

HOPE AGAINST DESPAIR: Reading Cronin in Times of Global Pandemic

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Abstract: A. J. Cronin is a man who possessed a near-monastic silence in life and neither sought nor encouraged celebrity status. He embellishes the literary world with his creative genius and holds an important position among all modern English writers. Critics hail Cronin for his surer pen and more penetrating eye as his writing addresses many of the most distressing issues we face today. His books are celebrated for their honesty and realism. Cronin's experience as a doctor enabled him to bring out a literary treatment of an epidemic in 1941, six years before Albert Camus published *The Plague*. Caught in the sweeping tides of the Second World War, the world was swamped with hatred and meaninglessness, strangled by fear and crushed beneath the terror of the arms race. This was a time when people had lost faith in themselves, faith in everything, and nations of the world were fighting against each other. With the current situation of the world being not too dissimilar, Father Francis Chisholm's story may give readers an answer to what the world can turn to for the survival during a pandemic. This paper focuses on analysing the human quest for meaning and happiness in absurdity, incredulity, uncertainty, and meaninglessness through a reading of A. J. Cronin's 1941 novel, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. Same as COVID-19 works as an act and a process, Father Chisholm's life too epitomises the process meaningfully.

Keywords: Absurdity, COVID-19, Crisis, Despair, Faith, Hope, Meaninglessness, Pandemic, Survival, World War.

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1. Introduction

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain.

When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's is all about (Murakami).

Dr A. J. Cronin, the Scottish physician-turned-novelist touched the lives of millions with his breath-taking skill of narration. He was a phenomenal figure in the literary history of the twentieth century. Cronin won the admiration of readers worldwide by combining realism and social criticism. "He possessed the Midas touch," notes Alan Davies in his biography (257). As one of the most popular story tellers of his time whatever Cronin wrote was noted for his views on social issues. He was a humanist who loved the suffering human beings in a troubled world. Cronin stood for people who were isolated and marginalized from society. He was "a friend of the poor and a crusader for social justice," who fought for religious values in a materialistic world (Salwak, *Cronin*, 130). As a traditionalist, he followed the writers like Dickens, Bennett, and Hardy and criticized writers like T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce for their ultra-modern approach in writing. The modernist authors purposely avoided true-to-life characters in telling their story. They don't use true-to-life reality for telling stories (Davies 18). Cronin realized that many modern authors were producing things with obscure and unintelligible language.

According to Cronin, "... literature is the mouthpiece of the humanities, not the insanities" (19). He also believed that many of these writers came from the affluent families of London who did not know the hardships and struggles of life. Cronin perceived that the modern writers from affluent families often fail in their attempt to express human emotions without feelings and wrote only "clever little novels ... the cocktails and sandwiches of fiction" (19). Whereas for Cronin, childhood memories of great suffering and loneliness both in school and at home had great influence in his emotional formation. He took everything he found. As a medical student and an observer of human beings, Cronin noticed everything in detail; the hopes and fears, the joy and sorrow of all

manner of fellow creatures (20). Harsh realities of life and human suffering found its meaningful expression in his novels. Even while meeting people of every kind he kept thinking of stories based on these men and women. His natural instincts were more of a writer than that of a doctor. "It has been said that the medical profession proves the best training ground for a novelist," Cronin wrote, "since there it is possible to see people with their masks off" (*Current Biography* 168). It is true that Cronin is "a reformer at heart, a physician by experience, and a novelist by choice" (Salwak, *A Reference Guide* 36).

2. *The Keys of the Kingdom: A Preliminary Analysis*

The Keys of the Kingdom (1941), says Salwak, "emphasizes with incisiveness the problems encountered when a religious man rebels against the man-made rules, limitations and barriers that are continually thrust between human beings and their God" (*Cronin* 72). There is always a conflict in the novel, a conflict of interest and a conflict of ideals. According to Davies, the novel can be considered as the "last part of trilogy in which the conflict between the individual and the establishment is explored: idealism against materialism in the mining industry (*The Stars Look Down*, 1935), altruism versus apathy in medicine (*The Citadel*, 1937) and, finally saintliness against dogma in the Roman Catholic Church" in *The Keys of the Kingdom* (158). Cronin takes the title of the novel from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 16:19, where Jesus entrusts Peter the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose. "And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Salwak figures out the central theme of the novel from Geoffrey Chaucer's famous description of the poor parson of the town, which ends, "But Christes' lore and his apostles twelve/ He taught, but first he followed it himself" (*Cronin* 72). Thus, the basic keys according to Cronin are tolerance, humility, charity, and kindness. Salwak notes, "Where creeds divide, deeds of love and sympathy unite" (73).

