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Resilience and Survival in the Face of Adversity: A Study of James Ragan's Poetic Themes

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Abstract:

Poetry is with Nature, by Nature, and for Nature. The words of a poem often create intensity deeper than the ones of prose and fiction. The speaker wants to convey their feelings and reveal their settings and situations. The selection of words can be a meticulous process for a poet, requiring deep and thorough knowledge and profound diction. Ragan is an internationally recognized poet who consummated the world with his ability to write and influence the public with his lyrical poems, plays, and essays. Ragan's birth and upbringing in Pennsylvania to Slovak parents and growing up in Pittsburgh connects him to Europe and America. His poems have been celebrated by the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, who said for his poems - "for sparing no passion in believing they sing". The Themes in Ragan's poetry are more like a kaleidoscope, whether he talks about nature; childhood, adulthood, or geography. Ragan relates and connects his poem geographically, where he talks about places in Slovakia, Pennsylvania, Prague, and America. He even mentioned China and other countries, depicted wonderfully in the poem. Each poem constitutes a lyrical sound. Ragan's poetry also presents a glimpse of history, geography, and thematic variation. His poems are more honest, vitalized, sublimely candid, and instructively didactic. James not only creates love for his poetry among children but anyone who reads his poetry would fall for the singing poem and the reality it brings across. In each of his books *Weather Womb-Weary*, *Lusions*, *In the Talking Hours*, and more he talks about social conscience, reason, and sense, flora and fauna, etc. His famous *Yevtushenko's Collected Poems* has been praised as "a passionate and essential edition" by the New York Times. His poems to Prague were performed for the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, at Prague along with 500 guests at Hradcany Castle on November 5, 2008. Reading and exploring Ragan apprise how Ragan loves to tell stories, keep photographs of all the special moments he had and important people in his life with whom he read in 1985 along with Seamus Heaney, Robert Bly, and Bob Dylan at the first international poetry festival hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev at Moscow. James along with Heaney and Bob

had read for 8,000 people in a Hockey stadium. James said in a conference- It is the hope that with a collective call for the Globalization of literature of conscience with its rejuvenated devotion to artistry, this one will be inspired by the verve and compassion with which the poets and the prose writers had, in the past, informed their art in the order to, in turn, move and shape the hearts and minds of a seemingly dispassionate culture.

Keywords: multipotentialite, Slovak, kaleidoscope, Prague, Didactic.

As he was born during World War II and coming of age during the Cold War, Ragan was deeply affected by the geopolitical events of his time. These experiences likely shaped his perspectives on war, politics, and the human condition, themes that are prevalent in his poetry. Global events such as World War II, the Cold War, and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe deeply influenced James Ragan's thematic choices in his poetry and plays. Growing up during the turbulent years of World War II and the Cold War, Ragan was witness to the human cost of conflict and the struggle for freedom and democracy. These experiences instilled in him a profound sense of empathy for those affected by war and oppression, themes that are often reflected in his work. Ragan's poetry often explores themes of loss, displacement, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, reflecting his own family's experience as immigrants and his broader understanding of the human condition. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s had a particularly profound impact on Ragan, as it coincided with his efforts as a cultural diplomat to promote artistic exchange between the United States and Eastern Europe. This period of historic change inspired much of Ragan's later work, as he sought to capture the spirit of hope and renewal that accompanied the collapse of the Iron Curtain. These global events shaped James Ragan's thematic choices by providing him with a broader perspective on the human experience, highlighting the universal themes of suffering, resilience, and the quest for freedom that are central to his poetry and plays. Like many Midwestern towns, his hometown was shaped by migration and immigration, contributing to its cultural diversity. This multicultural environment likely influenced Ragan's appreciation for different cultures and his exploration of themes related to identity and belonging in his poetry.

The theme in Ragan's poetry focuses more on Nature, childhood, geography, and history. Ragan's poems are always lovely and often deep, and he offers a reading in the spirit of a raconteur. In his poem "The Hunger Wall"- Ragan draws upon his personal experiences and historical research to examine what it meant to face the civil disturbances that viciously divided Los Angeles throughout the length of race and class. The Hunger Wall – named for the

wall near Prague Castle which delves into the similarities between both Czech and Slovak, takes these two cultural sensibilities that seem worlds apart and explores the subtle nuances of their unlikely similarities. In beautifully crafted and metaphorically rich language, Ragan studies what it means to set a “border,” whether it is political, racial, or economic. James Ragan’s poems are full of arresting collocations and striking phrases. For example, the following lines from “Too Long a Solitude” may be cited:

The ice now gutted where the trunk
Has hunkered down to see its cones,
Shods the whiskered stiles,
A grand ensemble for a bland horizon.

