

ANALYSIS

The Sheltering Sky (1949)



Paul Bowles

(1910-1999)

“There is a curiously double level to this novel. The surface is entralling as narrative. It is impressive as writing.... In its interior aspect, *The Sheltering Sky* is an allegory of the spiritual adventure of the fully conscious person into modern experience.... Actually this superior motive does not intrude in explicit form upon the story, certainly not in any form that will need to distract you from the great pleasure of being told a first-rate story of adventure by a really first-rate writer.”

Tennessee Williams
New York Times
(4 December 1949) 7, 38

“*The Sheltering Sky* is a remarkable job of writing, with a craftsmanship that makes it the most interesting first novel to come from a U.S. writer this year...[a] mixture of emotional nausea, intellectual despair and desert primitivism... Yet for so able a writer, Bowles fails to give his story much significance. Both Port and Kit are neurotic intellectual play children so short on real character and appeal that they seem hardly worth saving... Above all, *The Sheltering Sky* is drenched with a fine sense of place, and it sketches Arab towns and the Sahara itself with sharp sureness.”

Time
(5 December 1949)

“It has been a number of years since a first novel by an American has contained as much literary persuasion and original interest as *The Sheltering Sky*.... It is also the first time to my knowledge that an American novelist has met the French Existentialists on their ground and held them to a draw.... His characters are profoundly contemporary, out of a world that has neither God nor ethics.... Unlike other records of the same moral dilemma, this is not history, nor argument, nor description of moral paralysis. The cataclysm has occurred; the land is waste yet there are mirages; the water holes beckon. This is a carefully devised piece of fiction of unflinching interest about some of those 'ridiculous' mirages.”

Florence Codman
Commonweal
(30 December 1949) 346

“Much of this almost Gothic violence arises from the clash of the civilized with the primitive, but more basically it stems from the fact that Mr. Bowles’s characters (both enlightened and native) are warped and morbid beings. They are all, if not mad, severely neurotic, hugging to themselves some quietly terrible frustration, some taint, some malevolent perverseness that finally can be no longer controlled and explodes with twisted fury.”

John J. Maloney
New York Herald Tribune
(3 December 1950) 4

“Paul Bowles is a man and author of exceptional latitude but he has, like nearly all serious artists, a dominant theme. That theme is the fearful isolation of the individual being. He is as preoccupied with this isolation as the collectivist writers of ten years ago were concerned with group membership and purposes.... Bowles is apparently the only American writer whose work reflects the extreme spiritual dislocation (and a philosophical adjustment to it) of our immediate times. He has an ‘organic continuity’ with the present in a way that is commensurate with the great French trio of Camus, Genet, and Sartre.”

Tennessee Williams
Saturday Review
(23 December 1950) 19

“Such novels as Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) and Paul Bowles’s *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) are extensions of naturalism in that their authors provide a naturalistic surface but offer in addition a complex order of inference and meaning.... Bellow’s novel is...superior also to *The Sheltering Sky*, whose value lies chiefly in its precise rendering of Sahara sand, sky, and heat. It is perhaps proper to say that such a world dwarfs its people, who adjust to it in various strange ways, and this statement is most successfully made by Bowles. The weakness of the novel is not that the dramatic problems created by the Sahara towns and cities are not real, but rather that the persons suffering from them lose definition and precision--their integrity as persons is lost. The strangeness and the extremes of natural terror do not contribute to their meaning but rather extinguish it. It is possible to draw an inference from all of this concerning the universal extinction of human significance, a peculiarly modern tragedy. But this is certainly going beyond Bowles's intention--or at least beyond his achievement.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery 1951-63) 207-08

“Paul Bowles takes his people to Africa in search of sensation and spiritual emptiness and finally sacrifices his theme to melodrama and violence.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 453

“Mr. Bowles is one of the very few writers to depict the part Arab, part colonial-cosmopolitan life of North Africa without any trace of romanticization. He has a remarkable gift for evoking its atmosphere with graphic authenticity; and, at the same time, he externalizes in that atmosphere the inner drama he is unfolding--the drama of the Hollow Man, the man things are done to.... The weakness of both Bowles’s novels is that a man as hollow as Nelson Dyar (and previously Port Moresby)--a man without purpose or will; a cipher--is not a hero whose fate can stir us deeply. If fiction is to have life it must see something more in life than a dreamlike drift from nullity to nothingness.”