2.1. Father Francis: A Contradiction–Riddled Follower of Christ

The novel tells the adventurous and passionate life of Father Francis Chisholm, a missionary of Christ. He is a simple man – a priest, who loves God and human beings. He lives his priestly

vocation convincingly despite all the struggles and hardships. His whole life is in service of God. Each adversity in life brings forth a new opportunity for serving God in different circumstances and situations. Sometimes he questions God or argues with Him but at the end of everything, there is a faithful submission. He devotes his life as a village vicar in remote China following Christ as his role model. His vocation was a difficult one. It is the death of his parents and his lover Nora that led him to the seminary. His priesthood has a background of misery and suffering both in his childhood and adulthood. "He could no longer ignore these testaments from above. He would go away... he must go... to Father MacNabb... to San Morales. He would give himself entirely to God. He must become a priest (*Cronin* 819). His strange vocation for priesthood turned out to be a still stranger one for his superiors; a lone figure who struggled hard to get along with the folk. When everyone believed, he doubted; when everyone obeyed, he questioned; and when everyone followed the rules, he broke them without the intention of breaking them. It was a one man fight against the system or a lone voice in the wilderness, which gives the person a hero's grandeur.

2.2. Father Francis: A Presence of Peace and Tolerance

Cronin with the image of Father Francis shares some fundamental values which are so essential for a healthy and cordial habitation of human beings all over the world. Despite the material progress, the neglect of essential values that sustain humanity, all the advancement would lead us to annihilation. Cronin's troubled heart was so pained over the erosion of values in the world and hence he evidently stood for a set of values throughout his novels. His intention was to write about a simple man who professed peace and tolerance between nations and religions and lived his life amidst all human weaknesses. Cronin's work came at a time when people had lost faith among themselves and nations of the world were fighting against each other. He believed that it was a time when another World War was looming around, and it seemed to be appropriate for such a book. He was "Deeply troubled that the simple virtues of tolerance and brotherly love were being swept

aside by the horror of armed conflict, he felt compelled to make a plea for the return to simple goodness, personified by his central character" (Davies 159-60). As Naylor Pauline suggests, "Father Chisholm's story may give readers an answer for what the world can turn to for the survival of spiritual qualities" (4). He succeeds against all odds with humility and tolerance, forgetting his own bruised and battered mind. The purpose of the book, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, Cronin says, "is to preach tolerance, humility and liberality of spirit as against the material values which are poisoning the world today" (Interview, *America* 549). Reviewing the novel Radin Dorothea notes the importance of the work in the modern world, "The book is a glorification of the virtues of tolerance and humility, virtues now so little popular as to make their defence both desperate and timely" (2).

3. Literature in Meaning Making

As with other calamitous events that humankind has faced, literary explorations of disease too have offered ways to understand and confront the effects of pandemics. Authors like André Brink (*The Wall of the Plague*), Gabriel García Márquez (*Love in the Time of Cholera*), Stewart O'Nan (*A Prayer for the Dying*), and José Saramago (*Blindness*) used the motif of epidemic to depict the human condition as tightrope walk between wonder and despair. Life is a battle, and the question is whether individuals have the power to assert their own existential value in suffering against the hopelessness and inevitability of failure. Perhaps what Lauren Berlant terms, the "genre of crisis" (6) applies to such works which have sparked literary re-readings of disease. Such works help not only to provide viable models of survival but also make readers aware of the profundity of pain and personal suffering that are often erased in mere statistical or epidemiological depictions of disease. The present-day human encounter with the novel COVID-19 pandemic is yet another war on human beings by human beings/nature. As Mei Zhan says, "uncanny affinity [of human beings] with the nonhuman and the wild" (31) is the ultimate reason, and the nature itself cannot be blamed for the outbreak of the virus.

4. The Pandemic – the New Normal

For most of history, human existence has been poised on the knife edge between survival and extinction. In geological time scales, it has only been recently that our species has risen to the overlordship of all others and of the planet itself. We have even gone so far as to name the current epoch after ourselves as the Anthropocene, and yet, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have come as a rude shock to our complacency about human superiority. The pandemic has descended heavily as an act of nature over the humans and a process at work beyond human interference or even comprehension working to regiment, strengthen, redefine, and rethink the ways of the world. This forcible eviction of humans from the echelons of power leaves humanity in great angst.

