Growing Up in San Fernando: Change and Growth In Michael Anthony's The Year in San Fernando

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A true novelist, Michael Anthony is very careful in *The Year in San Fernando* to make the reader conscious of the time process.[1] It determines the title; it determines the structure; it determines the dominant patterns of imagery: birth, growth, death, regeneration, the fundamental movements of nature, all fit neatly into Anthony's year. In other words, cyclical time patterns are superimposed on a clearly defined linear sequence of twelve months and the events of these months are thereby, to a considerable extent, universalised. The novel begins and ends, very symbolically, with Christmas. In between, the cane crop grows to maturity and is cut down only to give way to the new crops of the rainy season. At every point in the novel, the reader is made aware that changes are taking place in time. Nothing is static; the year moves on and all moves with it.

It is this atmosphere of constant change which the young narrator of the novel breathes and reflects. Francis is sensitive to the flux around him and is not a little awed by it:

> But I had seen the planting at the beginning of the year, and then what looked like endless green fields, and lately, the fires every night. And with the fires, the three chimneys of the Usine Ste Madeleine had started puffing smoke. For they were grinding the cane. When Owen explained it, it seemed very simple for him. But for me there was always a little mystery about the cane.[2]

This ability to *see* clearly but never to quite *understand* fully stays with Francis throughout the novel and it gives him an engaging humility. It is also part of his callowness as a twelve year old, of course, but this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Francis, like everything else, undergoes changes in the course of the year. He grows physically and psychologically and this makes for a gradual transformation of the narrative itself. This is not to say that Francis has become any more "reliable" as a narrator by the end of the novel or that he has completely lost his innocence and immaturity. He is still puzzled by many things as the bus goes back to Mayaro, but he has moved many steps toward an eventual understanding of his San Fernando experience. And he is certainly more aware at the end about such matters as human greed and hate and sexual relationships than he was at the beginning. Even if only in a very general and half-realized way, he divines that life is more complicated than it had appeared before in simple, idyllic Mayaro.

There is ample evidence of Francis's physical growth in the novel. Very early in the book he sees himself as one of "hundreds of little boys" (p. 11) and his smallness stands in marked contrast to all that is "big" around him: Mr. Chandles' "big" job with the "Great Asphalt Company"; Mr. Chandles' big house in the "great town" of San Fernando (which seems to dwarf him as he enters it); the "big" mirror before which he stands feeling small and awkward before going to the market with Brinetta. At the end of the novel Francis sees that he too has become "big." As he hurriedly prepares to leave for the homeward bus he finds that his shirt can scarcely button-up and, with careful artistry, Anthony sets him before the mirror once again:

> I went to see myself in the glass now. I looked so different standing there with brown pants and sky-blue shirt. It almost didn't look like me. It was strange and very good. (p. 182)

Here Francis clearly sees the results of a year's physical growing in himself. Again, he does not quite know what to make of what is so plainly before him, but he is pleased nonetheless.

This awareness of himself as a physical being on the landscape gradually builds up in the course of the year as *others* become aware of his growing and draw his attention to it. Brinetta from the start calls him a man and it doesn't take him long after this to realize that he is "already twelve" (p. 49) and not *only* twelve. No longer a "little boy," his physical development inevitably has sexual repercussions. Julia's sister, Enid, is attracted to him but the literalness of her comments — "Enid say you getting big man now" (p. 148) — makes a more immediate impact on him than the sexuality behind them:

> Perhaps they (Anna, Felix and Sil) would say, like Enid, that I had got big. I knew I had. I could feel it. Then, too, all my pants were now too short for me. They held me very tight at the seat. I got teased about this at school. Perhaps the first thing they would say at home was that my pants were tight. Perhaps they had grown too. (pp. 154-55)

Growth to the young Francis means simply physical growth. At first, he feels awkward (as in the passage above) and even embarrassed — as when Julia goes on about it (pp. 148-50) — but he comes ultimately to be happy about it. Thus while he has grown old enough to appreciate surface changes, he is still too young to understand what is happening to him sexually and, in a wider and deeper sense, psychologically. It is in allowing these more subtle changes to quietly and unobtrusively inform the on-going narrative that Anthony shows himself a writer of considerable talent.

