

ANALYSIS

“The Volcano” (1944)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“It came out of a vacation trip that Wallace and Mary made to Mexico just after his leaving Harvard and before taking on the *Look* [magazine] assignment. ‘The Volcano’ can be considered the first of a sub-grouping that was produced during the later period—stories that came out of his travels. After taking on the job at Stanford, Stegner went on several extended trips abroad, and situations and characters that he encountered on these trips inspired a number of other stories that may seem at odds with his later reputation as ‘the dean of western writers.’

Most of these stories, and certainly ‘The Volcano,’ have as one of their central themes the conflict of American with foreign cultures. The American protagonist finds himself learning something about other people, but also about himself, and in the confrontation of one culture with another, he is usually humbled by his encounter. In one way or another he discovers his ignorance, an ignorance that suggests that he is, as an American, so involved in the modern and technological, that he has been removed from the land and from the sympathetic vibrations that the natives of a region have with nature. He is, in effect, taken back to basics and forced by his experiences to reevaluate his outlook and values. This theme, to some extent, reflects the progress of Stegner’s own life, from a childhood close to the land where his family was forced to live on a subsistence level, to a sophisticated life of comfort and convenience as an adult. In these stories he not only seems to be regressing in cultural time but seems to be recovering his own more challenging and earth-connected past and its values.... This recovery is essentially nostalgic; in these travel stories, however, the confrontation with a more basic way of life can be distressing, even painful.

The narrator of ‘The Volcano’ is significantly called only ‘the American.’ As a tourist he has gone to Paricutin in Mexico, presumably out of curiosity to see the effects of the eruption and the volcano’s continuing activity. (In life, the volcano of Paricutin came out of dormancy and erupted in 1943, just a few months before the author had visited the area.) With his Mexican driver and guide, the American approaches within two miles of the volcano and sees it venting ‘monstrous puffs of black smoke [which] mushroomed upward.’ There is nothing nostalgic about this setting; it is like a scene out of hell, ‘a landscape without shadows, submerged in gray twilight.’ The village of Paricutin on the other side of the mountain had been completely burned under lava....

As so often is the case in Stegner’s work, the landscape becomes invested with emotion. The American tells his driver, ‘I have conceived a great hatred for this thing.... It us a thing I have always known and always hated.’ It is something, he realizes, that the Mexicans have also always known, or else there would not be the figure of the robed skeleton in so many of their paintings. ‘They were patient under it, they accepted it,’ but at the same time he notices two little Indian girls, each with a small baby hung over her back, wading through the knee-deep powder and wonders at how alive their eyes, above the muffling *rebozos*, are—how very alive. There would seem to be a lesson here in adaptation, in the survival of the human spirit under the worst of circumstances by these unsophisticated people. The American has come to the volcano to see something unusual, something wondrous, but the wonder, the touching vision that sticks with him, is the eyes of the little girls, eyes that in their vitality seem to promise hope for the race in a nearly hopeless situation.”

Jackson J. Benson

Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1998) 70-72

“In ‘The Volcano,’ perhaps the most Hemingwayesque story of the collection, an unnamed American, most likely a reporter, is in Mexico to see first hand the devastation from the erupting volcano Paricutin... The volcano, Stegner means us to see, is much like the global war then in progress. As in ‘The Berry

Patch,' the war theme gradually surfaces as major. When that emphasis is clear, the dialogue appears markedly in the Hemingway manner: 'I have conceived a great hatred for this thing,' the American said finally. 'It is a thing I have always known and always hated. It is something which kills'."

Joseph M. Flora
"Stegner and Hemingway as Short Story Writers:
Some Parallels and Contrasts in Two Masters"
South Dakota Review 30.1
(September 1992)

Michael Hollister (2015)