

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUFFERING: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF H.E. BATES'S SHORT STORIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO 'THE OX'

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**Abstract:** Herbert Ernest Bates was a prolific author who enjoyed several phases of popularity during his lifetime. He initially garnered critical attention in the late 1920s with novels and short stories set in the rural English midlands. In these works Bates employed pastoral imagery and a lush prose style to vividly evoke mood and atmosphere while focusing on ordinary yet significant events in the lives of his characters. During World War II, Bates was commissioned Royal Air Force to write about the experiences of fighter pilot, leading to a series of esteemed short stories that examine effects of war on soldiers and civilians. Later in his career Bates returned to rural settings and themes, frequently depicting poignant incidents in the lives of children or elderly characters. Among his most popular later works are those which feature protagonists who vigorously pursue the sensual pleasures of life and nature. Bates also wrote *The Modern Short Story*, a respected literary study of short fiction. Bates is perhaps best known for his short stories, particularly those written during the late 1920s and 1930s and collected in several volumes, including *Day's End*, and *Other Stories* and *Seven Tales* and *Alexander*. The setting of these early works, noted V.S. Pritchett, "*was usually the traditional life of the small farms, cottages and holdings, his people the hedgers ditchers thatchers and local carriers—a horse-and-cart England in the main, the England of rural haggling and feelings which had changed very little for centuries and often sounds Chaucerian and ripe in speech.*" Critics have frequently compared his early stories to the works of Anton Chekhov, citing their minimal plot lines, thematic emphasis on everyday activities, and lucid evocation of atmosphere and emotions.

**Keywords:** Royal Air Force, Several Phases of Popularity, Psychology of Suffering.

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## The Psychology Of Suffering: A Critical Evaluation of H.E. Bates's Short Stories with Special Reference to 'The Ox'

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws,  
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"

(*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T.S. Eliot)

In Eliot's voice, we hear the cry of the anguished soul that "*hast nor youth nor age*" but endures like a beast of burden, bearing the pain of existence that is prolonged beyond all possible endurance. Like the quintessential beast of burden, weighed upon by heaviness, man's perpetual toil only consumes him in sharp distress. The mariners in *The Lotus Eater* harbour similar regrets. But man's Swadharma is in his selfless toil of life that alone can secure for him the law of his own being.

It is this transcendental vision of life that the theme of the story The Ox reflects, as the characters lumber through life like the ox, carrying their burdens of agony, of dreams and hope and of the self. Bates attempts to ordain even this ox-like existence with dignity of purpose, with a knowledge of the self that is human. As he makes us listen to the voice of the real English countryside, we hear, amidst still and windless air, that “*echo of a dream breathe.*” This is the “*dim breathe*” of humanity, that lies “*Exposed and isolated, the wind striking at it from all quarters.*” It is also the landscape that accommodates Mr. Thurlow’s struggle to bear the vestiges of his self esteem, Mrs. Thurlow’s brother’s burden of being childless and finally Mrs. Thurlow’s sons who are ironically burdened by the name of their own class that their mother embodies. The strain of complete human desolation that runs throughout the story is found most profoundly in Mrs. Thurlow.

Bates reveals the psychology of suffering with poignant sensitivity. Mrs. Thurlow is perhaps the only character who remains the “ox” throughout, carrying with her, the dream for her soul, the concerns for her uncaring husband and finally, the burden of nothingness, that man is left with when all desires are thwarted; her obsession to realize “*refined ambitions*” for her sons, is projected into her obsession for work, which she carries out with Sisyphean monotony- “*At half past seven every morning, Mrs. Thurlow pushed her great rusty bicycle down the hill, at six every morning, she pushed it back.*” H.E. Bates was a poet by nature. His setting was usually the traditional life of the small farms, cottages and holdings, his people the hedgers, ditchers, thatchers and local carries—a horse-and-cart England in the main, the England of rural haggling and feelings which had changed very little for centuries and often sounds Chaucerian and ripe in speech. The readers come to know how his people talk, eat, work, drink, love and die. Their habits had not yet been touched by the industrialization which changed village life after the last war. Bates is interested in people for their own curious sakes.

