

Dr. Lemons

English 205

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Journal Entry #3

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Today we talked about John Crowe Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," and how it avoided the cliché sentimentality that handicaps many of the other poems we read. I found this to be a significant testament to the poem's brilliance, for since it concerns the death of a little girl, it could have easily become overemotional and mawkish. However, nobody in class could pinpoint how it is able to accomplish this. I was very intrigued by this, and after class went to look for literary criticisms on how Ransom had this haunting effect on the reader, and I think I found an answer.

Robert Penn Warren, who, like Ransom, was a Fugitive Poet, said that despite its accord with the common elegy formula, "simple grief is not the content of the primary statement." In fact, the bulk of the poem doesn't focus on the girl's death, but rather the girl's life. The most vivid images of the poem come from the middle stanzas, which depicts John Whiteside's daughter harassing a flock of geese. These scenes are fairly comedic. They are written as if they are from the girl's perspective, for they use childish terms and sentences like "cried in goose" and "goose-fashion" and "noon apple-dream." The scene itself is incredibly ridiculous: the geese regret the girl's activeness because it disturbs their midday snooze and causes them to "scuttle / Goose-fashion under the skies!" This could perhaps add to the tragedy of the poem, for this little girl's imaginative world is now lost with her death.

When discussing his prose, Ransom once noted that "to wish to make a thing look pretty or look smart is to think poorly of it in itself and want it more conventional, and to try to improve it is to weaken and perhaps destroy it." It is in this way that Ransom avoids cliché and sentimentality; he tells it as it is. He avoids using overemotional words to describe the girl's death by simply saying "brown study," and thus avoids making his poem overemotional.

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When I first read James Wright's "A Song for the Middle of the Night," I felt immediately connected with it. It reminded me of an experience I had two summers ago when I stayed at my aunt and uncle's house for a week. My baby cousin was eighteen months old at the time, and my bedroom was situated right next to his. As a result, I was woken up every night by the screech of my cousin's sobs, as well as the subsequent footsteps of my aunt and uncle walking down the hallway to tend to him. Wright discusses a similar distaste for infants in his poem "A Song for the Middle of the Night," which was written as a response to his son's inquiries about Eustace Deschamps's philosophy regarding babies: "Happy is he who has no children; for babies bring nothing but crying and stench." The poem is a realistic look at the daily tasks that are associated with being a parent, such as waking up in the middle of the night. The poem is realistic, which is why I was able to connect to it more than the other baby poem in this chapter: Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Etude Realiste."

Swinburne's poem was the topic of a large class discussion. After a long series of harsh diatribes condemning the poem for its sentimentality, the class came to a unanimous agreement that the poem is not a particularly good poem, a judgement with which I wholly agree. The

mawkish poem attempts to romanticize an image of a baby's feet by comparing them to pink sea-shells and "rose-hued sea-flowers," noting that they "might tempt, should heaven see meet, / An angel's lips to kiss." The poem is so overemotional that it becomes almost laughable, for I have never witnessed somebody so delighted over the thought of a baby's feet as Algernon Charles Swinburne. I was unable to connect with this poem because of its mushy sort of romanticization of such an insignificant feature of a baby. During my week-long visit with my aunt and uncle, not once did I notice the flowery beauty of my little cousin's feet.

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Today in class we read May Swenson's "Cat & the Weather," which I think is a very interesting poem. As Dr. Lemons said in class, "Young people love pets," and I am another one of his stereotypes who has an unhealthy obsession with his pet. I am constantly wondering what my dog thinks about during the day, what kinds of dreams she has, because everything is always so new to her. Swenson's poem attempts to depict this through the eyes of a cat who has never experienced the phenomenon of snow. The cat is confused by the white powder (like many Florida students were during the Oxford snow day), and comes to the conclusion that it is simply white bugs with no buzz. After briefly experimenting with the snow by swatting at the "insects" and digging in it, the cat decides to go inside and "sleep until / [the world] puts itself right."

This poem reminds me of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which experiments with a technique known as "streams of consciousness." Faulkner writes the novel through the internal observations of various characters, some of whom have a difficult time understanding the world. As a result, their inner monologues are disjunctive and oftentimes confusing. An example of this

confusing logic occurs when a young, possibly mentally challenged boy named Vardaman tries to make sense of his mother's death. Just before she dies, he catches a fish in a lake and kills it.

