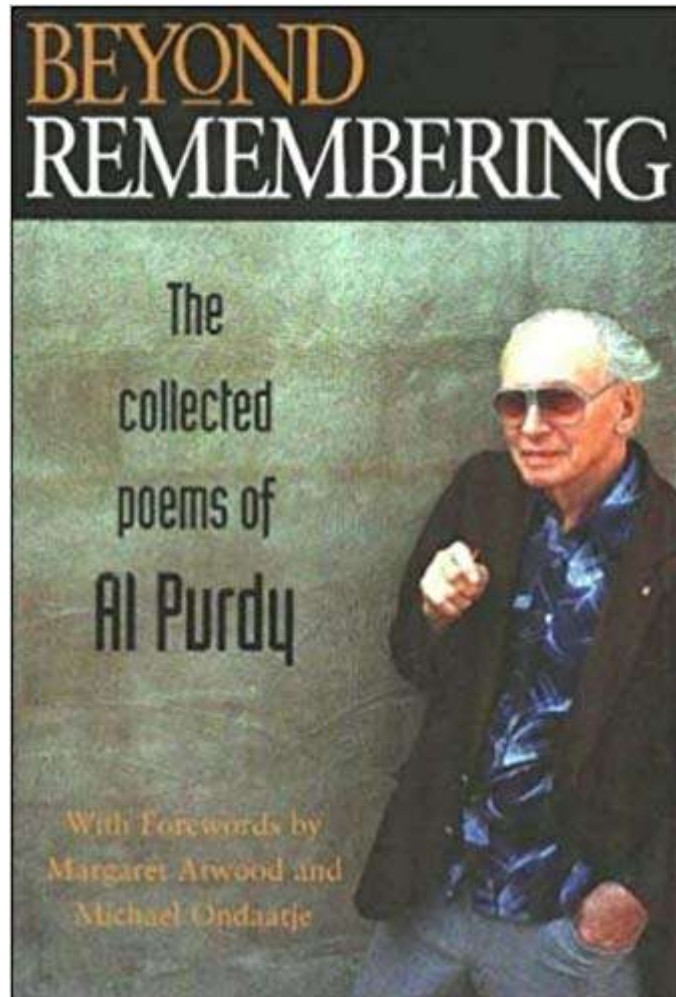


**A Study on Al Purdy's *Lament for the Dorsets* as an Elegy of Unique and Extinct Civilisation of the Dorsets**

Masilamani C.

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Remembering-Collected-Poems-Purdy/dp/1550172255>

**Abstract**

Al Purdy's *Lament for the Dorsets* explores the culture and the historical background of the Dorsets who were the inhabitants of the southern coast of Baffin Island, also known as the original Canadians. This article speculates the effects that lead to the extinction of the unique culture of the Dorsets and it brings out the elements of elegy existing in the poem, which further classifies the poem as an Elegy. These aborigines face problem with the changing environment and as the invaders were more technologically advanced, they were unable to survive. The theme of alienation and loneliness represent by different symbols in the poem also represents this poem as an Elegy. This article explores Purdy's role of concrete evidence in formulating social-ecological knowledge as well as role of

imagination and close observation of the natural world in the development of mythological theories of origin.

**Keywords:** Dorsets, Swan, Extinction, Lamentation, Death, and Culture.

## Introduction

Purdy is known as the Canadian poet of the underdogs as his writings mainly portray the lives of the minorities and the underprivileged population of Canada. His style of writing is simple, colloquial and erudite which describes the ordinary lives of the native Canadians. He has written his poems in his own unique style that made him one of Canada's most beloved poets. *Lament for the Dorsets* was written based on the experience of Al Purdy's visit to the Baffin Island during the summer of 1965, Northwest Territories of Canada. Purdy was very much advanced in his poetic career during this time. The poem was published in Purdy's 1968 collection, *Wild Grape Wine*. It portrays the lives of the early inhabitants of Inuit village on Baffin Island known as the Dorsets. Dorset civilisation was spread over panoptic area of Northern Canada and is believed to have existed for approximately two thousand years.

## The Dorset

The Dorset was a Paleo-Eskimoculture, lasting from 500 BC to between 1000 and 1500 AD, that followed the Pre-Dorset and preceded the Inuit in the Arctic of North America. It is named after Cape Dorset in Nunavut, Canada where the first evidence of its existence was found. The name Dorset was taken from Cape Dorset a place in Nunavut, Canada where the Dorsets first flourished. Dorsets were known by their miniature objects, tiny precision tools, and magical art objects. The Dorsets were estimated to have existed for about two thousand years. Its culture and people spread over a large area of the Northern part of Canada. It is acclaimed that the indigenous people of the America moved here from around 40,000 years ago. They are known to arrive by crossing over from Russia to Alaska. Historians who traced the fossil remains derived that some migrations also arrived here from Europe by crossing via Iceland and Greenland. Some must have even moved across from Easter Island and the Polynesian islands. In the first stanza of the poem, the Purdy has depicted the archaeological remains of the Dorsets in detail:

Animal bones and some mossy tent rings  
scrapers and spearheads  
carved ivory swans  
all that remains of the Dorset giants  
who drove the Vikings back to their long ships  
talked to spirits of earth and water. (1-5)

He traces back to the civilisation of Dorsets and tools and carvings bones left by Dorsets so on in the above mentioned lines.

## Giants

The Dorsets were portrayed as giant being so huge and strong who drove of the Vikings. They can kill any dangerous animal and can even break the backs of bears. They also have a unique skill whereby they can hide themselves behind the bone rafters or the minds of the modern invaders. The Dorsets used their sleds for hunting and not the hunting dogs. They dragged their sleds over the frozen oceans killing the seals for food.

