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Topic: The Pulley or the Gifts of God: An Analysis
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By:

Prof. Sunita Sinha
Head, Department of English
Women's College Samastipur
L.N.M.U., Darbhanga
Email: drsunitasinha@gmail.com
Website: www.sunitasinha.com
Mob No: 9934917117



The Pulley or The Gifts of God:An Analysis

'*The Pulley*' by George Herbert speaks on one part of the Christian creation story in which God chose to imbue humanity with blessings. The poem begins with the speaker stating that he is retelling the story of creation. He is particularly interested in the part where God gives humankind knowledge, wisdom, beauty, and strength. These are important features of human existence that flowed easily from God to humankind. There is one blessing that God did not let out of his cup, rest. He chose to withhold an innate ability to rest from humankind in order to keep his creation close to him. When one gets weary, they turn to God. Or that is his

reasoning. Herbert's speaker states that God did not want humanity to love Nature more than they love "the God of Nature."

Themes in *The Pulley*

Herbert was interested in exploring themes of religion and human nature. This poem provides the reader with an image and idea of how God bestowed various traits on humanity. The speaker describes these traits, which are the best that humanity has to offer, flowing from God. But, human nature was also influenced by that which God did not give—rest.

Structure and Form of *The Pulley*

'*The Pulley*' by George Herbert is a four stanza poem that is separated into sets of five lines or quintains. Each of these quintains follows a structured rhyme scheme. They conform to a pattern of ABABA, alternating end sounds as the poet saw fit. The consistent repetition in the rhyme helps to give the poem an overwhelming feeling of unity. This makes sense as the entirety of this piece is dialogue spoken by God or about God. A reader should also take note of the moments of repetition in the starting words of '*The Pulley*.' There are a few moments in which these words rhyme. One notable instance in stanza two with the words "Then" and "When" at the beginning of lines two and three. There is also an example in stanza three with "So" and "Bestow" in lines two and five. In regards to the meter, the lines are also very consistent. The first and fifth lines of each stanza conform to a pattern of iambic trimeter. This means that there are three sets of two beats per line. The first of these is unstressed and the second stressed. The stresses remain the same in lines two, three, and four, but they mostly contain five sets of two beats. This means they are

written in iambic pentameter. The regularity of the rhyme scheme, in tandem with the meter, gives the poem a very structured feeling. A reader learns what to expect from line to line, and at least in regards to structure, there are no surprises.

Literary Devices in *The Pulley*

In '*The Pulley*' Herbert makes use of several literary devices. These include but are not limited to alliteration, metaphor, and imagery. The latter is seen through the creative images that Herbert describes of the lightly personified forces making their way out of God's belonging and into humankind. The last, rest, lay on the bottom when all the rest of the treasures had departed. Alliteration is a common technique that helps to increase the overall rhyme and rhythm of a poem. For example, "Let" and "lie" in line four of the first stanza as well as the repetition of "nature" in stanza three. Throughout this poem, as stated in the introduction, Herbert makes use of a metaphysical conceit. This technique is comparable to a metaphor but is much more complex and original in nature. In this case, Herbert uses a pulley to describe the relationship between humanity and God/religion.

Analysis of *The Pulley*

Stanza One

When God at first made man,
 Having a glass of blessings standing by,
 "Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
 Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
 Contract into a span."

In the first stanza of *'The Pulley,'* the speaker begins by describing the creation of humankind. Herbert's speaker is seeking to retell the Christian story of creation with a few added details. The speaker is able to describe what God was thinking and feeling when he decided to make humanity. God saw what he had made, and decided to pour "a glass of blessings" on humankind.

These "blessings" were just "standing by" in a cup, waiting to be used. This speaks to the ease of God's access to forces separate from human understanding. This fact will become important later on in the text when God decides to withhold a blessing without a second thought.

The speaker relays God's words at the moment as he addresses all of creation. He decides to "Pour on [humankind] all that we can." The "world's riches," everything from strength to beauty is bestowed. They have come together into a "span."

Stanza Two

So strength first made a way;

Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.

When almost all was out, God made a stay,

Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,

Rest in the bottom lay.

The first of the blessings in *'The Pulley'* that came to humanity was "strength." It "made away." Next came beauty. It was soon followed by "wisdom, honour" and lastly "pleasure." These are all incredibly important parts of the human experience. There is one more element though that in this retelling of creation Herbert's speaker chose not to include. That was "Rest."

"Rest" as a blessing equal to beauty and strength is interesting. It is not something that one might immediately think of as a feature of life that can be given or granted.

But in this narrative, it is the “treasure” that remains at the bottom of God’s cup. He chooses not to give it to humanity. His reasoning behind this choice is contained within the next two stanzas.

Stanza Three

“For if I should,” said he,
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

In the next five lines, the speaker describes how it was God’s choice to not bestow “rest” on humanity. He knew that if he did so, then “He would adore my gifts instead of me.” Herbert’s speaker thinks that God made this choice because he didn’t want humankind spending their days worshiping nature. Instead, they should be appreciating “the God of Nature.”

Rest is not something that is an integral part of human life and God made an informed, at least to him, the choice to withhold it.

Stanza Four

“Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.”

In the final lines of *'The Pulley,'* the speaker finishes up God's reasoning behind his choice not to give humanity a complete life of rest. He doesn't want humanity to never rest, but there should be different periods. It is ideal for everyone to rest only until they feel restless, then they should get back to their lives. God believes that if there is "weariness" in one's everyday life then that feeling of exhaustion will "toss" humankind to his "breast."

These different periods of activity, exhaustion, rest, and rejuvenation are just as integral to human existence as are strength and wisdom. It seems that Herbert's God has chosen to add them for a reason that appears entirely selfish though. It is not clear, at least through these few lines of reasoning, how "weariness" helps humanity, aside from forcing them closer to God.

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