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Poem Explication

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Despair, Faith, and Dignity in Death

Ben Jonson's poem "On My First Son," written in 1616, is truly exemplary of the grief a parent experiences at the loss of a child. The poem approaches the loss both individually as Jonson depicts his own personal struggle, and globally, thereby relating to all people who have typical Christian beliefs about death. Lamentation is plentiful in this poem, and the poignant beauty of Jonson's barely controlled anguish gives the poem a universal appeal and yet also offers a private glimpse into Jonson's life as a creator, both as a poet and a parent.

The poem reads as a combination of epitaph and eulogy. The very beginning of the poem reads as if Jonson were actually standing in front of the grave or coffin of his son saying goodbye. The line "Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy" is structured so that it seems as though the poet is speaking directly to his son. At the end of the poem, the lines, "Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry," appear as though they might actually appear on the gravestone of the deceased. The construction of these lines in conjunction with the rest of the poem provides the reader with insight into Jonson's hugely personal grieving experience.

Ben Jonson was born in 1572 as the posthumous son of a clergyman and despite his father's early death, it is likely that Jonson was influenced by his father's beliefs to a certain extent. It is known, however, that Jonson converted to Roman Catholicism in 1597 while

serving time in prison for killing a man in a duel. He remained Roman Catholic until 1609, and these beliefs also likely influenced his thoughts about death (English Literature). Jonson was a popular playwright, and rumored to have a rivalry with Shakespeare, although at one time, Shakespeare acted in one of Jonson's plays. His plays were widely performed throughout England, even during the time of the plague, and his tragedies were particularly well received. Perhaps his excellence in writing plays helped with his ability to express grief so eloquently, as he did in "On My First Son."

Jonson composed the poem as a result of his son's death at the age of seven from an outbreak of the plague, which took place in London in the early 1600s. The poem seems to be a mixture of grief and guilt that Jonson may have felt upon the death of his son. Jonson, who called his wife "a shrew, but honest," had left his family to go to the countryside when the plague struck London. It was during this time that Jonson's son passed away as a result of the plague (Elizabethan and Stuart Plays).

The loss that Jonson describes in the poem about his son epitomizes human suffering at the loss of a child. Jonson was particularly vulnerable, as he lost a total of three children. His first son, Benjamin, the subject of "On My First Son," died in 1603, while his daughter Mary had passed away in 1595. He had a second son, also named Benjamin, who passed away in 1635. Jonson composed an elegy similar to "On My First Son" for his daughter, Mary, who died at the age of six months. "On My First Daughter" lauds the baby for dying with her innocence intact and acknowledges the birthright of her name as the virgin queen's of Heaven as well. The grief is better suppressed in this poem as compared to "On My First Son."

Usually acknowledged to be a companion poem to "On My First Son," "On My First Daughter" takes a markedly different approach to the ideas of grief and death. If "On My First Son" were to be read without knowledge of "On My First Daughter," the poem would appear as though it were describing grief about the loss of a child, and "son" would only be an operative term personalizing the poem for Jonson. When compared with its companion poem, "On My First Daughter," however, the poem suddenly appears more poignant towards the loss of his son and the poem about his daughter seems more restrained in its elaboration on loss. This is more likely than not due to the fact that very few children survived to the age of one year at the time Jonson was writing, and so the loss of a six-month-old child was to be somewhat expected. His son, however, passed away at the age of seven, which likely impacted the level of grief that Jonson felt at his son's passing.

Yet, there is another distinguishing characteristic between the two poems that leaves the reader questioning Jonson's emotions during the losses of his son and daughter. In "On My First Daughter," the poem itself is a commentary on religion and his daughter's progression to the Holy Land. The poem is full of references to the gift of arriving in Heaven and explains her mother's grief away as a comfort to her daughter's move from earth to Heaven. Yet, in "On My First Son," there is no reference to the child's mother and only one explicit reference to religion—the word "sin," and the word is mostly symbolic of Jonson's guilt. Jonson considers his "sin" as loving his child too much and having such high hopes for his life's achievements. He must atone for his sin with his son's life. The difference in the poem's religious affect from "On My First Daughter" is startling; there is no discussion of the son's ascendance and the only reference to his innocence is in a general lamentation. The disparity between the two poems could be due to gender differences of the time or the age

difference at the time of Jonson's children's deaths, the latter of which would explain the more passionate and personal lament of Jonson for his son and the calm, Christian acceptance of his daughter's death.

