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Lights Late to Gleam: A Critical Reading of “Unlighted Lamps” by Sherwood Anderson from a Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract

The American author Sherwood Anderson’s (1876-1941) “Unlighted Lamps” implies metaphorically that the two protagonists, Dr Lester Cochran and his daughter Mary, remain unlighted lamps throughout their eighteen-year coexistence because the element of truth fails to ignite between them enlightenment, mutuality, sympathy, and intimacy. He portrays images of light struggling to emerge through heavy layers of darkness to symbolically demonstrate the grotesque challenges faced by truth in its pervasion in the absence of robust means of communication. This helps to exemplify his philosophy that successful personal relationships work only based on the correct perception of the truth. Dr Cochran’s behaviour that parallels with the Buddhist teachings of reality is too ambiguous to the world around. Therefore, Mary Cochran becomes an eternal victim of scandalous misidentifications and fabrications about her mother made by the rumour-driven Huntersburg community. According to Buddhism, life is circumstantial, all entities, animate or inanimate, are impermanent, and moreover, each moment life changes, and dwelling on histories is meaningless, as everything ends up in being a memory. In that respect, according to Buddhism, Dr Cochran’s equanimity towards his wife Ellen, first as his patient, then as his wife, and later as an individual seeking her freedom, remains intact, as it professes that life is a delusion and one cannot claim or possess anything one encounters in life. Analysing his recluse demeanour from a Buddhist perspective, the paper strives to defend his character from popular misconceptions and justify his behaviour as acceptable based on his frequent exposure to suffering as a conscientious gynaecologist.

Keywords: Conscience, Enlightenment, Equanimity, Impermanence, Renunciation

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INTRODUCTION

Dr Lester Cochran, a 19th-century American gynaecologist was unfortunately misidentified by most inhabitants of Huntersburg as a misogynist for his wife's early separation, a narcissist for his usual reticence, and an eccentric for his shabby clothing and unkempt beard. Based on his wife's separation, the rumour-driven

Huntersburgers' vulgar fabrications rumours about his family where Dr Cochran was characterised as a neurotic, his wife Ellen as a prostitute, and their daughter Mary as a would-be prostitute. Ostracised by the Huntersburg elite, they resided in a frame house in a lower middle-class quarter of the town. Anderson captures the last twenty-four hours of Dr Cochran's life to reveal the reality behind him as a philanthropist committed to reticence with a deep understanding of life achieved during his gynaecological expeditions through constant exposure to women in their grotesque, struggling between life and death in painful labour. Mary learns about his virtues from a labourer and decides to renew her relationship with her father in a new vein of cheerfulness; almost simultaneously as Dr Cochran decides to have a comprehensive conversation with Mary on her mother. Unfortunately, death comes between them and shatters their hopes of interpersonal realisation. The paper attempts to foreground the make of Dr Cochran's attitude to life as a

gynaecologist who has experientially perceived the Buddhist explanations of the delusion of self, the fragility of temptations and mental formations, and the culmination of everything worldly in suffering, and defend his character from criticisms based on the superficial worldview which is often black and white about the complexities in human behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

This study has two main objectives: 1) to demonstrate Anderson's artistry in developing a critical approach to perceiving the circumstantiality of the complicated story line along with the complex story structure built up with prolepses and analepses and with imagery of light struggling to rise through darkness to symbolise the challenge truth faces amidst fabrications and misconceptions; and 2) to identify the virtues of Dr Cochran in terms of analysing and justifying his character and behaviour in harmony with the Buddhist teachings of impermanence, suffering, and soullessness. In achieving these objectives, the study focuses on Dr Cochran's behaviour in the crucial episodes from his life captured in the storyline. There the text is subjected to a thorough discourse analysis and the key exchanges between the characters and the narrative descriptions are pragmatically interpreted. The Buddhist discourses are used in explaining and justifying what appears as absurd against the world view which



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is represented here in the remarks made by the Huntersburgers.

