

### Man's loss of faith: A structuralist student's analysis

The common theme of two poems can be disclosed by examining the author's use of poetic methods. In addition through the use of theoretical approaches, the text's meaning can be expanded upon. Utilising close reading and structuralist theories, to uncover the binaries, the relationship of the text to the theme can be disclosed. By using these techniques, insight can be gained into the meaning of the text.

The Italian or Petrarchen sonnet is a highly structured poetic form. This form was originally utilised as a vehicle, for adoring lovers, to pay homage to the beloved. Typically an Italian sonnet consists of an octave, an eight-line stanza, which is usually a statement or indication of a problem or fact. This is followed by a sestet, a six-line stanza, which is usually the resolution. The carefully structured rhyming couplets visually call each other into existence. Through the use of a predictable structure and form, the two poems effectively convey the theme of lost faith.

John Donne's "Batter My Three-Personed-God" (Madden, 2002, p. 29) is a holy sonnet, a religious adaptation of the original Italian sonnet form. Firstly in the octave, the dilemma, the persona expresses the need to have God violently break and render him apart thus allowing him to be reborn afresh. Furthermore this dilemma is intensified, with a plea to have God liberate the occupied town. The sestet, the resolution, begins with the persona affirming his love for God. However the persona is trapped in a bond to the enemy and beseeches God to break this bond. Finally the sestet ends with the persona pleading for God's salvation. In writing about religious themes, many poets have used the adapted sonnet form.

Gerald Manley Hopkins "God's Grandeur" (Madden, 2002, p. 52) uses the Italian sonnet structure effectively in conveying the message of hope for man. The first octave presents the dilemma. God is the electrifying power, the flashing light, of the world. However man has lost faith and is ignorant of this divine power. The dilemma is intensified with, man's industry, blighting and ravaging the earth, so much so, that the smell of industry permeates the earth's soil. Finally the octave concludes that man, having shod feet, does not have an affinity to the very ground he walks on. However the sestet, the resolution, brings hope by praising nature for its enduring resources and strength. Nature is equated to, the unequivocal fact, of the sun rising out from the east to end the night. The persona implies that this is only possible due to God's nurturing love.

Hopkins and Donne capture the theme of man's lost faith effectively in the classic sonnet form. Both poems introduce the dilemma's that face the persona, and provide a resolution to these problems, albeit in different ways. Both poems portray God as a divine solution. However when looking closer at the binaries the ambiguities of the text, particularly in Donne's poem, become apparent.

In an analysis of the binaries in a text the structuralist can expand meaning from the text. Abrams states that "Close reading: the detailed analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities (multiple meanings)..."(1999, p.181). Using this technique one can develop the binaries, paired opposites, and find ambiguity in the text. Moreover this point of view allows the individual words to take on meaning, given how the text means and not what. In the case of John Donne's poem, there are several very astonishing ambiguities in the text.

Identifying the binaries is the first step in structuralist analysis. John Donne's "Batter My Heart Three Personed God" (Madden, 2002, p. 29) has many binaries, however the following have been deemed important for this discussion: GOD/MAN, DIVORCE/MARRIAGE, and IMPRISONMENT/FREEDOM. The sexual paradox and violence, associated with faith and imprisonment, become quickly apparent in closer analysis of these binaries.

An analysis of the GOD/MAN binary reveals some disturbing associations in the text. Firstly the word batter is used to describe a physical beating or using of force, not typically associated with salvation of the soul. Additionally the persona uses forceful words to depict the forceful act of rending, breaking, burning and bending the persona, renewing the soul. These words are more associated with divine retribution than salvation. The word usurp, used to describe God's liberation of the captive soul, gives the implication of an invading army. These words, related with God, are indicative of a violent, conquering and dominant God.

In reference to the IMPRISONMENT/FREEDOM binary the nature of the persona's relationship with God becomes dubious. The persona's relationship, with the enemy, is one of attraction. However, forfeiting freedom for salvation, the persona rejoices in the chance to be subjugated by God. This leads into the final, perhaps most revealing, binary.

The DIVORCE/MARRIAGE binary is key in interpreting the sexual ambiguity of the text. The persona implores God, the only power strong enough, to break the promised marriage to the enemy. In admonishing chastity and admitting the need to be charmed, ravished, and fulfilled by the power of the Lord, the persona echoes the

pleas of a disconsolate lover. The seemingly pious persona wishes to be broken by the violent dominant power of God, freed from a promised marriage, ravished and imprisoned, thus reclaiming salvation. This is an aberrant representation of the relationship of man's faith in God. Unlike Donne, Gerald Manley Hopkins has a more positive view of the relationship between God and humanity.

"God's Grandeur" (Madden, 2002, p. 52) has several binaries present in the text. The key binaries discernible from the text include GOD/MAN, DAY/NIGHT and finally NATURE/CULTURE. A discussion of the text, in relation to the binaries, unearths a positive theme.

God is portrayed as an all-powerful positive figure. God is given a beauty, breadth and brilliance in the opening lines of the poem. God is compared to the welling pressure of oil, man's most valued commodity. Contrary to this is man, described as burning the earth with industry. The image of man is described as bedimmed and covered in the grease of his drudgery. The persona ponders how man does not heed god's divine powerful rule. This contrast is further evident in the text's description of God's warmth and glow. This is in contrast with man, whose blackened scent is so strong it permeates the earth. These contrasts are further evidenced in the DAY/NIGHT binary.

The rising of the sun gives hope to mankind. Concerning the DAY/NIGHT binary and the concluding of the night. The darkness, or night, alludes to man and the industries associated with man. A contrast to this is the new day that dawns, the new beginning, and the edge that gives hope. Man is seen to be the darkness, the darkness that is chased off by the morning. The sun rises inevitably, across the east, chasing the darkness away, cleansing the world. The day is equated to a hope, a shining,

undiminished hope on the edge of the dark world. This hope is inevitable, like the suns rising, a positive outlook for man. This binary is a positive reinforcement of the NATURE/CULTURE binary.

The powerful NATURE/CULTURE binary reinforces the positive outlook of the poem. Man's generations, alluding perhaps to industry, is described as walking and subduing the earth. Man's culture is described as tearing, stripping and burning to expose the earth. However, regardless of all cultures efforts to dominate, nature prevails. Nature is never used up, even with cultures squandering. In contrast to man, culture, with it's fouled and defiled description, nature is cherished and has a fresh quality given to it. Culture sears the surface of the earth, while nature exists, endures, deep down inside the earth. This universal binary is prevalent in many poems, used to contrast the struggle of the natural world versus the cultural world.

The theme, lost faith, is strong throughout both poems. Several underlying hypothesis exist in both texts. The disclosure of the binaries helps to understand the text and how it reflects the theme in the particular poem. Firstly man is seen in both poems to have lost faith, in God. Secondly God is depicted as a powerful force in both poems. Thirdly both persona's view a relationship with God, different aspects pertaining, as a positive reinforcement of life. Finally in essence both poems make strong use of the faith and belief in God, ultimately showing that without God mankind cannot reach salvation. Using literary techniques the obscurity of the text can be revealed in relation to a common theme.

## References

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