With a face and body ugly in its angular boniness, she was like a beast of burden, loaded down always with the drudgery of a bleak existence. Yet this sense of purposelessness that hung around such people only strengthens them to reach out into the recesses of their energy. It is the strength of existentialism that compels all man to carry on even in the face of all hostilities. For even in the suffering, is the compulsive need for self-preservation that is the crux of existentialism. And thus exists Mrs. Thurlow, preserving herself in the future dreams of her children.

It is the same concern for self-preservation that drives her apparently insensitive husband, Mr. Thurlow. He had his own creed to bear. It was the plate in his head, the basis of his survival instinct- “*I didn’t ought to stoop, he would declare*” as he lives in the solid hollowness and devastation of emotions that the war had inflicted. At this point, Bates with poignant sensitivity, pictures a tormented soul in the aftermath of the Great War. Mr. Thurlow’s burden is in his surviving, in staring down at a personal abyss of solitude. Dean R. Baldwin in his essay H.E. Bates, A Critical Life (1987) comments that for writers in general and Bates in particular, time seemed suspended, unreal. Many writers like Graham Greene to Somerset Maugham had already joined or would be joining some branches of the army services. And as Bates waited for his turn, he spent his time compiling the Modern Short Stories. The News Chronicles hailed the stories as “*Capturing the spirit and character of the R.A.F.*” The shadow of war and the general disillusionment it produces plays its part in the character of Mr. Thurlow. During World War II, Bates was commissioned by the British Royal Air Force to chronicle the heroic exploits of fighter pilots in the Allied war effort. Bates received basic officer’s training in the fall of 1941 and was assigned to a series of airbases where he gathered accounts from British aviators about their combat experiences. Using the pseudonym Flying Officer X “for service reasons,” Bates published short stories based on these anecdotes in the British News Chronicle and later collected these pieces in such volumes as The Greatest People in the World and Other Stories, There’s Something in the Air, and How Sleep the Brave, and Other Stories.

Following World War II, Bates returned to rural concerns in several volumes of short fiction, including Other Stories, The Watercross Girl, and Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal. Set in the English Midlands, the pieces in these collections often focus on children or the elderly and frequently examine the effects of World War II and modernization as their way of life. Colonel Julian, for example, depicts the disillusionment of a retired British Army officer once stationed in colonial India who learns of the horrors of modern warfare from a group of World War II aviators.

Mrs. Thurlow’s brother did not have to carry the burden of his sister’s life, but his “clean painted existence” was without a legacy to invest himself into. Once again, Bates projects the character of an ox-like dimension, one who carries within

him, the pathetic emptiness of childlessness. On the surface, stories by H.E. Bates seem extremely conventional and straightforward. Readers instantly recognize the influence of Chekhov in his technique of building stories out of trifling events and suggestion rather than through dramatic plot; in the rural stories of the 1930's particularly. Bates seldom deals in complex characters or subtle psychology; his people are drawn from the lower social and economic strata where feeling and impulse dominate, thought has little subtlety, and ideas are few. The young, the inarticulate, and the innocent are the usual subjects of his stories. His plots are similarly straightforward and direct: a fall from innocence or the eternal love triangles are at the center of a great number of his stories which are spun out with few complications and a minimum of elaboration. Complexities of emotion rather than of plot or character are his trademark, and he almost never ventures into political commentary, social criticism, or abstract ideas. The interactions of people with one another and their immediate, natural environment are the focus of his interest. By and large their substance derives from his handling of atmosphere; the intricate interplay of mood and scene in relation to character and event is the basis of Bates's considerable art as a short story writer.

The likes of Thurlow provide us with another dimension of the burden that Mrs. Thurlow has to carry, along with a constantly lurking premonition of a destruction of all hopes. Even in Mrs. Thurlow's dreams, her unconscious anxiety takes a visual form. Thurlow's bill hook replaces the handlebar of her bicycle; signifying the bleeding away of her dreams into a colourless death. It was a conflict that created a division in her- "the one part solid and uncompromising in perpetual labour", keen to escape the consciousness of her own pathetic existence; the other self "Anxious to establish a world beyond her own", intent on playing destiny to her two sons. Her obsession became her hubris, salvation and paradoxical peace, the peace that ironically sustains us in our emotionless existence.

