considered so. He persuades the reader that the sinking of the massive ship, containing both the sailors and the piper, is sublime in its own right. Scott uses a variety of colours to indicate the dual nature of his poetry; the fear in the eyes of the men "[throwing] their faces to the sky" (130) is "ruby in the green" (145). The ship is becoming a part of the "purple heart" (143) of the sea. Scott effectively pairs the rhythmical quality of water with

the melancholy pace of song to highlight the struggle between secure loneliness and the desire to escape it.

The theme of yearning and the desire to extend the self in order to enter another realm is evident in another of Scott's poems entitled "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon". This transcendentalism is either for either purposes of excitement, connecting with a world that is beyond one's physical reach, or for mere purposes of fulfillment. There is a penetrable eeriness to the "dark mainland" (1), where "shadows mingle" (2) with the melody of hymns being sung. The melancholy "hymns of the churches" (3) deepen the sentiments of longing and sadness in Scott's poem. Again, as in "The Piper of Arll", the somber mood is underscored with the inherent duality in nature. The water's serene qualities, although still and tranquil, emit a haunting tone that is balanced with the soothing rhythm of the hymns. Moreover, the approach of the booming thunder in the distance instills fear and unpredictability as "one after one the stars and the beaming planets...vanish" (6-8). Nature holds captive the symbols of peace, erasing their existence to display its own glorious authority. The forthcoming storm makes its notorious presence known by rippling the previously still black water, and "[gathering] her voice in the quiet" (10). Scott personifies the thunder, giving it a human-like superiority, voice, and priority over other natural elements. The only method of dealing with its wildness is through song.

Humanity is forced to assemble and sing ancient hymns in order to "triumph...and comfort" (19) before the face of the storm. The people of Nipigon gather to sing "O Come All Ye Faithful", or "Adeste Fideles" (20), the original Latin title for the well-known Christmas carol. Their faith is preserved through religious hymns that dispel the "uncouth and mournful" (24) past. The struggle to emerge from a time when "faith brood[s] in darkness" (21) is symbolized by the dove that travels in a circular path to help in the reaffirmation and renewal of the people's faith and religion. The dove's circular journey itself possesses a musical strength in "[e]ach long cadence" (29) of its wings. The coupling of light and dark imagery, light being the dove and dark being the storm and shadows, is provocative in that it arouses the senses through tangible and believable representations. The real and natural worlds unite when the oars of the boat dip into the water, "[f]alling in rhythm, timed with the liquid" (26) harmony of the dark lake. The quietude is broken with the gurgling movements of the water that is stirred, and in a way, invaded by the onslaught of human action. The longing in Scott's poem is for silence, and the storm's quick departure offers lake Nipigon to "falter / [b]ack into quiet" (35-6). Nature's sudden uproar is directly parallels its ability to harness complete silence. The duality demonstrates the struggle within nature and its polar ends, which are never satisfied, but remain in constant disagreement. Scott's "Night Hymns on lake Nipigon" tells the tale of how "wild nature stirs" (33) the still and mundane world into a frenzy, overtaking control and demanding attention. One method of harnessing its ferocity is through collective singing, singing that trails over the water and encounters the thunderous storm face-to-face.

Scott reveals the harsh reality about the possibility that there may be no return after one chooses to vacate Scarboro' Beach. In another of Scott's pieces, appropriately titled "At Scarboro' Beach," he plays with the tranquil sea's ability to lure people away and consequently, never return them home. The sails of each ship are "[v]anishing one by one" (4), the wind helping the ships rob the people from the port of Scarboro' Beach, taking them on adventures to unknown destinations. The ships are as sure as its

passengers that a return home is certain, but are not aware that in reality, they "[m]ay never come home again" (8). The sadness of leaving port, a destination where land and sea meet, arouses an inexplicable sorrow. Yet, the exploration of beauty contained within and beyond the water's surface is a quest that merits one's high spirits and eagerness. The brilliance of the sun in this piece is welcoming, and gives the water an approachable component. This poem is reminiscent of an internal struggle to remain a part of the secure and familiar land, while another part of the self longs for liberation.

The sea described in this poem is not as dark and mysterious as the sea in "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon"; instead, it is depicted as "careless and grand" (12), even though there is a shadow on the land, attempting to cast a shadow over the "sea in the splendid sun" (11). The sea maintains a pleasant disposition, and is inviting; but of course, this happiness is short-lived when the fear of losing the interest of those departing is heartbreaking. It is both the taste of freedom and the unwillingness to return to the ordinary that makes the sea responsible for creating boundaries, literal and figurative, between people. Water itself is in command of emotion; it either demands wonder and amazement, or fear and uncertainty. It allows for discovery as well as loss, and the "sandpipers" (13), who are ready to "mount and fly" (14), approach the waters with a timid cry, less certain of what their voyages have in store for them. Scott's approach in this particular poem is to create a contemplative atmosphere in which doubts around travel arise. It is the state of uncertainty and hesitation and the doubts behind leaving one's life in the hands of the "treacherous main" (18) ahead. The open waters withhold the answers to one's fate, and the thought that it may possibly reveal the truth seems frightening. The overall assurance that the water is harmless is central to the poem, and Scott's ability to create a poem with the rhythmical movement of soothing waves emphasizes its realism. Pipe music is played on the beach as the ships sail into the distance, the melodies carrying the massive vessels to their unknown destinies. The music concludes this poem with a musical farewell that may be considered joyful, or alternately, laden with hopelessness.

Duncan Campbell Scott's poetry captures destructiveness, beauty, and mystery through the melancholy and rhythm of water and the natural world. The struggle of humanity is based in the knowledge that by remaining rooted on land, where there is an abundance of security and a personal connection, the self does not develop nor achieve a true sense of liberation. Through such poems as "The Piper of Arll", "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon", and "At Scarboro' Beach", Scott persuasively asserts the importance of self discovery through the connection between freedom and music, proving that the transcending power of song can liberate the soul and direct an advanced learning experience for humanity.

### Works Cited

Scott, Duncan Campbell. "At Scarboro' Beach", "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon", "The Piper of Arll". *A Northern Romanticism: Poets of the Confederation*. Ed. Tracy Ware. Canadian Critical Edition. Ottawa: The Tecumseh Press Ltd. 2000.