

## *Between two Gardens of Eden: Al Condraj in William Saroyan's Parsley Garden*

### **Abstract**

*This ironic pastoral focuses on Al, the eleven-year-old child of an Armenian immigrant woman. Left to his own devices, he must find a way to fit in capitalist America, where money is the key to success and possessions. Unable to differentiate between his mother's small paradise of a garden where he can simply reach out and partake, he must deal with some harsh realities that include humiliation and rejection thoughtlessly doled out to an immigrant child blinded by the plastic glitter of the American dream. Juxtaposing the narrator's voice with the sections of dialogue reveal the boy's actions as they actually occurred. Since this is also a story of growing up on the periphery of American society, we might wonder whether the boy's present actions also are a foreshadowing of what he will be like when he becomes an adult.*

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**Keywords:** Saroyan; pastoral; immigrants.

When Al Condraj wakes up in the morning, the day stretches before him. He has nothing to do. His mother is a day laborer in a fig-packing plant who leaves for work at dawn and comes back at irregular times, depending on the amount of work available that day. Al has no friends to hang out with, and there is no father in the picture. Although he is only eleven, he fends for himself. Mother and son live in a poor shack of a house, but their poverty is alleviated with the help of a vegetable garden, planted, maintained, and named for the parsley grown in it by Al's mother. In terms of physical sustenance, when Al feels like a snack, he can reach out into his mother's vegetable garden and pull up some parsley, peppers or other vegetable or herb. If he is thirsty he can drink from the hose she uses to water her garden. The above alludes to the basic premise of the pastoral, and fits in with Huth (2011), who claims "that the pastoral landscape has something to offer, whether it is a rustic feast, country entertainments, or simply a homely cottage in which to rest for the night. And as it is extended from one person to another... The pastoral landscape is often imagined as an ideal world of respite ..., but it is actually the invitation that creates the ideality of that world" (Huth, 2011, p. 44).

This definition, to a large extent, is applicable to the parsley garden in the story, as its existence teaches the boy that he has an open invitation, so to speak, to reach out and partake.

As Al drifts back and forth between the center of town and his Fresno neighborhood, he searches for pennies in the street, as if they might magically grow there for him to pick up and enjoy. At other times he wanders into the box-making factory, where he observes “Johnny Gale” who nailed “boxes for ten minutes” (Saroyan, 1987, p. 55). The man worked with “a box maker’s hatchet”, a kind of hammer with a split top used to pull out nails, and everybody in Fresno said he was the fastest box maker in town. “He was the closest thing to a machine any packing house ever saw. Foley himself was proud of Johnny Gale” (Saroyan, 1987, p. 55).

Gale is a kind of role-model to Al, a fact that attests to the paucity of male adults in his life, underscored by a memory Al nurtures fondly of how “one day at Sunday school, two or three years ago, Johnny had greeted him and said, ‘How’s the boy?’” (Saroyan, 1987, p. 55). The fact that Johnny apparently doesn’t even know the child’s name seems irrelevant to Al. To him, Gale’s passing remark is a sign that the man pays special attention him. This early memory, plus the fact the Johnny silently suffers Al’s presence at the factory, may even have set in motion the events in the story: used to gathering objects and food, Al turns to collecting the nails Johnny discards, and now that he has them, perhaps it is not surprising that eventually he gets the idea that he should have a hammer as well, in a subconscious effort to emulate Johnny Gale.

Communication between Al and his mother is impeded by the latter’s lack of English. Al is the child of immigrants, and his mother has not mastered the language of her new home. Hers is a marginal existence on the periphery of society, and in a way, Al feels that he understands America much better than his mother. As such, she is hardly an authority figure in his life, and Al learns to make his own decisions. In any case, the mother’s work hours start at dawn and her seasonal work as a fig packer involves overtime in season and lay-offs after the harvest is over. The family lives on very little, and the garden most likely keeps them from starving.

It is in this garden that Mrs. Condray feels most at home, as it represents the smells and ambience of the country of her birth. Not surprising, then, she invests in her crop: she cleans, weeds, and waters the garden and has even named it after its most pungent herb- the parsley. To improve the comfort of her garden, Mrs. Condray even spends some of her hard-earned cash to get a table built so she can serve supper outside, and feel as if she were still in the old country (Saroyan, 1987, p. 54), and the pastoral theme created by the existence of this secluded, verdant spot, is magnified by the language used to describe it.