THE STORY STRUCTURE

Sherwood Anderson has woven his short story "Unlighted Lamps" around the Cochran family which consists of the father Dr Lester Cochran, the mother Ellen Cochran, and the daughter Mary Cochran. The story is structured in a trajectory in which the lights of the symbolic unlighted lamps flash across the minds of the two protagonists, Dr Cochran and Mary, while moving in their individual worlds in total physical and psychological isolation. The action is confined to a few hours. But, during these few hours, a history of nearly twenty years is unfolded, revealing to Mary some of the realities behind her father's spiritual nature that she has had no access to all the years of her association with him, and relating to the reader what really happened between Lester and Ellen and how baseless the rumours about Ellen are that have spread all over the township of Huntersburg.

It has five sections: (1) Mary while walking in Upper Main Street recollects the previous evening when her father announced to her of the deadly disease he is suffering from and its possibility to kill him any time and "one of the loungers in the street" Duke Yetter mistakes for a signal of desire her "quick girlish gesture" with which she passes her hand over her eyes in reaction to her father's announcement;

(2) Mary encounters the violent and disorderly behaviour of a lower-class multiethnic community in Wilmott Street on her way "to the decayed old orchard" to meditate on her future and thereafter her contemplation is disturbed by Duke Yetter who has been infatuated with her and has misunderstood that she likes him but gets repulsed by her; (3) Mary, during her return journey, learns a bit about her father's real character as a warm and good-hearted man from a labourer and realises her own fault in not making an attempt to build up a healthy relationship with him; (4) Doctor Cochran recollects the same evening when Mary goes out, how he got married to his wife Ellen, the nature of their relationship, and the way in which they separated from each other, has his last adventure in midwifery and wonders about life and birth and reveals the philosophical way in which he presently feels about himself; (5) Mary arrives at home and recollects how her father was once prevented from revealing the secret of the marriage between him and Mary's mother, a little later Doctor Cochran returns from a medical expedition and dies in his stair case, and Duke Yetter together with another man carries his body into a room back of the office.

ANALEPSES AND PROLEPSES IN ACHIEVING COHERENCE

These sections are knitted together through analepses and prolepses that combine the past, the present, and the



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future. An “analepsis” is “a literary technique that involves interruption of the chronological sequence of events by interjection of events or scenes of earlier occurrence” (Mauney, n.d.) and a “Prolepsis”, “a figure of speech in which a future act or development is represented as if already accomplished or existing” (“Prolepsis”, n.d.). They are called flashbacks and flashforwards as well. At the present in the story what physically happens is very little. With the intention of meditating on her future, Mary walks to the old, decayed garden through Wilmott Street dotted with workmen’s houses. There she encounters people of different nationalities, behaving in a variety of ways. In the meantime, Duke Yetter follows her up to the orchard, without her knowledge and, after being shouted at by her, leaves her alone apologetically. His behaviour also has a proleptical function as he appears as the only source of help when her father dies.

The complete story of Doctor Cochran’s married life with his wife Ellen, which remains a mystery to Mary throughout the story, comes to light through analepses. Moreover, the virtues of Doctor Cochran as a human being become vivid not through any act of merit, he does at present but through the story related by the labourer referring to his past experiences as his beneficiary. The portrait of the cold, reserved, and silent Doctor Cochran is drawn as a history through the feelings that the daughter and the father dwell on in their individual worlds. Even the

declaration of his deadly health condition remains an analepsis as it was made the previous day. In the surroundings what happens during the two protagonists’ mental excursions to the past is important in revealing the social setting where they live and in realising the circumstances that caused them to live as unlighted lamps.

Mary’s meeting with the labourer and learning from him about her father’s generous philanthropic nature during her return journey suggest prolepsis as they impact the disappointment at the end. She comes home, determined to be kind and warm to her father and start a new relationship with him. While Mary is away Doctor Cochran leaves his practice on a medical visit. He has his last gynaecological adventure, comes home, and while climbing the stairs to his residence, falls dead and is carried into the house by Duke Yetter and another man. His midwifery work revives his memory of Ellen and makes space in the narration for a revelation of how they met, lived, and separated in terms of an analepsis. Like Mary he too comes home, determined to reveal to Mary everything about his mysterious separation from his wife and make way for an intimate relationship with his daughter. But his sudden death upsets the plans the father and the daughter respectively make that evening to work out a strategy of interpersonal harmony to help their relationship continue with understanding. The father and daughter separate from each other with unfulfilled obligations and duties to each other like two lamps disappearing



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without giving any light. All these developments and actions are analeptically and proleptically interconnected.