After discovering that his mother is dead, he uses the unsound logic that if the fish is dead and his mother is dead, then his mother must be a fish. Similarly, the cat decides that because insects fly, and this white powder flies, then this white powder must be insects.

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I just finished reading Theodore Roethke's poem "The Geranium," a poem I found deeply moving and sad. Although the poem is about a geranium flower, I couldn't help but imagine the flower as a woman; a bedraggled young girl who lost her way. I imagined that she had fallen deeply in love with a man who mistreated her, but her undying love for him made her wait for him, even when he "put her out, by the garbage pail," hoping to never see her again. The man calls her "foolish and trusting," but finally takes her back again, hoping that things would be different. He treats her better, feeding her "vitamins, water, and whatever sustenance seemed sensible at the time" for she had been living on "gin, bobbie pins, half-smoked cigars, and dead beer" for so long. She endures for so long, but, like in most abusive relationships, there is no hope, and their dysfunctional affair ultimately ends in her demise. It is hard to debate that the geranium is not a symbol for a girl, for if it were merely a poem about a man's relationship with his flower, it would be simply pathetic.

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Today Evan Dunn presented Dylan Thomas' poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." Evan prefaced his presentation by telling us that Thomas wrote this for his father, who was growing weak and frail with old age. As a result, Thomas tells him to fight death, to "rage, rage against the dying of the light."

This poem rang true to me because it reminded me of my late grandfather, who had fought death since his forties. I think he personified many of the traits that Thomas speaks of: he was wise, good, and yet grave. He knew since his late forties that he was going to die, but he still fought. He never thought he had done enough to die yet; he hadn't seen his grandchildren or seen his children get married, so he fought. He was able to live another twenty years, and he was able to see both of his dreams come true. I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with him, even when his condition became grave and he knew he didn't have much time left. Despite the pain it caused him, he raged against the dying of the light; he did not go gentle into that good night.

For that reason, I know what Thomas is feeling when he writes "And you, my father, there on the sad height, / Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray," because I too prayed for my grandfather when I saw him in that condition. Perhaps that is why I found the poem so haunting, for it did an excellent job at encapsulating the emotions that run through one's body as they see a loved one on their death bed. Although they know that "dark is right," they sincerely hope, deep down in their hearts, that those they love will "not go gentle into that good night."

Today we read E.E. Cummings' poem "Chansons Innocents, I." The physical structure of the poem is rather confusing (as is usually for a Cummings poem), and it took me a while to get around that and finally grasp the poem, which is equally perplexing and complex. My first reading led me to three conclusions: first, Cummings' spacing is significant in some way; second, the speaker is a child; and third, the "balloonman" is significant in some way.

Cummings' spacing and visual arrangement was the most difficult aspect to interpret. My first inclination was that it was merely for aesthetic purposes. It could also be used to regulate the tempo of the poem; by placing names together (such as "eddieandbill" and "bettyandisbel"), the reader is inclined to read them especially fast, while greatly spaced words incline the reader to read them in a slower manner. I was convinced that this was the purpose of Cummings' unusual punctuation until a prospective freshman pointed out that the phrase "far and wee" becomes increasingly spaced throughout the poem. This gave me the impression that the spacing was important to the message of the poem. When looking at the poem from afar (as a picture, not as a collection of words) I realized that the poem looks as if the words are dripping down the page. This coincides with the setting of the poem, which is a "mud-luscious" and "puddle-wonderful" world.

Another interpretation could be that the poem is spaced to coincide with the disjunctive chatter of a child, for it is my second conclusion that the poem is the perspective of a child. The speaker uses faux words like "mud-luscious" and "puddle-wonderful" to describe the spring rain. Also, the speaker uses peculiar words to describe the "balloonman," who is the focus of the poem. Also, perhaps the reason that the children's names are merged together is because of the children's shortness of breath as they come running to the balloonman who "whistles far and

wee." Thus the speaker in the poem is also a character in the poem; he is one of the children who comes running or dancing toward the balloonman's whistle.