To begin with, the description of the Condray garden virtually echoes the Biblical description

of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:20 and onward, the Bible describes the formation of the Garden of Eden which is tended by Adam, and watered by a special river. In Saroyan's story, the godhead is a woman, and the child a wannabe helpmate, ironically, created from her body. Lacking true communication, Al and his mother can find common ground, literally, in their parsley garden, and so, if Al wants to earn her approval, he must work toward adding to the creation which is his mother's garden. On a semiotic level, the mother may acknowledge Al only if he carries out an action that will establish him as her helpmate in the parsley garden. This creates the intertextuality with the Biblical story of the garden, from its creation to the expulsion of the tender of that garden.

And so, in order to sustain the theme of the pastoral, we must find the intrusion that will destroy its innocence and purity, and lead to a symbolic expulsion from Condraj's Fresno paradise. In other words, if Al breaches the innocence of the garden by allowing sin to enter it, the parsley garden will be forever changed just as in the Biblical Paradise Adam and Eve could no longer remain in the garden but had to leave and cope with the realities of the world. The fragility of the parsley garden is tested, when Al, wishing to prove his manhood, is tempted by a little hammer he finds at Woolworths, the glistening five-and-ten store in the center of town. The phallic hammer leads to Al's downfall as an innocent child, and, symbolically, may herald the destruction of the garden by the progress of the American way, for instance by new construction that will plough the garden under and erect a stone edifice in its place.

When the story begins, the narrator introduces Al drifting through the store, and relates his sudden uncontrollable impulse to have the small hammer he sees on display. In a way Al simply acts true to his upbringing: when he wants something, he reaches out and pulls. Here it is no different: he simply picks up the hammer as he would have a bell pepper or a penny, or perhaps some nails (Saroyan, 1987, pp. 54-55). However, Woolworths, that American, modern, capitalist paradise, is governed by different rules and laws, less forgiving than the agricultural rules of the Condraj's Parsley Garden.

The coin of Woolworth's realm is neither physical labor nor clan entitlement. In Huth's terms, there is no invitation to take or partake at Woolworths, rather the opposite is true, and in Woolworths the material possessions are all forbidden fruit, unless one possesses the proper means to own them. Al wants the hammer, and rationalizes his desire by thinking that this snake-like, phallic tool could enable him to contribute something meaningful to his mother's garden. After all, she likes to have her supper there and entertain her friend Leeza Abbott (Saroyan, 1987, p. 56), but has no bench, and so she must carry chairs from the house each time she wants to eat outside. How nice it would be to use the nails in his apple box and build a bench for his mother to prove his manhood. And so, Al takes the hammer, and in one fell swoop everything is changed forever, and the hammer, the temptation, "that he slipped into the pocket of his coveralls" signifies this (Saroyan, 1987, p. 51), even though he cloaks

the theft in his intention of building a bench for the garden. Of course, Al is caught red-handed.

In the male-dominated, capitalist realm of the shimmering and confusing American dream, Al is quickly roughly detained by a store clerk, and brought to the manager's office to await his punishment. There he is forced to stand in terrifying silence, and then, after what seems like an eternity, he is ejected with the warning never to return unless he has the appropriate key to Woolworths, meaning money (Saroyan, 1987, p. 52). The Woolworths' management has spoken; they rest assured that Al will be too terrified to return, but they take no precautions to prevent this, unlike the gates of the Biblical Garden of Eden where G-d placed cherubim with flaming swords to force man to earn his keep the hard way in the natural world. (Genesis, 3: 24) Al, on the outside now, and no longer allowed even to look in, must make up his mind about his future.

We must remember that Al Condraj is only a child, but he is the child of immigrants, left to his own devices by circumstance, and he must be responsible for his own actions. Left to fend for himself, come and go as he pleases, he must now distance himself from the store, in spite of his longing for revenge, and he knows that he must face his mother to tell her of his day.