IMAGERY: LIGHTS BLINKING IN THE DARK

The present of Sherwood Anderson's story 'Unlighted Lamps' is an evening in the lives of the Cochrans. Mary Cochran and her father Doctor Cochran have lived together for nearly eighteen years but have not had any rapport with each other because of Doctor Cochran's innate reticence. They have lived as two unlighted lamps, though they both have the potential to light each other's lives. This particular evening Mary Cochran walks to her lonely meditation spot in a faraway old, decayed garden on the pretext of going to church while her father Doctor Cochran goes out on a medical expedition. The previous day Doctor Cochran had announced to his daughter his approaching death. Therefore, Mary is now preoccupied with her future, under the influence of her father's warning. Mary's intention of going out is to figure out what she is going to do after her father's death and Doctor Cochran goes out to help a woman to deliver a baby while he is disillusioned with life. What they see, what they feel, what they recollect, and what they sense during their respective journeys contribute to the imagery of the story. The imagery is developed respectively, against the physical darkness that prevails in an evening

environment and the psychological darkness that prevails in the character's minds.

The author alludes to darkness seventeen times and to light eleven times. Darkness caused by the sunset is suggested through the atmosphere when the father summons the daughter to announce his approaching death. A kind of psychological darkness is suggested in Mary's attraction to crowded places "where life carried itself off darkly" and in her desire to spend her time in utter darkness contemplating her future, "Mary intended to sit by the tree until darkness came creeping over the land and to try to think out some plan regarding her future" (Anderson, 1921). She remembers sitting alone in the darkness by her father's office window and hearing "a man and woman" stumble along in the darkness on the sidewalk below, talking ill about her mother. The "dark-skinned" people she meets during her walk also add to the imagery. She is cheered up by the young Italian who "apparently setting out of his own Sunday evening's adventures ... walked quickly away into the darkness" (Anderson, 1921). At the bridge where Mary meets the farm labourer she notices "the slow-moving water" in darkness and imagines that her father's life "has been like a stream running always in shadows and never coming out into the sunlight," and "fear that her own life would run on in darkness" grips her. When Mary is away from home, Doctor Cochran stays



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in the dark for an hour in his office. On his arrival after the medical expedition, the liveryman takes his horse away "into the darkness of the barn." Mary recollects a moment when her father failed to tell her the story of her mother on a rainy and dark evening when she was away with him at a farmhouse as a fifteen-year-old girl. There, although he promised to tell it, he went away, leaving her to sit alone in the darkness. She remembers again the farm labourer's version of her father's personality given to her as she went away into the darkness. When she comes home Mary sits in the darkness by the office window waiting for her father. On his arrival in town, he starts to cross the street and then returns into the darkness. A strand of hair is blown by the light summer breeze across Mary's cheek and she jumps to her feet as though she has been touched by a hand reached out to her from the darkness. Mary imagines her father's dark form in the doorway. When Doctor Cochran's body is being carried in the atmosphere is very dark. All these situations, tinted with darkness, provide a drop scene for lights to be prominent, however faint they are.

Reinforcing the image of "lamps unlighted," Anderson depicts lights overwhelmed by darkness in the present and the past. While walking in Wilmott Street she notices the faces of the people as "soft little ovals of light" as they stand grouped under the "dark porches" by the fences in "the light of the summer evening." Mary remarks

on the effect the young Italian's clothing has on him. "The shining whiteness of the collar made his brown skin look almost black." (Anderson, 1921) Mary's "angry excited mood" vanishes when Duke Yetter is not to be seen "in the dim light." She stands "in the falling light" watching the farm labourer's two boys "fishing in the creek." She notices the labourer's "little fire of sticks" built "at the edge of the stream" to catch "bullheads." When the farmer appears in Doctor Cochran's office to take him home to help his wife with midwifery "the flickering light thrown on the wall" by the match burning on the floor recalls him "the great ball of golden light dancing across the fields and among the branches of trees" produced by the mirror on his knees when his wife announced her pregnancy. While waiting for Doctor Cochran Mary remembers how her father was disrupted once when he was about to tell her the story of her mother by the dangerously cracking timbers of the bridge under which "the lake of flood water was covered with dancing lights" effected by the moon. The story ends with the suggestion of "a light" from a forgotten cigarette held between the fingers by one of Duke Yetter's companions that "danced up and down in the darkness." Thus lights that represent unlighted lamps and that are of no use for someone in finding his or her way appear throughout the story alluding to the numerous possibilities the father and the daughter have had throughout their coexistence for getting out of their respective shells, becoming