(Too Long a Solitude, p.7)

The lines evoke themes of resilience and endurance, as seen in the tree standing firm amidst harsh conditions. They highlight nature's intricate beauty and detail against a bland horizon, showcasing the contrast between detailed elements and the broader, simpler landscape. The imagery reflects solitude and introspection, suggesting a passage of time and the changes it brings, with the tree symbolizing continuity amidst change.

Growing up in a working-class family in a small town in Illinois, James Ragan was immersed in a cultural environment that profoundly influenced his life and work. Rooted in the Midwest, he was surrounded by values of community, hard work, and resilience, themes that echo throughout his poetry. His upbringing exposed him to American folk traditions such as storytelling, folk music, and folk art, which emphasize the importance of oral narratives and the preservation of cultural heritage. The industrial landscape of his hometown also made a significant impact on his artistic vision, shaping his views on labour, industry, and the environment. His poetry often depicts factories, railroads, and other industrial elements, reflecting the influence of his surroundings. Ragan's upbringing in rural Illinois gave him a rich array of experiences and influences that continue to resonate in his poetry. His work reflects a deep connection to the landscapes, traditions, and values of the American Midwest, while also engaging with broader themes of history, identity, and the universal human experience. Ragan's Slovak roots also played a significant role in shaping his identity and artistic sensibilities. He often spoke fondly of his heritage, describing how his upbringing instilled in him a strong sense of resilience, community, and love for the arts. His family's Slovak background provided him with a rich tapestry of stories, myths, and traditions that would later find their way into his poetry and plays. His poetry is infused with a deep nostalgia for a homeland he never knew firsthand but was deeply connected to through his family and upbringing. Ragan's connection

to his Slovak heritage also influenced his work as a cultural diplomat. As the director of the University of Southern California's Professional Writing Program, he even organized cultural exchanges with Slovakia, bringing Slovak artists and writers to the United States and fostering artistic collaborations between the two countries. As a diplomat, he worked to promote cultural understanding and appreciation between the United States and Slovakia, highlighting the shared cultural heritage that binds the two nations. Through his poetry, plays, and diplomatic efforts, Ragan has celebrated his Slovak heritage and shared it with the world, enriching the cultural fabric of both Slovakia and the United States.

Ragan's poetry has been praised "for sparing no passion in believing they sing," said Seamus Heaney for Ragan's poetry. He had completed his honorary Doctorate from St. Vincent College and London's Richmond University (2001) his poetry was widely praised for exploring various subjects- "with compassion, and with a single voice one trusts. His poetry is Poetry of Conscience".

Ragan's style is also shaped by the influences of contemporary poets, such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Pablo Neruda. Like these poets, Ragan experiments with language and form, pushing the boundaries of traditional poetic conventions. His work is characterized by its lyrical intensity, its vivid imagery, and its willingness to engage with the complexities of modern life. His poetic style synthesises the old and the new, the classical and the contemporary. It is a style that reflects his deep reverence for the poetic traditions of the past while also embracing the ever-evolving nature of poetry in the present. Focusing on Ragan's poetic voice, it has evolved over the years, influenced by various literary sources and personal experiences. His early work shows the influence of modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, with its dense, allusive language and complex imagery. As Ragan's style matured, he began to incorporate elements of surrealism and magical realism into his work, inspired by poets like Federico García Lorca and Pablo Neruda. This phase of his writing is characterized by its dreamlike quality and its use of vivid, often fantastical imagery. In more recent years, Ragan's poetry has taken on a more reflective and meditative tone, influenced perhaps by the wisdom and perspective that comes with age. His work continues to be informed by his deep engagement with the world around him, as well as his ongoing exploration of themes like identity, memory, and the passage of time. Throughout his career, Ragan's poetic voice has remained distinctive and unique, shaped by a wide range of literary influences and a deep commitment to the craft of poetry. His work serves as a testament to the power of language to illuminate the human experience and connect us with the world around us.