In fact, a sexual awakening takes place in the young Francis in the course of his year at San Fernando. But this happens calmly. Anthony never allows it to become the central concern of the novel but he nonetheless provides broad hints throughout the narrative so that the reader, unlike Francis, is made fully aware of it. This, of

course, is the cause of much irony in the novel, but irony of a very gentle kind. The reader's amusement at Francis's inability to catch all the sexual innuendos that float around and within him is never allowed to become unsympathetic or condescending. Francis is twelve. As the months go by in San Fernando it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that Francis is actually undergoing puberty, this being part of his all-round physical development.

His first description of Julia indicates that he is sensitive to the attractions of the opposite sex and hence past the stage of ignoring girls:

> She was so slim and delicate that her dress seemed to drape around her, but she had a nice face, and her hair was combed up in the 'rose' style. It made her look — not glamorous — but extremely comely. (p. 43)

The conjunction is very carefully chosen, in fact, indicating as it does that Francis is not yet quite sure what to make of a slim figure in a slim dress. He appreciates a good-looking face, though, and hair that is fashionably styled (a few lines later he draws attention to her eyebrows and her eyes and her laughter: his focus is entirely on her face). A short time later, (under the house, feeling a hatred for Mr. Chandles and his mother who are quarrelling upstairs) he recalls this first encounter with Julia and he feels "cheered." He recalls the eyes, the eyebrows, the hair. He now compares her to his sister, Anna, who is back in Mayaro. Both girls (he still calls Julia a girl, not a woman) comb their hair the same way. But Julia is different somehow, "miles in front" of Anna and "very pleasant to see" (all p. 49). A few lines later he is even imagining asking her to marry him *if* he were grown up. The passage ends with an unconsciously understated "I liked her." This passage convincingly traces the movement of the mind of the adolescent Francis: the attraction to facial beauty; the comparison to the sister, a young female with whom he is familiar; the differentiation between female sibling and female non-sibling; the naive fantasizing

about marriage; the concluding declaration of puppy love. Though juvenile, Francis's feelings toward Julia as a member of the opposite sex have already grown more intimate since their first meeting. This infatuation grows, reaching a crisis point on Easter Day when, for the second time (the first time it didn't matter to him very much), he comes upon her and Chandles embracing in the dark. His fear of Chandles having seen him is accompanied by anger at Julia. He experiences a fit of jealousy described in unmistakably sexual terms:

> In a strange way Julia kept weighing on my mind. I passed my sleeves all round my head again and now they were wet. Blasts of music started coming from the school. I could hardly think of them but I could hear them coming short and sharp, seeming to stab the air . . . . I lay with my heart racing, waiting for Mr. Chandles' footsteps, and at the same time I could not help thinking what a dog Julia was. I turned from one side to the other and I felt as if there was a heat on my face. I said to myself, "She's pretty but she's only a tramp!" I turned and removed the wet bedclothes from under my cheek. And I lay in pain for some time. (pp. 84-85)

The author here handles what borders almost on a masturbation scene with superb control. He attributes Francis's heated condition to both fear and sexual anger. In doing so, he is able to use powerful images of heat and force suggestively without being crude. In doing so, too, he conveys Francis's own confusion about what is happening to him.

Unable to understand the sexual stirrings in himself, Francis feels uncomfortable when sexual matters are dealt with frankly. For example, a short time after his jealous fit, Julia confronts him with the stark facts about Chandles, Marva, and herself. He doesn't want to hear about them; he has come rather childishly to tell her about Ma's visit. The coming of the rains seems to cool down the relationship between Francis and Julia considerably and they are only brought together once in the second half of the book (the author clearly does not want the sexual element in the novel to assume major importance). Fran-

cis never completely forgets her, though, and he dreams of her on the night before he leaves for Mayaro:

> She laughed out in a vulgar way. She said: 'Little boy like you — before you study your book you studying to love big woman!' Shocked and excited I had awakened from that dream. (p. 179)

Julia, it seems, will dwell forever in Francis's subconscious.