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open to each other, and lighting each other's lives for having a happy household, a healthy social environment, and above all a harmonious personal relationship. As dancing lights, the opportunities the father and the daughter have had in building up a strong personal relationship appear and disappear in an unfortunate manner leaving the two in an eternal intellectual darkness. The struggle light has in showing up through darkness parallels with the question symbolically posed in a Buddhist stanza, "Shrouded in darkness why not seek the light?" (Tin, 1986) that queries the meaning of mundane engagements.

DOCTOR LESTER COCHRAN'S SENSE OF RENUNCIATION

"I have a disease of the heart ... The truth is I may die at any moment. I would not tell you but for one reason—I will leave little money and you must be making plans for the future" (Anderson, 1921). At the onset, Doctor Cochran makes this announcement to his daughter Mary "without any preliminary talk and quite suddenly and abruptly" as they stand together in the Doctor's office. From the style in which Doctor Cochran speaks at this moment, it is understood that he is generally not concerned about the emotional status of his listener when explaining a crisis. Sherwood Anderson establishes this in the statement, "To the girl it had seemed that everything concerning her father

must be cold and quiet" (Anderson, 1921). Yet, in spite of his apparent coldness, he gets touched by the terrible effect the announcement has had on his daughter and attempts to reassure her, laughing uncomfortably, that perhaps it might not kill him. " ... I've even heard it said that the best way to insure a long life is to contract a disease of the heart" (Anderson, 1921). However, from this attempt to repair his daughter's mood, it is clear that he has tremendous respect for others' feelings and yet he always feels impelled to keep it hidden. Even on this occasion, though he likes "to put his arm about his daughter's shoulder," he fails to do so as he has "never ... shown any feeling in his relations with her". Maybe, his strict adherence to the Hippocratic Oath (Penn State College of Medicine, 2024) has made him indiscriminate about his interlocutors in maintaining transparency during his interpersonal communication.

FRUSTRATION DUE TO GOSSIP

Mary demonstrates her perception of her father's frustration about the rumours peddled by various gossipmongers in her assaulting and shouting at Duke Yetter who follows her to her meditation spot in "the old, decayed garden".

"My father just wants to kill someone because of the lies that have been told in this town about mother" (Anderson, 1921).



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Here she defends her father's self-respect while suppressing her "hunger to be touched ... tenderly by a man's hand" in this solitary place where "she is well out of sight of her friends" and manifests her premise that Doctor Cochran's apparent coldness and apathy have been resulted in by the scandalous rumours about his wife spread around in the town. Even the farm labourer who praises Doctor Cochran holds a similar opinion, "Your father is a good man and I don't think he is very happy" (Anderson, 1921). As a mature man, he understands well this duality in Doctor Cochran's character.

PHILANTHROPY KEPT CONFIDENTIAL

Doctor Cochran's true nature emerges from the revelation made by a farm labourer. According to him, Doctor Cochran is a genuine but reticent philanthropist whose values transcend the general ethics of the medical profession. He does not associate with this poor family as a fee-levying medico but cares for not only their medical needs but also their financial, psychological, and even social and moral needs:

"I was down and out and your father not only took care of me and the boys but he gave my old woman money to buy the things we had to have from the stores in town here, groceries and medicines. ... The boy and I got well and I got work here in town but he wouldn't take any money from me,

'You know how to live with your children and with your wife. You know how to make them happy. Keep your money and spend it on them,' that's what he said to me" (Anderson, 1921).

The evidence provided by the farm labourer, a member of the town's lowest social category, gives Mary enormous moral support. Inspired by the new knowledge she receives from him, she passes all emotional barriers in her communication with her father and feels determined to be warm and loving to him that night and to make him act in due reciprocation:

"A great new love for her father swept over her and in fancy, she felt his arms about her. As a child she had continually dreamed of caresses received at her father's hands and now the dream came back. For a long time, she stood looking at the stream and she resolved that the night should not pass without an effort on her part to make the old dream come true" (Anderson, 1921).