Ragan believed that the art of poetry was a way of engaging global suffering and prejudice. All ten books of poetry are somehow connected to real-life incidents and most of them are autobiographies and are based on geographical and historical aspects. Ragan always uses vivid descriptions and his choices of words are so profound they manifest an aura for a reader. In all of his books, he made it public to meet the reality rather than to escape and he even let us know how the past and growing cancers of a world raging with conflict: Vietnam, U.S. Race Riots, and Cold War nuclear Threats.

As an artist, he believes that he must prick the conscience of society and engage the powers of a larger world. What distinguishes Ragan's poetry is his melodic Slovak dialect and riveting delivery, which contribute to the visceral pleasure of hearing his poems read aloud. The use of splendid diction and metaphorical imagery can be seen in his poems. For example:

Should your single eye
 Scale the precipice of space
 To see how barren the language
 of stars can be, how sullenly
 the night ignores the passing
 shell of one, fellow in its tow,
 yet divines the other
 in some fit of passion
 it cannot check, you should know.

(*'Walking to Two Moons'*, *Womb-Weary*, p. 52)

In the poem 'Walking to Two Moons,' the lines convey a sense of cosmic loneliness and the unpredictable nature of attention and affection. These lines suggest, that if we observe the vastness of space with a discerning eye, we will notice the emptiness and indifferent nature of the stars. One star's fading is ignored by the night, while another might receive unexpected attention due to an uncontrollable burst of passion. This highlights the randomness and indifference of the universe.

The "single eye" represents focused perception or insight, while the "precipice of space" implies a vast, daunting frontier. The "language of stars" suggests the communication or signals from celestial bodies, which are barren and unresponsive. The night ignoring the "passing shell" of a star depicts indifference, and the "fit of passion" represents sudden, uncontrollable events or emotions that shift focus.

Themes of isolation, indifference, and the unpredictability of attention are central, inviting contemplation on the nature of existence and recognition. The imagery evokes vast, silent space, emphasizing the randomness of fate and the universe's indifferent nature.

Ragan said- TO SUM UP what has brought him to this point - his poetic sensibility has always been global, as reflected by his current Visiting Distinguished Professorship at Prague's Charles University. He writes to find expression through his poetry, plays, and films to bring individuals and worlds, seemingly apart, closer in understanding. The cafes that he writes in are his libraries, from Prague to Paris to New York and Los Angeles. He used to write to live out loud and with the eternal hope that through the expansive reach of art, he could achieve community through a common language. And he used to keep very high optimism in that.

He was praised by Nobel Prize Nominee Miroslav Holub- "James Ragan dominates the art of image, the art of poetic line, and the art of poetic Narration with insight that marks major poets." Moreover, the very statement may be testified in the lines of different poems which follow:

In the Talking hours we cannibals,
Spoon salt out of gills
To preserve our Flesh, stiff with the blood of a whale,
Stripped to its bowels.

(*In The Talking Hours*, p.65)

In the poem "In the Talking Hours," the lines suggest a scene of survival and primal behaviour. The phrase "we cannibals" implies a metaphorical consumption of one another, perhaps through harsh conversations or actions. "Spoon salt out of gills" indicates extracting what is necessary to survive, using the salt to preserve their flesh, which is described as "stiff with the blood of a whale," suggesting a connection to a powerful, ancient source of sustenance. "Stripped to its bowels" implies a raw, exposed state, both physically and emotionally. In brief, the lines depict a struggle for preservation and survival, using visceral and intense imagery to convey the primal nature of their actions.

The line depicts the time of growing cancers of a world raging with conflict: Vietnam, U.S. Race Riots, and Cold War nuclear threats. The poem "Aryan Devolution," dedicated to the 11 Israeli athletes killed by terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics, led to national radio interviews. The Los Angeles Herald Examiner praised the book, describing it as "dry ice smoking from contact." Poems protesting the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia garnered international attention. Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko hailed it as "a testament to universal

brotherhood. He is my brother." Soon, Ragan's poetry intertwined with his passion for teaching.

U.S. Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur said- "James Ragan's poems are satisfying and distinctive, full of arresting collocations and striking phrases." The line itself is literal and veracious as it depicts how in an impressive and daunting way Ragan creates an image in the mind of his readers.