But hope, that "fowl deceitful thing continues to burden upon the emotions of those living. When the loss of both Thurlow and the money aroused in her no signs of emotions, the central core of optimism moved her to a decision. It was a decision that ironically moved her away from her identity of an ox, leaving her with the vast shadow of herself, totally embalmed in the world of pure white silence of sorrow. It was the sorrow of the betrayal of her two sons, as they proceeded from despairing her to disowning her in favor of their uncle's promise of a future.

In one swift stroke of fate, all our hopes and dreams lie devastated, in one moment; the wanton gods disapprove all human efforts and we are left staring at the naked skeletons of our own selves. Mrs. Thurlow is now left exposed to the secret of this truth, that no branches can grow out of the "stony rubbish" (Eliot) that life is. She now has to carry the burden of being a human. Her "crushed core of optimism and faith" fails to share a single fragment of life. "lumbering painfully", she is now an 'ox' directed into motion without mission like the "Ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots" (Preludes, Eliot); like the unfortunate sufferer who has to bear her own cross.

L.P. Hartley in his essay dated 1923 comments, *"It is a sheer joy to see him striding over, as if they did not exist, the ordinary obstacles that present themselves to the pedestrian novelist. He has a genius for selection and putting down simply the things the snatch at his interest. He has no technical resources; he often uses ugly clumsy words like "saddened," and his sense of humour is very fitful."*

They are stories without plot, vessels made to hold each a moment of emotion and all its overtones. Bates's method is much like that of Katherine Mansfield; he takes a single incident and so records its implications that it stirs the reader with vague feelings for which there is no name, not quite pity, not quite admiration, not quite recognition, not quite surprise, and yet partaking of all of these. And all of them recapture to a remarkable degree a directness of view and indiscriminating interest in everything. Greene notes the influence of the Russian writer Anton Chekhov on Bates's works and praises the stories collected in *The Woman Who Had Imagination*. Greene in his 1934 essay comments that *"The short story in England has suffered from the complete absence of any tradition. With the exception of Henry James, no writer of importance, until a few years ago, (Bates) had given his full time to a consideration of its technique."*

Mr. Bates's primary concern is, like Miss Bowen's, the *"problem of human unknowingness,"* (William Peden, essay dated 1952) and one might say that collectively his stories constitute an anatomy of loneliness. Though admirably varied in subject matter, they are essentially somber in tone. With loneliness their destiny, the characters wander like ghosts through the dry rot of a crumbling manor house or decaying farmhouse, their voices unheard above the sound of the restless sea or lost among the orderly tea rows of an Indian plantation. Some like, the masculine young woman of A Girl Named Peter, are denied love because of physical or emotional traits over which they can exercise little if any control.

Others, like the lovers of The Lighthouse, are frustrated by custom and tradition and social mores, still others by fear, or stupidity, or by the sheer perversity of things as they are like Mrs. Thurlow in the or still others struggle to achieve an inevitable defeat. Or, like the protagonist of The Frontier, they merely give up.

They are not, however, ignoble, and long after their fate has been settled, they linger disturbingly in the reader's mind. Mr. Bates avoids the sensational or the melodramatic; thought an unerring selection of the exact gesture or thought or act or incident, he reveals the very essence of his character's thwarted personalities.

Milton Rugoff in a 1952 essay comment that in the short stories of H.E. Bates, *"the main characters are groping for love - in flight from frustration or trapped by it. A few abandon themselves to desire, but rarely without a sense of guilt; the others can find no release and wither in unfulfillment."* As through a magnifying glass Mr. Bates focuses light on their lives until they shoulder and burst into flame or curl up and withdraw. He works deliberately, making masterful use of natural surroundings that are mockingly serene and uninhibited a fine old manor going slowly back to wildness, a tea plantation in the light that falls off Kanchenjunga, a farm at harvest time, and in a Swiss lake. In such landscapes, his characters reach out to each other, some timidly, some boldly, a few to snatch hasty consummation, most to be thwarted and rejected. The breakdown of human relations and the subsequent sterility of response it breeds also form the core structure of the short story The Ox.