It is mainly through the relationship with Julia, then, that Anthony expresses the gradual sexual awakening of his young narrator. There are other, more casual hints in the novel too. Silly, too-obvious, ones like the recurring references to the "Ladies of the Night" and the "love-birds." More substantial intimations such as Francis's excitement at the preparations for the dance at the school, a sequence which builds up very effectively to the night of the dance itself, the night on which he sees Chandles and Marva together for the second time. One could perhaps see sexual significance also in the whole background of growth in nature (the harvesting of the canes and the accompanying fires, the abundance in the market-place after the rains have come), but this would be to destroy the quiet tone that pervades the whole book. The only shrill note in Francis's sexual awakening is his jealous fit over Julia and this is carefully controlled and never repeated. One must take into account also what the author chooses to leave out. Francis and his peers *never* discuss sex, for example (his relationship with his school friends is generally peripheral, in fact). How perfectly "realistic" this would have been, but how destructive too of the novel's mood! Too prolonged an interaction with Julia would have caused the same damage. In short, Anthony is extremely careful to understate, though never to let us forget, his young narrator's developing sexuality. This allows for very subtle effects on the continuing narrative because obviously if the narrator is changing in the course of the year, the view-point he provides should be gradually altered to suit his steadily changing self.

The pertinent point here is not Francis's reliability as recorder of the events that occur around him. Whether or not the boy reports these with increasing accuracy is of secondary importance to the process of change taking place within him. Neither can it be said that he develops a more stable "self" in the course of the novel. Anthony eschews the traditional method of solid characterization in favour of the more modern and more flexible approach which allows for a strong hinting at psychological change in the direction of maturity without positing an achieved and stable state.[3] Ramchand recognizes Anthony's use of the flexible method when he states:

> . . . *The Year in San Fernando* continuously leads us away from a settled notion of the person to a more liberal view of latent and only sparodically realized possibilities.[4]

I find, though, that the phraseology here makes Anthony's method seem more unique than it really is; the author is simply working in a by-now well established twentieth century tradition found, at its most complex, in a writer like Proust. Also, Ramchand's concept of "open consciousness" upon which the above statement is based does not recognize sufficiently the process of growth. This process is behind Francis's ever-changing "impressions" of people and the world around him: it accounts for the barely noticeable but important alterations of focus on the meagre and generally uninteresting surface action of the novel.

The first alteration of focus comes early in the narrative in the shift from the plural to the singular. Before he is told by his mother that he is going to San Fernando, Francis speaks with a group voice: "we had heard only very little about Mr. Chandles"; "It was the whispers about Mr. Chandles and Marva that we heard so often in our house" (both p. 7): "sometimes it impressed us also" (p. 8); "we said nothing" (p. 10). This reflects his boyishness, his very close identification, in fact his merging, with his peer group. Immediately (the very next line) after his mother's excited announcement, Francis switches

to the singular pronoun, "I was flabbergasted. I did not know what it was all about." Anthony has thereby isolated Francis's consciousness from the rest of his group but this has been done almost imperceptibly. This isolation of consciousness is essential to the technique of first-person narration but, in addition, it acts as an early signal of Francis's growing up. Separated from his boyhood (and communal) environment for the first time in his life, Francis is also to feel a terrible loneliness during his first days in San Fernando. On his first night at the Chandles' house he cannot even sleep because he is alone without his brothers next to him in bed. Psychologically alone, Francis soon develops a sense of self which is manifested specifically in growing self-reliance: "Brinetta had said it was proper to stand on your own two feet and be good for yourself. Maybe one should be like that" (p. 48). Typically, Francis feels joy at his ability to handle himself at the market-place and a kind of mischievous self-satisfaction when Mrs. Chandles is unable to get any information out of him about Marva (p. 48). Throughout the year he often thinks of his "boy days" in Mayaro, but with an increasingly balanced sense of nostalgia and love that contrasts with his early, sometimes desperate, longing to return home.

