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LLED 412

Reading Self Study: Part 2

Work Without Hope

"Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out...
Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure." – A.E. Housman

Before reading poetry, I always keep this thought in mind: To truly enjoy poetry, you should never know the exact meaning because then you can never truly grasp the craftsmanship, the creativity, and most importantly, the connection to the poem. What I'm trying to say is that poetry is one of those unexplainable things that everyone likes whether they are open about it or not. As Audrey Foris once said, "Poetry is not always words." Songs are poetry. Photographic images are unwritten poetry. Memories are mind written poetry. I always have this in mind when reading written poetry and because of this thought, meaning of poetry usually comes easy.

Keyword: usually.

Whenever I view poetry for the first time, I usually go through a three step process. First, I try to hide the title until I'm done reading the poem. I am very big into the use of words and I feel that a title is where the bulk of meaning should be constructed when writing or interpreting poetry. Secondly, I look for one word lines throughout the poem before reading the entire thing. Why else would a single word receive its own line? It must be important. The last thing I do is look at the shape of the poem. If it's in block style, then I just move on to the reading of the text. But if it's in a certain shape, I keep the shape in mind as I read. Why is a certain line shifted over farther than the one before it? To me, nothing happens randomly in poetry. There is a specific purpose for every indent, every misspelled word, every period, every pause, every single word

line, and every capital letter. Poetry is a machine and in order for it to work, everything has to do its part to get the meaning through.

I was not able to stop myself from seeing the title of Samuel Coleridge's poem because of the size of it and position on the page, but it's ok because I find the title to be very interesting. As I scan the poem, I only notice one part of the poem that shows emphasis and that being the very first line, "All Nature seems at work." There are tons of images that blur through my head as I read this line. Excuse me as I do my best Walt Whitman impression but I think of butterflies coming out of cocoons, volcanoes erupting, grass blowing in the wind, pollen in the air, sun going down and the moon coming up, and crickets chirping. From this line, I'm guessing that the poem will have something to do with nature and its processes, but I will just have to wait and see.

Finally, before I actually read the poem, I look at the shape. Nothing really special except that it's organized in a rhyme scheme of ababbb ccddeeff and that it is closely related to a reversed Petrarchan sonnet. Because of this, I have this idea that the poem might have a meaning of "unattainable love" because that's what Petrarchan sonnets usually are about.

As I start to read the poem, more specifically the first stanza, I am right thus far that the poem is using the idea of nature and its processes in its meaning. I find it interesting that the author gives winter the masculine gender and looks forward to Spring coming. Perhaps because of what Spring means when it comes to nature. *Earth reborn*. He ends the stanza interesting as well by confessing that he, the human, is the only thing not busy or doing anything productive for the habitat in which he inhabits... not lives. He does not make "honey" like bees, does not "pair" which to animals means to mate, does not "build" to progress and stay safe, and does not

“sing” which might actually be a connection to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which is based around a man being one with nature. He is saying he is not.

I think that I have an idea as to what this poem is about already after reading the first stanza, but I am not going to rush to any conclusions until I’m done. If I have an idea this early into the poem, then I will read the rest of the poem with a certain bias that does not give respect to the writer. The line “Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,” deserves to be dug into more because of the repetition of “amaranths.” According to dictionary.com, ken means to understand and amaranths are flowers that never fade. Flowers that never fade. Flowers are usually symbols of beauty and color. Beauty that never dies?

The rest of the poem is based around this image of the amaranth flower and how it is selective in which who or what it will bloom for. “Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may, For me ye bloom not!” The next phrase that grabs me is “wreathless brow.” What is a wreathless brow? Could he be talking about not being like Jesus Christ? Jesus sacrificed himself for the replenishment of our souls. With a huge cross on his back, he struggled to walk and wore a wreath of thorns on his head. A brow is your forehead. Could the author be saying that he is the opposite of Jesus? Almost arrogant towards Jesus, our savior? His lips, the symbol of love, not brightened for anyone or anything. He does not have a wreath on his forehead and he doesn’t struggle, he strolls. Not just walk, but stroll. When I think of someone strolling, it’s usually in an arrogant manner trying to show something whether it be worth or happiness.

The author ends his piece with the two most important lines in the entire poem. “Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, And hope without an object cannot live.” Nectar, the liquid

that attracts bees to flowers, is important to a flower's survival and a sieve is either an instrument used for straining liquids or, even more interesting, is a person who cannot keep a secret.

Putting all of these together, I feel that the poem means a few things, but I believe that the poem is mostly about this:

Nature is always at work, trying to progress the earth and enhance its beauty that will never die just like the symbolism of the amaranth flower but he, the human, does not work. He uses earth and all its beauty and cares only about his arrogant self (unlike Jesus who died for us). He can work all he wants in life for monetary reasons, but never hopes to achieve anything more unless it benefits himself. Nature works for nature for the hope of another Spring. Man works for himself in hope for progress of himself (unattainable love). Himself is not an object... himself is only that... himself, whereas nature and those who work for others work for the object of love, the object of beauty, the object of happiness, and just like Jesus, work for the object of LIFE. Just like what nectar means to a flower, life, to us, is priceless.

My reflection on how I interpreted this poem and/or this poem as a whole is that it never ceases to amaze me the depths that I go to figure out a poem's meaning. Most of my peers look at poetry and try to read it over and over again until it just pops into their heads, but I'm always the one who is writing on the side of the pages notes about certain words or shapes of phrases. Overall, I thought the poem was excellent. Its meaning was rich and pure, and none of the rhymes seemed forced or out of place. The symbolism of the flower was amazing and really brought back memories of when I had to do a project my freshman year on the novel "The Purple Hibiscus" and the symbolism behind the color purple. Something else that I did not notice until now was how much I have progressed as a literary scholar/reader. Last semester I took an American Poetry course and throughout the entire year I was that student who was running to

catch up because I was surrounded by English majors and I had a teacher who stressed a certain way to look at poetry which conflicted with my own strategy. However, after looking at how I interpreted this poem, I finally am reading poetry the way my professor wanted me to the entire semester. I didn't recognize it at first, but after I think about it, it's true and it's a great feeling. I guess when it comes to reading poetry, in connection to the poem, *all my senses are at work*.