Anderson demonstrates thus how powerfully the report on Dr Cochran's philanthropy succeeds in achieving a catharsis in Mary.

PERCEPTION OF THE NON-SELF STATE

The evening he dies, Doctor Cochran behaves the same old man. As usual, he is "not very neat", and keeps stroking "his half-grown beard." Having



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realised the gravity of his illness, he develops “an inclination to float out of his body.” A detached feeling for his own body surfaces from his contemplation. “He grew philosophic.” His thoughts seem close to the Buddhist Concept of Soullessness, while exploding the sense of belonging and attachment to life.

“Bhikkhus, feeling is not self, as perceptions are not self. Fabrications are not self. Consciousness is not self. If these aggregates were self-clinging to them would not lead to suffering and one could direct these aggregates as one wished. Since these are not-self they can only lead to suffering and no one can have these (aggregates) be as they wish. ... When they find estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, they are liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that they are liberated. They understand: ‘Birth is exhausted, the integrated life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond’ (Haspel, 2014).

In fact, this shows under the Buddhist explanation of the not-self that his behaviour is determined not by any malice in him but by his disillusionment with his own life for which he has not at all been able to assert any command:

“Here I've lived in it all these years and how little use I have had of it. Now it's going to die and decay never having been used. I wonder why it did not get another tenant. ...”Well,

I've had thoughts enough concerning people and I've had the use of these lips and a tongue but I've let them lie idle. When my Ellen was here living with me, I let her think me cold and unfeeling while something within me was straining and straining trying to tear itself loose” (Anderson, 1921).

The nihilistic feeling that overwhelms all his emotions and sentiments restricts his approach to other people. The last evening of his life he remembers how often, as a young man, while seated together with his wife, he was prevented by his own disillusionment with life from his desire “to reach across the narrow space that separated them and touch her hands, her face, her hair” (Anderson, 1921). This mentality has been characteristic of Doctor Cochran throughout his life, and it is clear even from the short period of time he spent as a lover and husband. He seems to have cared for Ellen the best way he could but without getting emotionally attached to her.

SENSE OF DETACHMENT

His inner perception of the futility of romantic relationships can be justified under the Buddhist teaching of *patichcha samuppada* (dependent arising) which demonstrates that suffering is the outcome of all mundane pursuits ignited by consciousness supported by volitional formations.



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"Now from the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness. From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form. From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of the six sense media. From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact. From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling. From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving. From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering" (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013).

However, through his separation from his wife, he accommodates her desire to proceed in the lifestyle she had been used to, because he takes the sole responsibility for bringing up their daughter Mary. But his tendency to confuse "the remembered figure of his wife ... with the figure of his daughter", to have hallucinations of "a white girlish figure coming through a door out of the rooms in which he and his daughter lived", to imagine through the sound of the papers on his table

rustling in the wind "a soft swishing sound as of a woman's skirts," and to react to them "Which is it? Is it you Mary or is it Ellen?" suggests that in his thoughts, subject to the force of the stream of consciousness, he lives quite in close contact with his wife and daughter. It does not prove that he is a person to harbour any grudge against anybody or to play upon the other's emotions and sentiments, but is vulnerable to certain worldly conditions.

POTENTIALITY AS A WARM-HEARTED MAN

On the last evening of his life, he makes his last adventure in midwifery. He reacts fearfully to the farmer's sudden appearance in his practice. He recollects the "great ball of golden light dancing across the fields and among the branches of trees" that sprang up from the mirror presented to Ellen by a farm woman concerning "the flickering light on the wall" created by the burning match that fell on the floor from his hand. He remembers Ellen's declaration of her pregnancy during the farmer's mission to take him away as a gynaecologist. He regrets his reticence towards his daughter, "I've been a proud man and a coward." He is determined to "tell the whole story of his marriage and its failure sparing himself no humiliation" while he helps the farmer's wife deliver her child. Moreover, full of confidence in the strength of his resolution, he thinks, "There was something very dear and



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beautiful in my Ellen and I must make Mary understand that. It will help her to be a beautiful woman." All these suggest that he still treasures the key moments of his married life, and he has the potential to become a warm-hearted man. Unfortunately, before he satisfies his desire to restore the relationship with his daughter he dies. In other words, he exists as an unlighted lamp all his life and vanishes from his daughter's association.