Two elements of these memories of Mayaro stand out: his group activities and his mother. The changes in focus on these two reflect the changes in Francis himself. Anthony uses parallelism again (as in the two mirror scenes mentioned above) to show growth:

> Also, I often thought of the cricket we played in the yard under that scorching sun. Ma . . . would come rushing to the tiger-wire fence to drive us in from the heat. When she went back we would steal chances to play and not make much noise. . . ." (p. 64)

This is in April of the year in San Fernando: the sense of "we" shows itself still strong in his thoughts of Mayaro and his mother stands a stable central figure in the idyll.

Much later in the year, as he anticipates his return, the same thoughts come back to him:

> It was easy for me to picture what they would say when I first arrived. I would want to play cricket right away, though. Perhaps they would think they could get me out easily. These fellers here could bowl harder than Sil and Felix and I still made runs against them. I wondered if Cyril would be there while I was batting in the savannah and afterwards maybe he would want to give me a job when I left school. Sil and Felix wouldn't get me out so quickly. Not with those hop-and-drop balls. But Ma might chase us from the sun. I wondered if Ma would chase us from the sun. (p. 155)

The earlier communal "we" has now been divided into two camps, "I" and "they." Francis wishes to return to the group activities that he left behind a year before, but now with a strong sense of his own individuality not untouched by a litle city pride ("These fellers here could bowl harder than Sil and Felix and I still made runs against them . . . . those hop-and-drop balls"). Noteworthy too is the way in which his consciousness shifts forward to thoughts of school-leaving and getting a job and, as in the earlier memory, there is Ma. But Ma is not thought of with the certainty of eight months before. She *might* chase them. He wonders about her just as he wonders about her fortitude when she visits him after Easter. He can no longer think of her in simple terms — chasing them out of the sun, gossiping about Marva and Mr. Chandles, slaving for Mrs. Samuels. His fleeting, childish anxiety about her at the beginning of the novel: "They said she would run her blood to water. Hearing this so often I seriously feared it would happen. I always thought if it could happen, would it happen one of these days?" (p. 12) is replaced by a deeper, more measured compassion that nearly shatters him:

> Her eyes looked large and seemed to be forming tears again at the corners. I noticed that her face was a little more sunken, so her cheekbones stood out. Her head, very full of hair, surprised me because I had not remembered so much grey upon it. Looking at her like that from right above her, and seeing her eyes looking so full of pain, I at once felt weak and desolate. (pp. 88-89)

Very naturally, Ma is the strongest emotional link to Francis's pre-San Fernando life and hence the hardest to weaken. She is a potential threat to his newly forming sense of self and for this reason the author prolongs her visit to San Fernando over two chapters as he very carefully follows the changing relationship between mother and son. At first, it seems as if Francis has returned to his boyhood state of emotional dependency: "'Ma,' I cried, running towards her. I absolutely forgot myself" (p. 86); but it soon becomes clear that Francis can now regard his mother with a certain degree of detachment. Anthony purposely keeps mother and son from becoming intimate in the course of the visit: Mrs. Chandles occupies much of Ma's time and Francis keeps the truth of the Chandles family quarrel away from her even though she offers him the opportunity of returning home with her if he is being badly treated. Ostensibly, he does not want to destroy Ma's illusions about the Chandles family but implicit in his silence also is no small measure of independence from his mother's (and Mayaro's) custodial clutches. He feels dejected when she departs but the cane-fires jolt him back to an awareness of the liberating cyclical rhythms of nature that he has been assimilating over the period of half a year (pp. 94-96). These have broadened his perspective, indicating his absorption into a world that is much wider and more adult than that which revolved around his group activities and his mother in Mayaro.