Among the twentieth century writers, Albert Camus is noted for his philosophical explorations of angst which accompanies catastrophes. For Camus, the greatest absurdity is death, and death is inherently unpredictable. The question that Camus poses is how do we understand the absurdity of the human condition? Human beings always desire a meaningful life and seek it out through art, religion, pleasure, and more. This tension between the felt needs of human beings and the apparent lack of fulfilment of those needs gives rise to what Camus calls the “feeling of the absurd” (27). We continue living to discover meaning, but we find none, so our very existence seems irrational and absurd. If our entire existence is absurd, what is to stop one from choosing to end one’s life prematurely? Camus rules out this possibility as it would amount to the voluntary embracing of absurdity as death is the greatest absurdity that one confronts within life. Camus’ resolution of absurdity lies in the continuous struggle of human beings to exist. It is this incessant existential struggle that gives meaning to life. Paradoxically, it is the fight against the meaninglessness of life that gives meaning to life. He observes that life is a rope walk; walk through a vertiginous ridge (Camus 9-14) One cannot be irresponsible at any moment of one’s life, hopeless at any moment of life; one can never be a pessimist. One should always be hopeful. Hope is nothing but one’s fight against the odds. Human beings are invited to continue their fight endlessly.

Camus' observations may be worth pondering over as the people all over the world are forced to restrict their spheres of interaction, movement and even freedom. What could be more absurd than the fact that all of this can be attributed to a viral agent which is many orders of magnitude smaller than the smallest object that can be seen by the human eye? On the cover page of a May 2015 issue of *New Scientist* is a picture of what seems to be a giant virus, a multi-coloured ball of concentric circles that is ringed at its external edge with skulls and crossbones. The artist, Ross Holden, is known for his socially incisive and satirical photography, and this picture invokes the nascent genre of digital microbe art. The cover story by Emma Young brings home this viral association: in all caps, it announces that with "THE NEW PLAGUE, we're one mutation away from the end of the world as we know it" (30-33). With the mobility conferred on pathogens by air travel, global trade, tourist networks, and with 7 billion potential hosts for any such pathogen, the article warns us that "we are more vulnerable than ever before. "Just one mutation of a flu strain "would be a colossal threat, capable of killing on a catastrophic scale" (32).

The *New Scientist* article epitomises the novel coronavirus pandemic. Yet another warning was from the former WHO Director-General Lee Jong-wook¹ who, during a global health meeting, declared our pandemic future a certainty: "It is only a matter of time before an avian flu virus ... acquires the ability to be transmitted from human to human, sparking the outbreak of human pandemic influenza. We don't know when this will happen. But we do know that it will happen" (Knox). WHO Director-General Margaret Chan² further warned the world at the time of Ebola pandemic threat with repeated martial metaphors, of

¹Lee Jong-wook was nominated on 28 January 2003 by the World Health Organization's Executive Board for the post of Director-General of the agency and elected to the post on 21 May by the Member States of WHO for a five-year term. <www.who.int/dg/lee/en/> (2 April 2020).

²Dr Margaret Chan was the Director-General of WHO, first appointed by the World Health Assembly on 9 November 2006. The Assembly appointed Dr Chan for a second five-year term at its sixty-fifth session in May 2012. <who.int/dg/chan/en/> (2 April 2020).

“going to war with Ebola” (Cited in Kong 138). What we are experiencing today is not too distant from what was predicted in 2005 and 2014. Despite this not being unanticipated, the psychological assault of the pandemic has been substantial. With the world reeling from the coronavirus pandemic, some nameless fear grips every heart. The world order has changed dramatically and the so called ‘normal way of life’ has become supplanted almost overnight with a ‘new normal’ of life under lockdown, surveillance and isolation. With social interaction petering out and interpersonal interactions becoming filtered and masked, everything seems meaningless, absurd, uncertain, and unusually challenging. The inevitable economic crisis following the COVID-19 is to be an opportunity for the humanity to introspect and arrest the spiralling acceleration of life.

Beyond the disease’s material effects, the very core of the human condition ensconced in our identity as social beings seems vitiated. In an urgent quest for a meaningful social existence, people have begun to question the fundamental foundations of many social, religious, and scientific institutions. The devaluation of social and spiritual human values that might accompany a protracted engagement with the pandemic is a serious concern. More vexing is the idea that the global village might well cease to exist. To simplify, COVID-19 has caused individually complex issues to become tangled up in one another, setting up strange feedback loops and interactions leading to a historical breakdown of human activity on the planet. The crisis unfolding around us is a grave threat as well as a unique opportunity.