At the entrance to the Parsley Garden there are no cherubim with flaming swords either, and there is nothing to bar Al's entrance, except for his own conscience, and he is afraid to go inside. To underscore the importance of the garden and his mother's love for it, the story relates that Al diverts a bit of the water meant for the vegetables, and takes a long drink at the hose used to water the plants (Saroyan, 1987, p. 54). Now, with his courage sustained by the healing and nourishing liquid together with the chunk of parsley he pulls from the soil he is ready to face his mother. Metaphorically, he ingests some of the things she cares for deeply, and this gives him the feeling that he is not facing her all alone.

After the long drink of water he sat down where the parsley itself was growing and he pulled a handful of it out and slowly ate it. Then he went inside and told his mother what had happened. He even told her what he had thought of doing after he had been turned loose: to go back and steal the hammer again.

'I don't want you to steal,' his mother said in broken English. 'Here is ten cents. You go back to that man and you give him this money and you bring it home, that hammer.'

'No, Al Condraj said. 'I won't take your money for something I don't really need. I just thought I ought to have a hammer, so I could make something if I felt like it. I've got a lot of nails and some box wood, but I haven't got a hammer.'

'Go buy it, that hammer,' his mother said.

'No,' Al said.

'All right,' his mother said. 'Shut up. That's what she always said when she didn't know what else to say.' (Saroyan, 1987, pp. 54-55)

Her 'Shut up!' signifies that she has run out of words. Saroyan juxtaposes her fractured English with the conversation she has the next day with Leeza. The language used here is flowery and rich, so as to show that Al's mother has the ability to communicate fluently, just not with her son, the little American.

Al, then, is a typical second-generation immigrant, longing to shed the trappings of the old world, including language, and to acquire some wealth so as to have a stake in the American capitalist world. The capitalist paradise is much more attractive than the garden his mother tends, but he cannot cut himself off from her, as he is young, has a strong sense of loyalty to his mother, and has nowhere to go in any case. Therefore, Al must decide whether he can sustain his mother's way of life in the new country, reject and discard all she represents in order to start a new way of his own, or find a way to merge the old and the new. As many other children of immigrants, Al has the vicarious experience of American prosperity, but lacks the means to acquire it. He needs a shortcut to gain entry into the American world of small hammers displayed temptingly in shiny stores. The problem is his banishment from Woolworths and the dire consequence of police and possible incarceration should he return before he has any money to spend. Unwilling to accept his mother's hard-earned pennies, Al must now either abandon Woolworths or use his ingenuity to achieve that hammer.

By this time, the hammer has grown beyond its minute proportions because of his anger and humiliation. The latter fan his desire, and he cannot put the idea of the hammer aside. It has taken on an aura of forbidden fruit, so to speak, so that he longs for it all the more strongly. This longing fuels his anger and resentment toward the powerful guardians of the store who, in his eyes, have humiliated and insulted him. Al is but a child, not yet willing, or perhaps able to take responsibility for his actions; he can only see how the men threatened him, made him stand on that mat for a long time, and ejected him into the alley behind the store as so much superfluous garbage (Saroyan, 1987, pp. 52-53). He longs for revenge!

Thus far, Al's foraging has brought him food, water, and an apple box- another allusion to the Garden of Eden story- filled with discarded nails. He spends the evening after the botched shoplifting attempt with that apple box, quietly rummaging through his "junk", but unlike the parsley garden, where things appear fully functional out of the soil, the apple box holds no such promise, and in spite of his search through his stuff, "it was all there, the same as yesterday" (Saroyan, 1987, p. 55), suggesting that the apple box cannot, by itself, change its content into anything usable and offers no salvation.

When Mrs. Condray gets up the next morning at dawn, Al is already gone, and he essentially disappears from the story until his mother comes back from work and sees him inside her garden. Like her, the reader, as a result, has no idea where the boy has spent his day until the narrator brings him back to the story. Consequently, like her, we have only his word to go on

when he tells his mother of his adventures that day. One thing is clear, however, as the chronology shows that Al is home before her, unlike the previous day. The narrator tells us that he is a different child, and his demeanor manifests that he has grown serious and industrious, intent on his labors. Gone is that little boy who needed the cleansing water and the parsley to purify and fortify himself before he could enter the parsley garden and his mother's realm. Together with the mother and Leeza, the reader see a serious-browed child.