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However, these Dorsets could not stand with the other men who invade the island as they were more advanced than them. The ‘little men’ came from the west and has hunting dogs with them which they used for killing seals. The poet has suggested that this could be one possible reason that led to the extinction of seals from the island. The other reason can be due to the change in climatic condition where the seals went back to the cold waters as they cannot survive in warm weather. The Dorsets were left in a confused state of mind; they could not figure the reason for death and destruction of the seals.

### Poet’s Prediction for Future

The poet was imagining a time in the future, the twentieth century people whereby they would not accept that the Dorsets would live along with them as he foresees:

Twentieth century people  
apartment dwellers  
executives of neon death  
warmakers with things that explode  
—they have never imagined us in their future  
how could we imagine them in the past. (30-35)

### Destruction of Land and Culture

Similarly, the Dorsets cannot accept them to take over their land and their culture. However, before they even realised, their land and their culture was being destroyed leaving only the ‘last Dorset’ to survive. The poet imagines this man as an old hunter with one lame leg and he named him Kudluk. Kudluk was carefully carving and transforming his thoughts into an ivory swan figure, putting all his efforts on it, in memory of his dead grand-daughter. As soon as he finished the carving, darkness covered his thoughts, a strong wind knocks down his tent and the snow covered his body. Six hundred years later, the ivory swan is still alive even though its creator has long died.

### Symbolic Inuits

The Dorsets were symbolised by Inuit legends as giants who scared easily. They were immortalized in the Al Purdy poem (1968). In a review of *Wild Grape Wine in Poetry*, the dean of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, called the volume a ‘satisfying’ book and states:

These poems go beyond Purdy’s interest in people and incidents to the process of human life within the larger process of nature; they create, not a personality and a speaking voice ... but a landscape with figures, both alive and dead. It’s this Purdy ... a lonely, defiant, almost anonymous man, dwarfed by rocks, trees, and time but making a commitment, finally, to his own place ... where grim ancestors reach up from the ground to claim him. (202-07)

### Really Lamenting

As the poet being a Canadian, Al Purdy in the poem *Lament for the Dorsets* is actually lamenting for the dying and perishing of the culture of the Dorsets one of the unique culture in Canada. Purdy displays how the invaders have taken away their belongings and destroying their habitation. The Dorsets are old generation people and they do not have much weapons and technologies to fight against the invaders. Purdy has portrayed the beautiful island where the Dorsets live peacefully before the coming of the invaders, but now they are nowhere to be found. Al Purdy is mourning for these Dorsets who does not even have a memorial tomb for their existence, so through his poem he was able to keep

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the Dorsets alive and tell the world about their existence in the lone island once upon a time in the history of Canada.

### Poem as an Elegy

Purdy's *Lament for the Dorsets* is actually written in the form of an elegy where he is dedicating the poem to the extinct Dorsets. The poem has a sad tone and like many elegies the content is serious. For a poem to be called an elegy, it should be one that revolves around the theme of lamentation for the death of someone or lost of something. Here too the poet laments for the Dorsets and represents the lost culture of the Dorsets. Therefore it can be said that the poem is an elegy. The title itself has the word lament which is the main component for an elegiac poem. The symbols which Purdy uses in the poem bring in more of the elegiac elements in the poem. The character of 'Kudluk' is wonderfully portrayed by Purdy making him the last Dorset to be alive. However, even Kudluk did not last long, he tried to survive but with the changes all around he was unable to cope and eventually dies. Kudluk in the last scenes of the poem is seen carving a swan and this serves as a 'swan song' for the Dorsets. Both Kudluk and the swan are symbols of alienation and loneliness this suggests the alienation and the loneliness of the entire Dorsets community.

### Symbol of Swan

Another important symbol in the poem is the 'swan'; it is special because of the symbolism surrounding it. It is known as the symbol of birth and most of all swans pertain death which is depicted in the 'swan song'. Swan song is derived from a myth which refers to a farewell or final appearance of action or work and part of ancient legend known to the Greeks and Romans. It is the belief that the swan sings as it dies, the beautiful and sweet song is supposed to be sung in ancient fable by a dying swan. Swan song also symbolizes the last act, final creative work, etc. of a person, as before his death. The Celtic tradition represents Swan as Soul, the characteristics that made all beings immortal. So from this aspect, regardless of the annihilation of the Dorsets their spirit continues to live through Al Purdy's poem.

Kinghorn has rightly brought out the symbol of swan in literature and quotes:

English poets, including Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Landor, Hood and Tennyson conjured up visions of singing and dying swans. Chaucer's 'jealous swan that agens his deth that singeth' from the Parlement of Birds and Shakespeare's 'I will play the swan and die in music' from the final Act of Othello are two out of many examples. Ben Jonson's allusion to Shakespeare as the 'Sweet Swan of Avon', composed seven years after the playwright's death, probably refers to Mute swans on the Avon, relating them to the ancient myth and recalling a Pythagorean belief that the souls of great poets passed into swans. (510)

The 'swan' in the poem is very much associated with death, which is one of the themes in an elegy.

### Conclusion

Purdy has wonderfully and intelligently used the symbols that add up to the melancholic nature of the poem. On the whole, *Lament for the Dorsets*, therefore, can be called as an elegy for the unique and extinct civilisation of the Dorsets. Purdy has made an impassioned call for the preservation of Inuit

people and their culture. It also serves as a national agglutinative and works as an international wedge asserting Canadian individuality as it acted more and more on the world stage.

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