5. The China Incident

It is remarkable to see Cronin envisioning the outbreak of a pandemic from China in the year 1941. Why did Cronin choose China? Could the political and cultural context have entrenched China as the world’s number one disease ground zero? Or is it merely a part of Western discourse and outlook? “The China incident” described in the novel portrays how a pandemic called “coughing sickness” (Cronin 898) spread across different provinces of China endangering millions of lives. With the world reeling from

the COVID-19, there is perhaps no better time than now to revisit the work. It is through Father Francis' love and tolerance that Cronin attempts to answer human existential questions.

Bishop MacNabb sent Father Francis to the new mission in China, and he set out on his mission with great grit and enthusiasm; but was shocked, when he discovered that there was not much left of the mission. He had to encounter countless hardships like hostility, isolation, disease, and poverty. Various setbacks in life humbled him. He had neither food nor water, or even a bed to sleep. While trying to rest, the shrill ping of mosquitoes and the crack of flying beetles split the sweltering air. At all times, he forced himself to smile. He did not feel heroic, but rather, considered himself a fool. Totally isolated from human beings and even from God, he experienced an overwhelming sense of being alone. He prayed with fierce intensity, "Dear God, you wish me to begin from nothing. This is the answer to my vanity, my stubborn human arrogance. It's better so! I'll work, I'll fight for you. I'll never give up ... never ... never!" (Cronin 869). Cronin gives us a detailed account of the man of Christ from a simple origin and a soul that burned for others. Suffering was part of his life; poverty he embraced happily. Like Francis of Assisi he too humbled himself before others. This was a life he willingly chose to live, a life of utter solitariness.

His adventurous mission life in China started with a confrontation with the catechists Hosannah and Philomena Wang. They preached Christ, it seems, for money. Many missionaries paid them good amount of money for teaching catechism among people and many believed in the Christian God because of Christian money. Cronin critically intrudes into the missionary activities of the Church and shows what a failure it was or what went wrong with producing 'rice Christians' for the sake of numbers. The seed of the Good News was shown on the surface and nothing substantial remained in their soul but the contempt for destroying the order of the land (Cronin 870). Failure was part and parcel of the life of Father Francis, and here too his beginning was a failure. Wangs spread the report that he was poor, and he had nothing to share with them, but only arrogant words. His attempt to bring them together for a meeting also failed, and he was the subject of

their talk; everyone ignored him. He felt ashamed of his own incompetence, and the feeling of failure humiliated him. His faith deepened after each failure, each attempt. He prayed most sincerely, desperately: "Oh God, you've helped me in the past. Help me now, for God's sake, please" (871). The Wangs, his hostile catechists, spread rumours about him and hostility towards him increased day by day. On his way back from the village, people started abusing him and even started intentionally soiling the premises of his quarters with human waste. One night while he was returning, somebody threw a stone at his forehead. The wound on his brow gave him the wild idea of a dispensary. The very next day he started a public dispensary and that changed the entire outlook of the mission. One sleepless night Father Francis found a dead woman near the mission along with a child in swaddling. He thought of this as a sign from heaven, a sign of God's mercy and the impetus behind the children's home he would establish.

6. The Coughing Epidemic and Human Engagement

It was when things seemed to be improving that the tragedy struck. Father Francis first noticed it as a change in climate. Great flocks of birds were seen flying to the south and there were rumours in Pai-tan of evil things travelling from the North, the East, and the West. He went down to the town and found that many of the shops were closed. "It is sickness...great coughing sickness. Already six provinces are stricken. The first came last night to Pai-tan," people said to one another (Cronin 898). A great fear gripped Francis when he thought of the children under his care. The visionary in him sensed the signs of the time and sent Joseph, his assistant, to Sen-siang for assistance.

When you have the boat, proceed with all speed to Sen-siang. There you will go to Father Thibodeau at the mission. If he is away go to the offices of the American oil company. Find someone in authority. Tell him the plague is upon us, that we need immediately [sic] medicine, supplies, and doctors. Then go to the telegraph company, send these two messages I have written for you. See ... take the papers ... the first to the Vicariate at Peking, the second to the Union General Hospital at Nankin.

Here is money. Do not fail me, Joseph. Now go ... go. And the good God go with you! (899).

He informed the Sisters at the Mission Centre about the impending danger and began preparations to save the mission and the children.