When the two women reached the garden it was almost nine o'clock, but still daylight, and [Mrs Condraj] saw her son nailing pieces of box wood together, making something with a hammer. It looked like a bench. He had already watered the garden and tidied up the rest of the yard, and the place seemed very nice, and her son seemed very serious and busy.

(Saroyan, 1987, p. 57)

As nothing like that had ever happened before, Al seems to have matured into a partner, and perhaps even a helpmate to his mother. From his actions we can see that he knows how to use modern tools to improve the verdant garden, and free his mother to her female task of feeding him.

There is no conversation between mother and son while Leeza Abbott is there with them. Instead, we observe the two women as they eat old-country style salad and homemade bread, and occupy themselves with old-country ritual, such as reading the coffee grounds. Their words flow in the language of the old country, as the two women go beyond small talk and turn to "stories about their experiences in the old country and ... in Fresno" (Saroyan, 1987, p. 57).

It is only after Leeza leaves that the mother turns to Al to question him about the hammer he has so suddenly acquired, and her language turns stilted and fractured again, because she has switched to English.

In a story, the narrator controls events, and in *The Parsley Garden*, the narrator has chosen to turn away from Al, so that the boy's explanation to his mother, and the reader, about how the hammer came into his possession is delivered in direct speech. The narrator delivers no commentary, and is no longer privy to Al's inner thoughts. Like the mother, the reader sees the boy at work in the garden, wielding a hammer, building a bench and looking serious, and together with her, the reader has to wait until supper is over and Leeza Abbott leaves. Al retreats into the background, and does not even join the women as they eat, smoke, and talk. He listens in, and he knows they are not discussing him, just as the reader, and like the reader, he probably knows what will happen when Leeza leaves.

Mrs. Condraj lacks subtlety when she turns to her son. "Where you get it, that hammer, Al?" (Saroyan, 1987, p. 57). Considering the events till now, there seems no logical explanation beyond the option that Al did what he had wanted to do at some point, namely, go back and steal that hammer. While the narrator kept Al in focus, that did not happen, he merely fumed

and plotted, and eventually went to bed where he tossed and turned most of the night (Saroyan, 1987, p. 56). And now, having to answer his mother, Al stands in her parsley garden, close to the bench he has made, and tells her that he worked for the hammer. She finds this hard to believe, as should the reader, but Al has his story ready, and sits down on his homemade garden bench, as if for support. His story is detailed, and specific. He worked for the hammer, he tells his mother, and adds that he did a good job. The clerk who had caught him offered him work and he was so happy with Al's performance that he took him back to the manager where he was offered the job for the summer, with pay of one dollar a day. However, Al only wanted the hammer, and the clerk gave it to him. The dollar, Al tells his mother, he refused to take, and left it lying on the desk. He also refused the job after the day he had worked, and "just looked at [the clerk and Mr. Clement the manager] and picked up [the] hammer and walked out." Then he came home and made the bench. Run out of questions, the mother ends the conversation by saying "Shut up", and going to bed (Saroyan, 1987, pp. 57-58).

From this point on, the reader must decide who to believe. Did Al steal the hammer? Did he earn it? The narrator offers no insight. We have only the direct speech conversation to go on, as if the narrator has stepped aside, and so it is up to the mother and the reader to examine the child's story. Some facts remain: Al had wanted to avenge what he perceived as his lost dignity, and he had wanted to go back and steal the hammer. His mother worked an extra half a day for sixty-five cents, and she considered that good money. In fact, she stayed the overtime although she had run out of food and would come home late and hungry (Saroyan, 1987, p. 56). Therefore, the idea that the boy could refuse to take a whole dollar for a day's work makes no sense. The fact is that he had no dollar to show his mother, and he circumvents this problem by claiming that he had refused the money (Saroyan, 1987, p. 58).

Mr. Clement had allegedly given him the hammer after one hour, and even that would have been extremely generous, showing that Al has no perception of the value of money. While Al told his mother that he worked in the store, he could not describe the job he had done beyond saying that he had "carried different stuff to the different counters", yet unable to say what exactly that "stuff" was and why the clerk could not do this job (Saroyan, 1987, p. 58). In Al's story, the clerk insists that the boy be paid "at least a dollar", something that is hardly in this man's job description, and it is doubtful that he himself earned that kind of cash. Finally, just the day before, Al had been ejected from the store with a dire warning never to return, and the clerk had been extremely hostile to the child (Saroyan, 1987, p. 52), possibly because shoplifters were his responsibility, and he paid for goods missing from the shelf. Whatever it may be, the clerk was diligent in catching Al, and angry enough to threaten the boy with violence, saying that Al should be hit over the head with the hammer he had stolen (Saroyan, 1987, p. 52).