The significance of the balloonman was widely debated in our class, with interpretations ranging from a pedophile to Satan. The adjective describing the balloonman that was most heavily debated upon was "goat-footed," which led many class members to think that it was an allusion to Pan, the god of flocks and herds in Greek mythology. Pan is typically represented with the horns, ears, and legs of a goat on a man's body, and his appearance is meant to cause terror similar to that of a stampeding herd (the word "panic" is derived from his name). However, I didn't agree with this interpretation because the children flock toward the "goat-footed balloonman," they don't run away from him. Another interpretation is that the goat-footed man is Satan, which would give the poem a rather sinister connotation. I tend to disagree with this analysis for two reasons. The first has to do with Cummings' strange style of punctuation: only two words in the entire poem are capitalized, and one of them comes after Cummings describes the balloonman as goat-footed (he calls him the "balloonMan"). This emphasis on "man" immediately after describing him as goat-footed leads me to believe that the balloonman really is a human, and not Satan. The second reason that I disagree with this poem is because I believe that the poem has a much lighter connotation, for I believe it is told by a child. However, the only interpretation I could devise to explain the goat-footedness of the balloonman was that the child was merely mispronouncing the term pigeon-toed or duck-footed. However, even I have difficulty accepting this explanation.

Today I began to analyze William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 66" for my class presentation. At first, I hated the poem; it seemed to be simply a whiny list of grievances about the unfairness of life. I didn't find the prose to be very engaging; in fact, I found his word and punctuation choice to be (dare I say it about Shakespeare?) awkward. His use of tri and quadrisyllabic rhymes as well as his excessive use of punctuation make the poem sound choppy and forced. Little did I know that this was Shakespeare's intention, and it's what makes the poem great. In Helen Vendler's book *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, she writes that "throughout Sonnet 66, Shakespeare artfully avoids the appearance of art, and this paradox proves the most artful of all." The censorship suggested in line nine ("And art made tongue-tied by authority") necessitates an absence of art from the poem, thus challenging Shakespeare to keep the reader interested.

Shakespeare attempts to keep the reader interested in the poem with quick tempo. His use of repetition (almost every line begins with "and") along with alliteration and assonance make the reader rush through the poem. This forces the reader to disregard the choppy sentences and awkward rhymes. Also, his gradually decreasing vagueness creates questions in the reader's mind. The poem begins with the speaker declaring that he is "tired with all these...", causing the reader to wonder what "these things" are. His first few answers provide little more clarity on the subject; they speak in broad terms, discussing the unfairness of life. However, the reader still doesn't know what these injustices are. He becomes increasingly clear with each line, speaking of silenced artists, simple truths being mistaken for simplemindedness, and good enslaved by evil. However, he never reaches a concrete level for he unexpectedly ends the list to tell the reader that, were it not for his lover, he would have killed himself by now.

(not in book)

I know this isn't in the book, but I would like to comment on a poem I read while conducting research for an essay. The topic of my essay is the significance of God in a post-Holocaust world, and throughout my web surfing for information, I came across a poem written by Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, entitled "After Auschwitz." Here it is:

After Auschwitz, no theology:  
 From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises --  
 a sign the cardinals have chosen themselves a Pope.  
 From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises --  
 a sign the conclave of Gods hasn't yet chosen  
 the Chosen People.  
 After Auschwitz, no theology:  
 the inmates of extermination bear on their forearms  
 the telephone numbers of God,  
 numbers that do not answer  
 and now are disconnected, one by one.

After Auschwitz, a new theology:  
 the Jews who died in the Shoah  
 have now come to be like their God,  
 who has no likeness of a body and has no body.  
 They have no likeness of a body and they have no body

When I was in Hebrew School, I had a teacher who was a Holocaust survivor. Her entire family was lost to the Auschwitz gas chambers, and by the time she was liberated, she had nearly died of malnutrition, starvation, and exhaustion. For a while, she had lost her faith in God; she hated him because she felt that he had turned his back on her. She asked herself, "What kind of God would allow my family to die before my eyes, and allow me and my people to suffer like this?" Although I was only in third grade at the time, her story made a profound impact on me, for I wondered whether I could believe in God after something like Auschwitz. She us it took her thirty years before her faith in the Lord, and that is why she teaches Hebrew school: to

compensate for all those years she hated Him. This poem brought back memories of that teacher. Her arm bears "the telephone numbers of God." She felt disconnected from God, for she saw the black smoke rising from the crematoria of Auschwitz, and she knew that it was the black smoke of her family. This disconnection from God was not uncommon among survivors, and this poem's haunting explanation is both vivid and real. It brought back memories of this teacher who taught me more about life, death, and God than any professor or novel or friend ever has, and it is for that reason that I will remember this poem forever.