There are signs of an epidemic in the city. I am afraid it may be plague. If so, it is important for us to be prepared ... At all costs we must try to keep the sickness away from the children. That means isolating the school and the Sisters' house. I shall arrange at once for some kind of barrier to be put up. The children and all three Sisters should remain inside, with one Sister always on duty at the entrance (899).

With the support of the foreman, he set them to build a thick fence of kaolin around the boundary. The work went on all day and was not completed until late at night.

He took most of his stores into the enclosure, carrying sacks of potatoes and flour on his shoulders, butter, bacon, condensed milk, and all the tinned goods of the mission. His small stock of medicines he likewise transferred. Only then did he feel some degree of relief. He looked at his watch: three o'clock in the morning. It was not worthwhile to go to bed. He went into the church and spent the hours remaining until dawn in prayer (900).

When it was light, he set out to meet the Chief Magistrate. As he passed through the town, he could hear the racking sound of coughing all around.

His heart flowed out towards these poor exhausted creatures, many already stricken, enduring humbly, suffering without hope; and a burning, impetuous desire to help them suffused his soul. One old man lay dead and naked, stripped of the garments he no longer needed. His wrinkled toothless face was upturned towards the sky (900).

Sixteen people admitted to the makeshift hospital died at dawn. It was pneumonic plague and its virulence surpassed the fiercest venom. It seemed to congeal the blood and rot the lungs, which threw up thin white speckled sputum, swarming with lethal germs. A wave of panic gripped the hitherto apathetic people as the cold intensified. Joseph returned with the news of the arrival of

Dr Willie Tulloch, his childhood friend. Dr Willie clearly explained the danger that they are in,

Remember! This is practically a fatal disease. An ounce of prevention is better than a ton of cure. We'll turn our attention—not to the living—but to the dead. Don't you realize, you confounded innocents ... one cough in your eye and you're done for ... the microbes can penetrate the cornea? They knew that even in the fourteenth century ... they wore vizors of isinglass against this thing ... it was brought down from Siberia by a band of marmoset hunters (906).

They all worked hard to prevent the disease from spreading further. Having devoted his time to the care of the living, Father Francis had overlooked the grim necessity of swift interment of the deceased before the germ-infested bodies were attacked by rats. Individual burial was impossible in the frozen ground and the supply of coffins had run out long ago. They dug a great pit outside the walls and buried the corpses in this common grave. Some of the bodies had been hidden by relatives in houses and under the kaolin roofs to keep the dead from being interred in what they considered to be unholy tomb. At the doctor's suggestion Lieutenant Shon promulgated an edict that all such hoarders would be shot: "Bring out your dead. Or you yourselves will die" (907). Meanwhile, they were ruthlessly destroying certain properties which Dr Willie had marked as breeding grounds of the disease. They were also halting all nomads outside the walls, disinfecting and holding them in quarantine in hastily built isolation huts until assured of their freedom from the disease. The hardships of physical exhaustion were clearly visible in their bodies and the mental strain of dealing with disease and death was telling on them. For ten days Father Francis had not been out of his clothes. He was dead with fatigue. They had no water, only melted snow. Cooking was near impossible. Yet every day, Tulloch insisted that they all meet to have their midday meal together, to counteract the waking nightmare that was their lives. At one point, Dr Willie, overtaxed and with his faculties frayed to a state of raw anger, asked Father Francis, "Is hell any worse than this?" He answered, "Hell is that state where one has ceased to hope" (909).

7. The Atheist Encounter with Human Suffering

It is through the character of Dr Willie Tulloch that Cronin discusses the prospect of hope in a hopeless world. As Camus says, "there is no Sun without the shadow and it is essential to know the night" (78). Dr Willie was an atheist but worked for the suffering people just because of humanitarian consideration and not because of his faith in God. The concept of God meant nothing to him, but an empty vacuum. Dr Willie reminded Father Francis and his team members of the prevention of disease and mocked them by saying, "Oh! I know you two [Father Francis and Mother Maria] believe in God ... But I believe in Prophylaxis" (906). Dr Willie, who took life in a different perspective satirized his own life; he had nothing to claim; he had done nothing, acquired nothing but only a taste for whisky. He questioned the existence of God and soul, but finally surrendered to God at the last moment of his life. With a peculiar smile he said: "Now is the time to send for the priest" (911).