VISION BEYOND THE MUNDANE

All his behaviour helps establish that Doctor Cochran has no worldly desires. He is not thirsty for any material achievements. He is not affected by any romantic love or sensual pleasures. He is only a duty-conscious man. His generosity to Ellen, the farm labourer, and Mary (while getting ready to renounce life) is the same that he shows to the whole of humanity or, in a larger sense, to life and stands for a very high degree of equanimity. But he is a hypersensitive person who realises the futility of all types of worldly endeavours that end in one's death. All his feelings are influenced by his perception of suffering and transience which he achieves by experiencing fully exposed women straining and struggling painfully while delivering babies. His query "Life doesn't work out. Why are babies always being born?" (Anderson, 1921) is fundamental to his perception of life, which has a fortuitous connection with the Buddhist teaching as follows:

"Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, ageing is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging aggregates are stressful (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997).

Thus, Doctor Cochran leads his life according to a philosophy he postulates through his experience of the grotesque in human physiognomy as a medical doctor, without raising any hope in others, or rendering anyone dependent on him for anything, as he has realised that everything is delusive.

MARY COCHRAN'S DEPRIVATION

Mary is the only child of Doctor Lester Cochran and his wife Ellen. When Mary is still a baby her mother gets peacefully separated from her father and Mary grows as a single-parent child. The father and the daughter occupy the rooms behind the Doctor's practice on the second floor of an old frame building in the town of Huntersburg, Illinois, and Mary seems to have spent eighteen years there. "It was June of the year nineteen hundred and eight and Mary was eighteen years old" (Anderson, 1921).

The previous evening her father, "without any preliminary talk and quite suddenly and abruptly," had announced his approaching death and



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given her the responsibility of looking after herself. Her only security now is a modest sum of money saved by her father. She recollects the occasion on which her father relates the condition of his health in "a cold quiet voice." Mary gets alarmed by the announcement her father has made. "She turned to look toward the door through which her father had passed and dread took possession of her" (Anderson, 1921).

Mary walks through the town of Huntersburg to an isolated place with the idea, "I'll get off by myself and think." She has selected an old, decayed garden situated in the extreme corner of the Wilmott Street lower-class residential area of the town as her meditation spot. This time she visits the place because she has been posed with the challenge of "making plans for the future."

CLASS HATRED CAUSED BY PAROCHIALISM AND GOSSIP

Although she tells her father that she is going to the church, she finds it useless to be "sitting in a stuffy church and hearing a man talk of things that had apparently nothing to do with her own problem" (Anderson, 1921). Through Mary's preference for a decayed garden over the church, Anderson conveys his scepticism about Christianity's ability to solve human problems. The story has five sections, and three of them are devoted to narrating what Mary sees, thinks, and feels during her walk. She needs to be out in an open space as she

senses that she is in a tight corner now. "Her own affairs were approaching a crisis and it was time for her to begin thinking seriously of her future" (Anderson, 1921).

She has selected a place to visit in this lower-class residential area because of her class-based hatred towards the people of her class and is confronted with the Huntersburg riffraff in numerous moods. She is fascinated to see crowded places where ordinary people behave shabbily. As her only frequent associate is her silent and cold father, when she is alone, she has developed an independent spirit in which she can try various adventures.

"In Huntersburg she had always lived under a cloud and now she was becoming a woman and the close stuffy atmosphere she had always breathed was becoming constantly more and more oppressive" (Anderson, 1921).

Conscious that the other girls of her class and her age do not walk like that she is somewhat proud of herself. She also likes to hear different languages spoken by the workers in the furniture factory. She feels she is in a strange land in an environment like that and prefers not to comprehend what they say in their tongues. Because of the rumours about her mother, she feels unwelcome on Lower Main Street where there are people of her class and that has led to a secret antagonism to herself and in a place like here, she is very comfortable. She has heard once a woman warning



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her husband against Mary, "She's growing up and attracting men's attention now. Better keep your eyes on your head. She'll turn out bad. Like mother, like daughter" (Anderson, 1921). From such remarks about her, she has learnt the existence of a prejudice against her.