Charles J. Rolo
Atlantic Monthly
(March 1952) 84-5

“The action of Bowles’s first novel *The Sheltering Sky*, is relatively simple. The protagonists, Port and Kit Moresby, are members of New York’s intelligentsia, and they have come to North Africa accompanied by a friend, or rather a hanger-on, named Tunner, a young man whose intellectual endowments, while inferior to those of the Moresbys, are in some degree compensated for by his good looks: he is handsome, we are told, in a ‘late Paramount way.’ There is tension in Port’s relationship with his wife, and it is partly in the hope of redefining this relationship that the two of them have come to Africa. They are out of tune with each other, the result, Port suspects, of being out of tune with their metropolitan environment, which never really satisfied either of them. In the Sahara, he feels, they have a chance of rediscovering their love, and themselves in the process.

Port and Kit have fallen out of love, but they have preserved their respect for each other. In rebellion against this state of affairs, Kit allows herself to be loved briefly by Tunner, for whom she has no respect, and Port has an occasional commercial contact with native women. At Ain Krorfa, a remote village in the Sahara, the Moresbys part with Tunner, who plans to rejoin them in a few days. They proceed deeper into the desert, where Port contracts typhoid and dies.

Kit joins a caravan of merchants whose two leaders rape her and share her as their mistress until they reach their destination, where the younger of the two installs her in his harem. She succeeds at last in escaping, but the strain has been too much for her and she breaks down mentally. In the meantime, at Tunner’s instigation, a search for her has been organized. French authorities finally locate her and return her to Oran, where she is met by an official from whom she breaks away and disappears once more, into the Casbah. That, on a literal level, is all there is to the story, but this is not the level with which Mr. Bowles is primarily concerned.

Port and Kit have been carefully chosen for their role, the role of the doomed and civilized traveler. The highly evolved representatives of a modern urban society, it is significant, to begin with, that they are unhappy at home. Intuition tells them that their chances for happiness lie in a less complex environment and they come to the Sahara--he with his maps, for which...he has a passion, she with her...fitted case and her cosmetics. But Port’s maps only lead him to his death, and Kit’s case is stolen from her in the desert. He suffers physical destruction; she, mental.

Tunner is a more important character than he at first appears. Less intelligent than the Moresbys, he is also closer to Bowles’s type of ‘natural’ man (who, incidentally, is frequently handsome, which is of course symbolically appropriate). The desert does not destroy him as it does the other two. Subtly not being his strong point, he possesses instead a healthy egotism: he is unaware of the real reason for Kit’s yielding to his advances, and it never occurs to him that in retrospect she should find the experience distasteful. She, for her part, can neither love a man she cannot respect nor, as it happens, love the man she does respect--a dilemma peculiar, perhaps, to a civilized individual. Port’s is a similar predicament; his encounters with the native women are ill-fated, and of the three only Tunner is untroubled where such matters are concerned. Tunner is also untroubled by any feeling of guilt at having seduced his friend’s wife, but Kit’s conscience does not let her off so lightly.

Kit stands midway between Port, who is completely civilized, and Tunner, who is half animal. We are told in so many words that she is torn by ‘the war between reason and atavism.’ She has a profound regard for omens, and a large part of her consciousness is devoted to the classification and interpretation of them; nevertheless, ‘in intellectual discussions she was always the proponent of scientific method.’ One somehow feels that the fault for their estrangement lies with Port, who is entirely a rational being (he understands his wife so well that he can even predict the effect certain omens will produce upon her), and it is part of the peculiar justice of the situation that Port’s destruction comes first and is the more complete and final.

There is a strongly sensual side to Kit’s character which Tunner, who is only half a primitive, touches but fails to release when he makes love to her. The real primitive in the story, of course, is Belqassim, the young Arab who imprisons her in his harem. Belqassim is everything that Port is not, and this relationship is more satisfactory than the one she has had with Tunner because it is not complicated by the element of respect, which (so different are she and Belqassim culturally) simply does not enter into the picture--or

perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she respects him because he is so very different from all the men she has ever known, like a being from another planet.