It fails to grasp the predicament,
 To be named a forest- a lone spruce, digging into the rock's rigging
 For nourishment in snow,
 When all around it, stones are rootless,
 And scurf's of ice tumble through flight

(*The Aleutian Forest*, Too Long a Solitude, p.7)

The lines tell us about the Aleutian islands, which are situated in the western part of the U.S.A. Here Ragan describes the forest as a lone spruce which is the main reference to an island that is clean and neat and the surrounding waters are the home to many seabirds, mammals, and fishes.

Ragan's "Too Long a Solitude" has been a runner-up for the 2009 Oklahoma Book Award. In the poetry collection "Too Long a Solitude," his poems migrate from isolation in a world tinged with war and an aching sense of global alienation.

"In conversations with James Ragan in Voyage L.A. we get to know that James was widely praised- "James Ragan's fine-grained and witty poems move us through a remarkable range of history and geography, thematic variety and tonal dexterity." – Said The Pulitzer Prize Winner C.K. Williams as his poems are more thematical and are also linked to subjects both Geography and History. Ragan's reference to islands, oceans, mountains, plateaus, and plains makes him a writer full of geographical knowledge.

"James Ragan's poetry lights the passage to the larger world of global citizenship."- Said National Book Critics Award, William Matthews as the poems unleash their raw energy and emotional power like a collection of classic paintings brought in a new retrospective manner. "James Ragan's poetry is splendidly candid, original, energized, connected to the real world, humane, full of nuances, of music, of idioms he has heard and invented."- said Robert Frost Award, Michael S. Harper.

Ragan in his collection of poetry- "Womb-Weary" let us know how it chronicles a soul-searching odyssey through the international landscape of human joy and suffering, a private

charting of terrain both physical and metaphysical. Take an example of one of his poems from 'Womb-Weary'.

In India, we name the river Ganga,
The anointed locks of hair
Through which water flows
And where on slats of sandalwood
The pilgrims wade to find the source of light.

('*Monongahela*', p.10)

James even depicted more about India and the culture – the reference to river Ganga in the above lines of the poem "Monongahela"- which means a month.

In India, the tradition of pilgrimage often includes acquiring tokens or souvenirs from the sacred sites visited. Among these, sandalwood holds a special significance, often sought after as a memento or gift from the city of Ayodhya. This aromatic wood is treasured for its cultural and religious importance, symbolizing purity and spiritual connection. Interestingly, Ayodhya's sandalwood products, known as 'Maharaja Chandan', attract not only pilgrims but also visitors from other revered religious destinations such as Mathura and Haridwar. This tradition highlights Ayodhya's cultural and commercial importance as a center for spiritual tourism and the exchange of sacred items.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the First Prime Minister of India, referred to the River Ganga in his book 'Discovery of India' - India "The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people. It is a repository of India's historical memories, a canvas painted with the hopes and fears of its populace, and a symphony echoing the songs of its triumphs and tribulations. The Ganga has been the symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga."

"The Ganges" is reverently called Ganga Mata (Mother Ganga) in Hindu culture, esteemed for her role in absolving sins and purifying humanity. Unlike numerous deities, she lacks a menacing or destructive aspect, notwithstanding her potential for devastation as a river. Furthermore, she is regarded as a maternal figure to other gods.

As Ragan said –the anointed locks of hair- which means the other rivers that are connected to River Ganga including Bhagirathi and Alaknanda meet and form River Ganga. The anointed locks of hair are also a representation of Lord Shiva from which The River Ganga flows which even represents the causal waters from which the earth arises.

Ragan poems are musical and pleasing as his lyrics in the poem say it all, the mention of Shakespeare and Dante even makes the poem appealing.

It is universally acknowledged that poetry is still the hallmark of sublime creativity. Next to music, it is Literature in general and Poetry in particular which comes closest to the human heart. It is more critical when a poet sings of the pains and sufferings common and uncommon, of both mankind. After all, a poet is a product of the society to that time She/he belongs, and it seems pretty impossible for him/her to delink himself/herself from his surroundings. In conclusion, James Ragan's work is characterized by its deep connection to nature, history, geography, and personal experience. His poetry reflects a kaleidoscope of themes, ranging from the beauty of nature to the complexities of human relationships. Ragan's ability to weave together vivid imagery, profound diction, and melodic language creates a powerful and engaging poetic experience for readers. Ragan's poetry encourages readers to explore their surroundings and examine their place in it. He is a genuinely universal poet whose themes are timeless and enduring because his work resonates with readers of all ages and backgrounds.

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