DEFIANT SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE

Mary's destination is an old, decayed garden by the road on the top of a small hill. Its only features are a ruined barn, a great hole filled with charred timbers of what had been a farmhouse, a pile of stones, some creeping vines, an orchard with a mass of tangled weeds covered with blossoms, a rock that had been rolled against the trunk of an old apple tree, and a hedge that separated the orchard from the fields on the hillside. "Mary intended to sit by the tree until darkness came creeping over the land and to try to think out some plan regarding her future" (Anderson, 1921). For Mary death did not "take the form of a cold inanimate body that was to be buried in the ground, instead, it seemed to her that her father was not to die but to go away somewhere on a journey. Long ago her mother had done that" (Anderson, 1921). She even tends to prefer death to life under the circumstance of the psychological torture she undergoes in her daily life in the company of a cold and quiet father and in a society which is hostile to her.

CONCERN ABOUT SELF-RESPECT

The previous evening, while listening to her father, Mary sees a young man help his sweetheart to alight from a buggy, taking hold of her arm with a certain air of tenderness, and "a hunger to be touched thus tenderly by a man's hand that has come to Mary many times before returns" (Anderson, 1921). Infatuated with her looks, Duke Yetter, one of the loungers in the street, a strongly built young man in a checkered suit, tries to attract her attention, making a theatrical presentation of a story to his small audience. He misinterprets her gesture of discomfort and uncertainty made at herself casually as a response to his effort to befriend her. This is in fact a very matching coincidence for another girl in Mary's shoes. When she is all alone in that old decayed garden hedged from every side, she has the perfect chance of getting intimate and feeling connected. Overconfident, Duke Yetter follows her all the way, and enters the garden to be in her company. But she with her open hand strikes him "a sharp blow on the cheek" and shouts, "If you follow or speak to me, I'll get someone to kill you" (Anderson, 1921). Believing the rumours about her mother, she correctly takes Duke Yetter for another "young town rough" following suit with the one who had been in the habit of loitering before Barney Smithfield's Livery Barn and had been suspected to have eloped with her mother. But he tries to plead with her not to



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misunderstand, "I tell you I didn't mean no harm" (Anderson, 1921). In fact, he does not behave like a violent rapist. He does not attempt to overpower Mary. Mary's angry excited mood vanishes when she notices that Duke Yetter follows her no more. Here it becomes clear that she holds the responsibility of a martyr for her family's dignity. She sacrifices her emotional requirements for the sake of her family's dignity.

REALISATION OF THE TRUTH

Mary's journey becomes fruitful to her when she meets the farm labourer. According to him, Doctor Cochran is a genuine but reticent philanthropist whose values transcend the general ethics of the medical profession. He does not associate with this poor family as a fee-levying medical professional but cares for not only their medical needs but also their financial, psychological, and even social and moral needs. The evidence provided by the farm labourer, a member of the lowest social category in the town, gives an enormous moral support to Mary. Inspired by the new knowledge she receives from him, she passes all emotional barriers in her communication with her father, and feels determined to be warm and loving to him that night and to make him act in due reciprocation:

"A great new love for her father swept over her and in fancy, she felt his arms about her. As a child, she

had continually dreamed of caresses received at her father's hands and now the dream came back. For a long time, she stood looking at the stream and she resolved that the night should not pass without an effort on her part to make the old dream come true" (Anderson, 1921).

But when she comes home to see her father and rectify the mechanics of their relationship destiny comes in her way. Her father is brought home only dead. Anderson conjures up a telepathic coincidence in the minds of the father and the daughter by coordinating the developments in their minds coincidentally. While Mary comes home to start a new life with her father loving and open, Doctor Cochran comes home to clear Mary's misunderstanding about his married life with Ellen. Yet they are separated from each other by death. They both remain unlighted lamps in the story despite their great potential of being sensitive to each other and coexisting in generous terms. Destiny overarches all possibilities for their mutual respect and understanding.

CONCLUSION: SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S PHILOSOPHY

In "Unlighted Lamps" Sherwood Anderson projects his philosophy of life that parallels greatly with the fundamental teachings of the Buddha through the character of the gynaecologist Dr Cochran who behaves throughout the story as a man



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disillusioned with the uncertainty of life and unaffected by all that is mundane, while conscientiously satisfying his obligations to humanity in a series of roles as a doctor, carer, lover, husband, father, and fellow human being, irrespective of what sort of relationship he has with the individuals concerned. During his frequent midwifery expeditions, he gains exposure to naked women in labour in their worst straining with bed pains and comes to terms with the grotesque in life. This alludes in a way to the naked women Prince Siddhartha saw on his renunciation.

