

# ***Under the Volcano***

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Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry is an emotive and distressing novel about a raging alcoholic who has ruined his marriage and his life. The action opens on Nov 1, 1939 in the small Mexican town of Quauhahuac exactly one year after the death of the English Consul Geoffrey Fermin. This opening chapter is narrated by one of Geoffrey's fellow expats, Jaques Laruelle. In the remaining 11 chapters unfolds the actions one year prior on Nov 1, 1938. Each chapter is narrated by one of the main characters covering 11 hours from about 7AM in the morning until the Consul's death around 6PM that evening. The structure of the novel is deliberate – there are exactly 12 chapters, 12 months have passed between the opening chapter and the remaining 11, and for Lowry the number 12 contained important significance in the Kabbalah, which for Lowry represented "Spiritual Aspirations".

On the Day of the Dead Nov 1, 1938 we find Geoffrey about 7AM on the tail end of an all night bender when his estranged wife, Yvonne, returns to Quauhahuac to be reunited with her husband. Geoffrey is a former Consul serving in a diplomatic post of sorts. Yvonne left him about a year before (in 1937) to travel in America and though she has written letters to Geoff, those have remained unanswered. These letters will surface in Chapter 12, as the Consul nears his death. The disintegration of their marriage, or more specifically whether it might be salvaged, takes up a central point of tension in the novel. The Consul's drinking is so shockingly out of control, we assume this is the reason the two have been driven apart, but this explanation is perhaps too neat. It is worth noting that Yvonne herself also gets "tight" at several points in the day, and when her letters are read by Geoffrey at the end of the book she never mentions his drinking as the root of their incompatibility. Geoffrey's brother-in-law, Hugh, is the third main character who narrates several chapters. Hugh is also in love with Yvonne further complicating the situation. The action of the day is interrupted by the personal history of each of these characters which serves to create a backdrop that helps orient the reader to the complex emotional web that has led to this point, and to the Consul's drinking.

Lowry's writing is complex. At times the book reminds us of Joyce because the writing is hard to follow, and few details are explained. In Ulysses, Leopold, Molly and Stephen ambulate about Dublin crossing (or almost crossing) paths in a single day. Here the novel unfolds in much the same way with Geoffrey, Hugh, and Yvonne, and though the writing is not as obtuse as Joyce it is far from the simple prose of Hemingway. Like both Joyce and Hemingway, Lowry's work is full of symbolism. The primary leitmotif is death. The action takes place on the Day of the Dead, opens with a funeral procession and ends with the Consul being shot to death. Devils and scorpions punctuate the novel, also representing or reminding us of death. And perhaps the greatest symbols of death, towering over the town are the two volcanoes, around whose summits storm clouds gather throughout the day as Geoffrey approaches his end. In Chapter 8 (about 2PM) Geoffrey, Hugh and Yvonne come across an Indian lying in the road with a wound to his head. A "pelado" on the bus in which they were traveling robs the dying man, while all others stand around, afraid to touch him. Later corrupt police officers (the very ones who will murder Geoffrey in about 5 hours) arrive to drive off the by-standers and steal the remainder of the

Indian's belongings (including his horse branded with the number 7). This single scene was written in 1936 as a short story, and became the kernel around which *Under the Volcano* took shape until it was published in 1945.

The centrality of this scene bridges into another motif in the novel – that of brokenness. In this case it is a broken society in which men are allowed to die rather than receive help from others. It is a twisted retelling of the Good Samaritan, in which all moral fiber is stripped, and evil becomes the rule of the day. This brokenness extends beyond this tiny Mexican town to the world at large. Lowry makes constant reference to the gathering clouds of war in Europe, in particular the Battle of Ebro, which was in progress on Nov 1, 1938 between the Republican and Nationalist combatants in the Spanish Civil War. That conflict is symbolized in the distant sound of artillery shells falling on the slopes of the volcano. The brokenness and separation are also represented in the many clefts and valleys that decorate the landscape of Quauhnahuac. At one point, Hugh refers to one of these deep clefts as Malbolge. Malbolge is Dante's 8<sup>th</sup> circle of hell. I find this telling – The Inferno's moral geography would place alcoholics in higher circles where are punished those guilty of the incontinent sin of Gluttony. But in Malbolge are punished those guilty of simple fraud. The Consul's existence is fraudulent, and his brokenness manifest by drinking.

Geoffrey cannot manage the world in which he lives. He cannot handle marriage and drives away his wife. The irony is, to live he must drink, but to drink is to slip further into self-deception. He seeks to escape his hell by drinking, and in the bottle seeks heaven. In Chapter 11 there is a telling scene in which we read "In how many glasses, how many bottles had he hid himself", followed by a page long list of liquor and mescal brands, concluding with these lines: "How indeed could he hope to find himself, to begin again, when somewhere, perhaps, in one of those lost or broken bottles, in one of those glasses, lay, forever, the solitary clue to his identity?" This wall of glass, white and yellow and green, engender images from Revelation, in which the heavenly city is paved with gems of every color and type. Here is Geoffrey's heaven in which is hidden his identity, but in reality it is a trail of broken glass and pain. What can be more terrible?

As I read this book I realized that many around the table this evening would probably not enjoy it. The story line is too hard to follow, and it's first and most obvious impression is that it is a story about a drunk whose wife has left him, and he's powerless to reconcile with her or wrestle with his demons. But it is not merely a book about drunkenness. It is a book about a broken world in which relationships are hard, and while the soul is willing, the flesh is weak. Whether we drink too much or not, there is a little of Geoffrey in all of us, because we all wrestle with a demon or two. Someone pass me the water pitcher.