Cronin, the skilled master of words narrates the last moment of Dr Willie's life passionately and vicariously. Himself becoming a prey to the dreaded illness, Dr Willie at the last moment of life says, "I still can't believe in God" (912). Francis, who really understood his friend, gave him an assurance of hope: but "He believes in you.". Dr Willie was conscious of repentance, "I'm not repentant," he said. But Francis again supporting him said, "All human suffering is an act of repentance" (912). Cronin here points to the reality that there is meaning in human suffering. For Cronin, God's mercy and forgiveness depend not on certain acts but on one's conscience. The last feeble words of Dr Willie give us some assurance that everything has not been in vain: "Our fight ... Francis ... more than six pence to get my sins forgiven" (913). Dr Willie fails to see the value of suffering in human life and as a result suffering becomes so intense and painful. For Dr Willie, many questions about the intense experiences of life are beyond answers and therefore lacks meaning in life. Perhaps, Dr Willie stands along with Camus in search of the meaning of life. Death, for Camus brings ultimate absurdity but for Father Francis, death is a possibility, for a new life in hope. Cronin impresses upon the reader a new vision and attributes meaning to suffering in life.

Whether you have hope or faith, God believes in you, is the hope that he shares with a world that is under duress.

The hard core Catholic, Mother Maria Veronica, could not digest the mercy shown by Father Francis towards Dr Willie at the last hour of his life. Questioning Father Francis, Mother Maria Says:

He was an atheist, and yet you virtually promised he would have his eternal reward." Francis replied quickly: "God judges us not only by what we believe ... but by what we do." "There is one thing we most of us forget," Francis continued gracefully, "Christ taught it. The Church teaches it ... though you wouldn't think so to hear a great many of us today. No one in good faith can ever be lost. No one. Buddhists, Mohammedans, Taoists ... if they are sincere, according to their own lights, they will be saved. That is the splendid mercy of God. So why shouldn't He enjoy confronting a decent agnostic at the Judgement Seat with a twinkle in his eye: 'I'm here you see, in spite of all they brought you up to believe. Enter the kingdom which you honestly denied' (Cronin 914- 15).

What Pope Francis said in an interview with Eugenio Scalfari that "I believe in God, not in a Catholic God, there is no Catholic God, there is God and I believe in Jesus Christ, his incarnation" becomes relevant in the light of Cronin's religious perspective (Francis). Cronin comes alive with the possibility of reviving the Church in the twenty first century and points to its relevance in a world beset by unprecedented pandemic experiences.

10. Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic which has already taken over 400,000 lives has created a situation of despair and meaninglessness similar to the Second World War times which led Cronin to write, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. It challenges the writers to go beyond the business of mirroring life and/or nature, or right to expression, to the task of creating meaning. As Alan Davies rightly remarked, "In the world of letters, even today, the human impact of some of Cronin's work would undoubtedly complement any study of modern social history, and that alone, quite apart from his obvious narrative

powers, should guarantee him a place in twentieth-century British literature" (24). The work is an invitation to create meaning for oneself and for others through a collective and purposive engagement with the harrowing human maladies.

In short, Cronin argues that we must persist in existing by simply choosing to choose life in the face of absurdity. Like Camus, Cronin too considers the two possible ways of confronting this absurdity: the unconditional surrender to God and the Sisyphean fight against absurdity. The way of faith makes one's journey easy and hopeful even in midst of despair and desolation. It comes handy in times of crisis. Father Francis, a man of faith and hope, surrenders his life unconditionally to God and finds meaning in life. The ethical atheist in Dr Tulloch, confronts the same question when he is able 'to do good in cold blood' (borrowing Shaw's term), without any reference to God. The doctor is an ethical possibility and is able to make ethical choices without reference to God. However, he is unable to account for the excruciating human suffering and meaning of life. Cronin's contrast between the characters of Fr Francis and Dr Willie points to the inherent value and worth of the human life. He certainly advances beyond Camus's philosophy and proposes the possibility of the human drive to persevere in the face of adversity. Adversities are teleological; they invoke the human potential for collective engagement with life. For Cronin's characters, the fight against danger and death is not a lonely Sisyphean endeavour. It is an act of community and urgency, executed without philosophical dissembling or political controversy. In Cronin's work, characters lose no time in identifying the sanctity and value of human life that transcends the cultural and religious boundaries. Irrespective of the suffering and pain in the world, Cronin tries to project the idea of hope in an apparently absurd and pessimistic world. His tale, therefore, is nothing but an ardent invitation for us to be the torchbearers of hope and humanity at this moment of global COVID-19 pandemic.

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