What a sight! All the prettiest, most charming dancing girls, the finest singers, best musicians and cleverest performers in the country, who, hours ago, were trying to make the prince so happy, were now all over the floor of the room in the most ugly, shameful and loathsome positions. Some people were snoring like pigs, with their mouths wide open, some grinding and chewing their teeth like hungry devils. This alteration in their appearance made the prince even more disgusted and unhappy (Buddha Dharma Education Association & BuddhaNet, 2008).

Such experiences of feminine suffering leave him no room to think positively about life other than poses him the frustrating question, "Life doesn't work out. Why are babies always being born?" He keeps quiet as he has nothing to talk about. In that sense, the talkative Duke Yetter who represents

the common people of Huntersburg remains his contrast. Therefore, it is surmised that he remains a man living for the sake of others.

His marriage begins with his medical commitment to the stranded patient Ellen during her convalescence and lasts only as long as she could cope with her unexciting quiet life with him as a silent benefactor. When she decides to separate from him, he helps her out in her plans to join the theatre company of which she has been a member. Thereafter, he brings up his two-year old daughter Mary singlehandedly until she turns eighteen. He helps people like the labourer not only with medical advice but also with finances. In shabby clothing and with an unshaven countenance, he leads a quiet simple life in a lower middleclass residential area in Huntersburg.

Despite his virtue, his failure to communicate with his daughter and resolve the mysteries behind his separation from Ellen renders them to be two unlighted lamps to each other. Although they reside under one roof, they live in compartments. So, the topic "The Unlighted Lamps" metaphorically represents the protagonists Dr Lester Cochran and Mary Cochran, who both cannot cheer up each other as father and daughter, however much they are capable of being considerate to each other as two warm-hearted humans. Mary, more vulnerable between the two, misses what she deserves in terms of parental love. Like other children of her age, she



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does not have any pleasure of life. At home she has a reticent father and outside she has the cynical people around who have mistaken her mother for a prostitute and anticipate her to follow suit with her mother. From the perspective of Buddhism, Dr Cochran's behaviour in its entirety agrees with its teaching about "anatta" (non-self or soullessness). While living, he frees himself from all mundane encumbrances together with self-consciousness.

Coincidentally, when Mary comes to know of the true character of her father and decides to acknowledge his virtue, Dr Cochran senses the injustice his silence has caused to Mary and decides to reveal to her, now a grown-up, everything about Ellen and clear all doubts she may have harboured about them. Yet, Dr Cochran's death prevents them from meeting each other. Paradoxically, she learns about her father's philanthropic nature too late, because she cannot contribute to their home atmosphere with that knowledge, as she meets her father thereafter only as a dead. She is compelled to depend on Duke Yetter whom she once repulsed for the sake of her family's dignity in the scenario where she has nobody to turn to while her father is dead. That again confirms the delay of the lamps in their lighting of each other's lives.

Anderson develops a spatiotemporal framework for his narration to exemplify the Cochran family case while establishing the power of right

perception of the characters and the circumstances under which they lead their lives in adding positive energy for the sustenance of harmony in human relationships which are obviously destined to disappear in the course of time. A psychoanalytical probe into Dr Cochran's characterisation reveals that his behaviour succinctly projects some of the actual developments in Anderson's struggle as a young man (Dunne, 2020) under various calamities he was confronted with during the great depression in Virginia. After all, irrespective of Anderson's sociocultural background, his short story is claimed to demonstrate the Buddha's fundamental teaching of the three characteristics of existence known as *aniccha* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (the absence of a self) through its circumstantial developments which both Dr Cochran and Mary are subjected to.

"The Buddha taught three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) that apply to all existence in *Samsāra*, namely impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and non-self or selflessness (*anatta*). ... If things are impermanent, then clinging causes suffering. If there were a self, then that self would be able to decide just to be happy and content, but we know from experience that this is not possible" (The Buddhō Foundation, 2024).

Anderson's hero, Dr Cochran follows this to the letter in his behaviour throughout the story. As this projects



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Anderson's vision of life, it is claimed here with tangible evidence from society that even today his philosophy dramatically parallels the Buddha's teaching.

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