Paradoxical though it may appear, Kit's series of amorous adventures with Belqassim and other natives in the latter part of the book offers her an opportunity of spiritual salvation: intuitively she realizes this, which is why she accepts these adventures with a willingness which would otherwise appear rather motiveless, since obviously she is not a nymphomaniacal type. The love of a civilized man had never been able to satisfy her (Bowles's implication is that civilized man has lost the art of making love); perhaps another kind of love can. And it does satisfy, at the same time that it destroys her. Kit's tragedy is that her experience has unfitted her for a primitive type of love, for love on a 'natural' plane; her civilized background revolts, and she explodes mentally. Looked at in this light, Book III is far from being merely erotic exercise: the protagonist (and there is no question but what Kit and not Port is the main character) is undergoing an ordeal by fire, as it were, and the ordeal, painful though it is, is very much worth watching.

The book is in effect a moral tragedy, presented in terms of allegory--and it is tragedy rather than pathos, for Kit does put up a struggle. Nor is the tragedy merely personal: the allegory includes all of civilized humanity, incapable of leading a purely rational existence (Port's way, the way of death) or of returning atavistically to a merely intuitive way of life, as Kit does with such heart-rending consequences."

Oliver Evans
"Paul Bowles and the 'Natural' Man"
Critique III.1 (Spring-Fall 1959) 43-59
reprinted in *Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views*
ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir
(Houghton 1963) 139-152

"If the word 'Gothic' still has any meaning when applied to fiction then Bowles's--*The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider's House* (1955)--are Gothic novels and as such are related to horror comics. In a sense, they are indeed highbrow horror comics, and the isolation of the horrific or the beastly or the vilely incongruous is an essential part of Bowles's method. [As when] Kit Moresby is deserting her husband, who is dying of typhoid... As a Gothic novelist, Bowles is a modern version of Poe. Like Poe's, his theme is the disintegration of the psyche; and his novels are works of symbolism in which the world described is really the interior world of his characters. It is projected with great brilliance: in his ability to suggest tropical heat and squalor, the seediness of the exotic, Bowles is not surpassed by Graham Greene.

Bowles's scene is North Africa, and his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, may be taken as typical of his work. The central characters are Port and Kit Moresby, husband and wife, rich American expatriates, each bearing a burden of undefined guilt. Port is a man who, 'in order to avoid having to deal with relative values,' had long since come to deny all purpose to the phenomena of existence--it was more expedient and 'comforting.' He is a man whose soul only 'silences and emptinesses' can touch; his soul aspires to the blankness of the desert and of the cloudless African sky. His attempts to make some sort of living contact with his wife are fumbling and abortive, tentative gestures only; and Kit's life is ruled by omens that she cannot decipher. Their wanderings in the interior of Algeria are described in every vivid detail of physical discomfort and dirt. Port dies meaninglessly of typhoid at a French military post...and Kit disappears alone into the desert to bum a lift on a camel caravan into the interior. She is raped repeatedly by the two Arabs whose caravan it is, and with one of them, who installs her in his harem, she sinks into a state of frantic sensual bliss and craving, a mindless abandonment to sexual subjugation, from which she escapes only to return to Algiers little better than an imbecile.

In these novels Bowles expresses the ultimate horror of nothingness. Yet, though the books affect one while reading almost as a series of physical assaults, one is scarcely moved by them, because Bowles scarcely tries to persuade us that his characters have value as human beings."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 300-01

“Paul Bowles, in *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) and *Let It Come Down* (1952), like Burroughs, uses the journey as a form of discovery even when it leads to self-destruction. Only the ‘ultimate’ expression of self can jar the self from exhaustion. In this respect, however different literarily, both are recreating a war situation, using drugs, sexual experimentation, forms of sadism and masochism, to convey a form of combat. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port and Kit Moresby must make the journey to North Africa, or else watch their lives waste away in inconsequential acts. They are driven not by social or political needs, but by inner pressures. The journey is their final effort to stay alive. Once it is started, Port’s illness gives Kit her freedom, and then the desert provides opportunity for further choice--and as it turns out, what she desires most, bondage. Her deepest needs are met by an Arab on a caravan, who by degrees turns her into his slave, finally adding her to his harem. Kit feels most intensely at her greatest moments of servitude; this is the ‘female condition,’ presented as a form of liberation for her.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper 1983) 123, 206n, 402-03

Michael Hollister (2015)