Most of Francis's activities in San Fernando itself revolve around another older woman, the unhappy Mrs. Chandles, and in his dealing with her he again shows a growing maturity. She is the third woman in the young boy's life and the one with whom he has the most direct and prolonged contact during the year. He experiences a range of emotions around the old lady — timidity, fear, hatred, happiness, affection, sympathy. These follow one after another in sequence as Francis comes gradually to a more considered evaluation of her. True enough, part

of his reaction to her might be explained by *her* treatment of him: very simply, when she is harsh towards him, he dislikes her, and when she becomes kind, he feels affection. But this would be to over-simplify the situation and to do little justice to the more complex psychological process that the author is tracing in the young boy. The initial timidity and fear which Francis feels around Mrs. Chandles (and her son) reflects very neatly his boyish innocence in the face of (as Julia later puts it in another context) "big people's business" (p. 104). He cringes before the old woman's harshness: fresh from Mayaro, Francis feels "unsettled." This fear continues and, as Francis experiences more of her behaviour, he feels himself hating her. But in the midst of this early period in which Francis feels intense dislike, the author drops, very stealthily, the following lines of quick reflection:

> And sometimes my thoughts pondered here on this house and on Mr. Chandles and this mother of his, and often I remembered what Brinetta had said, that the old lady wasn't so bad, it was the old age. (p. 52)

The lines show an opening in the direction of understanding, a potential in Francis to move beyond his own raw emotions towards sympathy. The way is open to a rapprochement between the old woman and the young boy. This begins on Easter Sunday at lunch when, for the first time, she is kind towards him (pp. 71-79). Francis's response to her behaviour here is one of cautious appreciation. He is happy at her affability but he realizes that it is "strange." He is not overwhelmed by it. The old lady, as Brinetta had said, may not be so bad after all. As their relationship becomes established on a new and friendlier plane, Francis displays a remarkable lack of naivete in assessing the changes taking place. A key passage (and one worth quoting in full) comes right after Ma has returned to Mayaro. Mrs. Chandles tells Francis that he is "nearly a San Fernando boy now" (p. 98). His reaction to this is warm but by no means childish: the wiles are those of a near adult:

> I looked up at her broad, toothless grin and I tried to look pleasant. The fact was, I did feel a little pleasant to hear her say that. There was nothing false in her grin. On her night gown was a little brooch Ma had left with her. Right away I tried to count how many brooches my mother had left with people. There was the one Tanty Alice had. I could not think of the others straight away. This one looked odd on a night gown. A brooch on a night gown! It nearly made me laugh. Mrs. Chandles thought I was smiling with her. She looked strangely pleased. Her smile had big pleats on the cheeks and under the chin and the flabby skin round her eyes shone out like two jumbie-beads. It was strange, because she was looking spooky somehow, and yet she looked so sincere, I believed in her. We smiled broadly. (p. 98)

The exchange of smiles (partly spontaneous, partly calculated on Francis's part) heralds the establishment of a new basis for the relationship, one of mutual respect and understanding. The closeness between the old woman and the boy is confirmed beyond doubt in the unnecessarily drawn-out scene (thick with an atmosphere of camaraderie) on the rainy July evening as the two of them sit down to another meal (pp. 111-21). Again Anthony has used parallelism (two meal-time sequences) to indicate important developments.

It is Mrs. Chandles' approaching death in the closing chapters of the novel which forces Francis as never before to try to cope with the realities of human experience. This comes, appropriately, at the end of his year in San Fernando. At first, Francis feels helpless at Mrs. Chandles' rapidly deteriorating condition along with terror at the prospect of death:

> There were moments when I had heard her groaning in the night, or vomiting, and I wished somebody could do something. Not because she was disturbing me. I couldn't sleep anyway. Nor was it because I loved her so much, although I felt well towards her now. It was just because I had seen what was coming and I didn't want anybody to die and I was afraid of death in the house. And perhaps I would miss Mrs. Chandles a little. (pp. 167-68)

But Anthony prolongs the old lady's illness over five chapters during which time the now older Francis is given

the chance to come to grips with the fact of death. Proximity to the dying woman (bringing the porridge, propping up the pillows, helping to change the dirty sheets) and his observation of the "elderly lady" who is nursing Mrs. Chandles, bring him gradually to a calmer view of the situation:

> I watched her rush in and out of the room, always with hot water on the fire, always with foul-smelling bedclothes to wash. And yet she did everything with zest. It was as if she was just getting the feel of the wrestle with death and was enjoying it. I thought maybe she had always been at the side of the dying. I thought maybe it made no difference to her if death won all the time. (p. 168)

Francis learns that he too must "wrestle with death" and extend a steady, sympathetic hand to the dying (his final, calm hand-shake with Mrs. Chandles should be seen in this light). This is quickly learnt because he is now an older, more experienced person than he was a year ago when he first came to San Fernando, fresh and carefree, from Mayaro.