In each of these stories Mr. Bates tells us so much more than his words actually say. His crises develop ostensibly through an unexpected flowering of love in apparently loveless people or loss of it, but he makes us see (always without stating it explicitly) that these people have been preparing all their lives for this particular moment of personal disaster. In the Thirties, when H. E. Bates was an angry young Englishman, he proclaimed in a brief essay on Hardy and Conrad: *"Morality is virtually a fraud, since there is really no stabilized coinage of morality at all but only the elemental currency of human action and re-action, only human conduct and its consequences"*. Bates was then fighting for a fiction that would display moral judgments not as something obviously superior to, but as something imperceptibly imbedded in the human condition. Throughout his writing career this has remained his central artistic aim. (Irving H. Buchen, essay dated 1961)

The key to Bates's achievement is his lightness of touch. His characters never crowd or crush the reader. They emerge casually, considerately, as if starting off a long distance away and slowly walking toward us. Their problems and conflicts never thunder or crackle noisily; they are treated by Bates with quiet respect, almost with reverence. And yet, our final impression is of an artistic world surprisingly powerful, rich, and full. Equally as important, we find that Bates has granted the same extended breadth to our understanding of human conduct and its moral consequences.

He dwells long and lovingly on things as flowers, plants, trees, birds, sea, sky, everything in short which meets the eye and which the unskilled writer uses as so much window dressing. With Mr. Bates this fault has been made into a virtue. The reader falls upon these lengthy passages like a man athirst.

And then there is the one element which crops up again and again – an obsession with pain. Pain stretched to the breaking point, pain prolonged beyond all seeming endurance. This element is usually called forth in connection with heroic behavior. Perhaps it is the supreme mark of the hero, this ability to endure pain. With Mr. Bates it goes beyond the point of the heroic; it carries us into some other dimension. Pain takes on the aspects of space and time, a continuum or perpetuum which one finally question no longer. This element of pain pervades most of his short stories including the character of Mrs. Thurlow in The Ox.

Colin Murry in his essay The Golden Oriole (1962) writes, *"But no matter how much one is made to suffer, one closes his books with a lasting sensation of beauty. And this sense of beauty, it seems to me, is evoked by the author's unswerving acceptance of life. It is this which makes his flowers, trees, birds, skies, whatever it be, different from those of other writers. They are not merely decorative, they are not showily dramatic: they exist, along with his characters, his thoughts, his observations, in a plenum which is spiritual as well as physical."*

As Bates followed a style, similar to that of Chekhov, his careful craftsmanship was infused with a sensitivity to beauty and character that led David Garnett to write that *"his best stories have the extreme delicacy and tenderness of Renoir's Painting"*. Having been read once, some of its stories exist in the mind as pictures, often as still life, as does The Gleaner, probably the most famous of his early stories. Movement in it seem arrested almost to the point of having been frozen.

The impression he creates of stillness, of stasis, seems at times akin to the rendering of a state of trance, as in the late long short story.

The short story is the most memorable form of fiction. It is memorable because it has to tell and ring in every line. It has to be as exact as a sonnet or a ballad. It is, in essence, 'poetic' in its impulse. Also, the short story is very suited to the nervous, glancing habits forced upon us by the hurry of contemporary life, which is so unlike the ruminative life of the nineteenth century when the novel was the dominating form of fiction. In the novel; we lose ourselves; in the shorter thing we find ourselves. All of Bates's short stories fulfill these qualities as V.S. Pritchett seeks in short stories and infact stretches beyond. At the end of the nineteenth century we meet the first outstanding masters of the form in Kipling, Wells, Conrad, James; in artists like Katherine Mansfield, Saki, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, D.H. Lawrence, the Joyce of Dubliners and many others. They have read Maupassant, Chekhov and Turgenev. Their special gift is to catch the crucial moments of a life as it passes. We see people who might have been minor characters in great novels, but now enlarged and brought forward.

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