It is, therefore, inconceivable that Al returned to that store and was offered a job. Chances are that if the clerk had seen him, Al would have been arrested. Since he obviously was not, the only true utterance he made was that he “just looked at them and picked up [the] hammer and walked out” (Saroyan, 1987, p. 58).

This time Al is not caught. He brings the hammer home and builds the bench for his mother to mitigate his actions. Perhaps the most telling event is that “Al Condraj finished the bench and sat on it”, and only then had the courage to deny his mother’s accusation that he stole the hammer (Saroyan, 1987, p. 58).

If the previous day Al screwed up his courage to face his mother by drinking the garden’s water and eating its produce, he now gets his courage by touching the bench he has made. He gets support, literally, from the bench he has hammered together with the purloined hammer. The pastoral is complete. Al has brought temptation into the garden, and neither he nor it can ever be the same.

In a way, the hammer is the bridge between the two metaphoric gardens of Eden in this story, the old world versus the new. And, as suggested by Scruggs (2004), “as a general rule the pastoral within the urban context ... is almost always treated ironically” (Scruggs, 2004, p. 323), so that from the outset, the garden in Fresno has no future. Al’s actions are an extension of this ironic paradise, as we may fairly safely assume that the garden was planted on land Mrs. Condraj did not really own, and if this is the case, Al’s actions can be seen as an extension of her own. Still, the boy, a second generation immigrant, must in his own life integrate two worlds, that of his mother, her life close to the soil, and ancient laws that afford ownership to the person who tills the land, and that of the store and its immutable laws of possession and an ironic promise of the American dream. It remains to be seen whether Al will be able to merge his worlds and internalize the laws of the capitalist paradise as a productive citizen.

In the final analysis, the irony of the story is amplified by the fact that crime is rampant in America, with so many citizens who do not respect the laws that govern places like Woolworths, but rather reach out and take, motivated by different belief systems. Singleton connects the notion of the urban, ironic paradise to crime and greed (Singleton, 1991 quoted in Scruggs, 2004, p. 324), and in Saroyan’s story, the boy’s greed to possess the hammer fits in with this notion. Al’s choice to achieve comfort by stealing does not bode well for his future, and the catharsis he gets from the theft leaves one wondering whether he will repeat this act over and over, turning to a life of crime as he had fantasized he would while planning his revenge on the store and the perceived humiliation.

The narrator does not offer any comfort in this respect, for after the “mother went inside and went to bed, ... Al Condraj sat on the bench he had made and smelled the parsley garden and didn’t feel humiliated any more. But nothing could stop him from hating the two men, even



though he knew they hadn't done anything they shouldn't have done" (Saroyan, 1987, pp. 58-59). It is this final sentence that holds out some hope for the future, namely that Al may grow up to see the error of his youthful ways, and become a contributing citizen in the society he belongs to, but considering his hatred for these men, and his sense of outrage at his perceived humiliation may gain the upper hand in his adult life as well. What is clear, is the pastoral theme, the expulsion from innocence, and Al's need to make his own way in the world, whether as an honest citizen or a thief.

The apple box, the figs, and the overwhelming sense of a world-gone-by all add to the pastoral theme. It, in turn, lays the foundation for the coming-of-age story of a young boy. And after all is said and done, there is the essential question of Mrs. Condray's garden to begin with. Aside from the notion that any garden "must always suggest a hegemony of the human over the natural world, the pastoral may also suggest "euphemized land appropriation" (Davis, 2006, p. 383). While Davis probably meant the appropriation of land by government, there is the ironic notion that Mrs. Condray has been growing her parsley garden on land she does not own, and so, there is the ironic reversal at the end where Al may have learned from early childhood that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and having the hammer is more meaningful than how he got it. This leaves the story open to a more Marxist interpretation, perhaps based on Williams, who suggests that "man makes his own history ...[by ] making himself through producing his own means of life" (Williams, 1977, pp. 18-19).

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