Francis's relationship with Mr. Chandles, the man responsible for precipitating him into the heady world of San Fernando in the first place, is nowhere as interesting or as complex as his relationship with the three important women in the novel. In Mayaro, the boy displays the awe of the young and the unsophisticated in the face of the city slicker: Chandles, "tidy and elegant" in his coat and tie, appears "aristocratic" to the villagers (Francis, it must be remembered, is speaking in the group voice at this stage). In San Fernando, it soon becomes clear to the isolated Francis that Chandles is something less than noble. For a while his feelings towards the man follow fairly closely the course of his feelings towards the old woman — timidity, fear, hatred. There is ambivalence too, however, in the boy's feelings about Chandles because he represents at this early stage a link to Mayaro life:

> It was not easy to think whether I was glad to see Mr. Chandles, or not. He was the only person in San Fernando I could say I knew. For I had been seeing his face for so many months, maybe a year. (p. 45)

Chandles' value as emotional link decreases, however, as tensions in the household become unbearable, Francis finds that he can only relax when Chandles is not around because then there are no quarrels. Chandles' affairs with Marva and Julia (especially Julia) are another source of anxiety for the adolescent boy but, by keeping Chandles off the scene for much of the book, the author keeps the tension between the two from developing into the full-fledged hostility. Absence, in fact, allows for an eventual fondness between the man and the boy. Three days before Francis leaves for Mayaro Chandles shows himself amiable and frank, talking to Francis like an adult. Francis responds sympathetically:

> And he stood there close to me and though I was looking outside I had the feeling that he was worried now and had lost his composure because there was so much on his mind. I was looking outside but there was growing within me a strange, close feeling for him. It was coming home to me that at this late hour we were becoming friends. I could feel it there between us. I could feel it strong and real . . . I looked down at the sweetbroom and at the lovebirds and inside me I was feeling new. (p. 176)

This is the same humanity which Francis displays in his final views of his mother and Mrs. Chandles. It springs from an increased consciousness of the complex nature of human behaviour and hence is clear proof of the boy's psychological growth. It is testimony also to his moral worth.

The Year in San Fernando is a novel about change and growth over a one year period. This is seen as both universal and specific. Against a background of change and growth in nature (the seasonal cycles and their effect on agriculture) Michael Anthony traces the physical and psychological development of the twelve-year-old Francis as he enters into early adolescence. There are clear indications throughout the narrative of increasing maturity of both body and mind although Francis cannot be said to have achieved a stable adolescent self by the end of the novel. The exposure to the "more complicated" life of

San Fernando, however, has left him with a greater awareness of the puzzle that is life itself, and the compassion that grows in him shows a deepening understanding of the human condition. Anthony's use of a first-person narrator, and this being Francis himself, makes for a point-of-view that is in some ways limited. Nonetheless, the question of reliability can be misleading, because the surface action (meagre in any case) is not the major concern of the novel. The value of the novel lies deeper, in its success at conveying the evolving state of Francis's mind, his movement toward maturity, as he tries to make sense of experience.

NOTES

[1]For discussions of the crucial importance of the time-process to the genesis of the novel form and the presentation of character see Ian Watt, *The Rise of The Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), pp. 21-25, and Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 169-70.

[2]Michael Anthony, *The Year in San Fernando* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), pp. 95-96. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

[3]A statement of Scholes and Kellogg, p. 203, is relevant to my point here: "One of the major trends in twentieth-century characterization is away from the attempt to penetrate the individual psyche and toward a focus on the apprehension of 'impressions' which claim no absolute validity as facts."

[4]Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 221.