"On My First Son" is composed in heroic couplets, which helps to contain and control the grief expressed by Jonson. The iambic pentameter yields a rhythm that might symbolize a desired closure to the situation and the rhymes of the couplets may provide some closure to the expression of grief, at least in written form. Jonson, who lost his son thirteen years before the composition of the elegaic poem, may be searching for an end to his anguish over losing his firstborn son and namesake through the composition of the poem. The rhyme scheme, aabb, etc., in conjunction with the sharp endstops at the end of each couplet, represent the desired closure, and perhaps a level of closure that Jonson attains in creating the elegy for his son. The few variations in meter throughout the poem are mostly spondees. The stressed syllables of the spondees slow the verse down, representative of the pain and the slow feeling of the progression of life after the loss of a loved one. A prime example of Jonson's eloquence in meter is in the ninth line of the poem, where he writes, "Rest in soft peace." Rest, soft, and peace are all stressed in that statement and one can well imagine the thoughtfulness and sadness that permeates Jonson's being as he writes these words.

The poem is a typical elegy in that it is not only personal in its expression of grief, but it also questions the worldly states of age and lamentation, particularly in lines five through eight. "Oh, could I lose all father now! For why / Will man lament the state he should envy? / To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage, / And if no other misery, yet age?" generalize the pain of loss and question why the living grieve to a great extent for the deceased when they have gone to a better place. In the poem, Jonson describes the place as

one that is not full of anger, hatred, and if that is not enough to be thankful for, a childhood death also allows one to escape the aging process, which itself is depressing. The words Jonson writes appear didactic in nature, as he attempts to comfort both himself and others who have lost a child by espousing the positive aspects of dying at a young age. It also serves as a rhetorical question that needs no answer, but perhaps generates thought among those who have not experienced the loss or those who sympathize with Jonson and other's in his situation.

A paradox is found in line five as Jonson laments his state of fatherhood. Becoming a father has given Jonson a child, who has become part of his life, but fatherhood also leaves a man vulnerable to the notion that, at any given time, life can be taken away. Fatherhood removes some of the authority that a man feels he has, and this is expressed in Jonson's poem as he cries out, "Oh, could I lose all father now!" If the poet can merely remove all feelings of fatherhood, he will be able to recognize the positive aspects of his son's death. Though father is not capitalized in the poem, the meaning could also be construed as a pleading question to God as to whether Jonson is going to lose more in his life, or if it is even possible to lose more at this point now that he has lost his firstborn son.

Alliteration, assonance, and consonance are used sparingly within the poem. In line seven, the "s" sound is repeated several times throughout the line, "To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage." The line also has many stressed syllables, as though Jonson is attempting to force the belief upon himself that what happened was beneficial for his young son in many ways, but his grief shines through the words. The reader can imagine Jonson dragging his pen across the page as though he is struggling to write the words. Assonance occurs in lines seven and eight with the words "state", "'scaped," "rage," and "age."

Financial terminology saturates lines three and four, as Jonson articulates his sin of loving his son too much. As though it were a transaction between he and God, Jonson writes that he borrowed his son from God for a mere seven years. At the end of seven years, his loan was complete, and Jonson paid dearly with his son's death. The poet uses the word "exacted" as though his son were the precise amount required to pay the loan. It is the case, in fact, as it was his son who was loaned, and he must be returned to God and Heaven, where his rightful home is. The words "just day" could represent two different aspects of the death of Jonson's son. The word "just" means morally correct or righteous, and lawful. Together, "just day" can signify Judgment Day for Jonson's son, in terms of his death, or they could stand for the day that Benjamin died—his birthday. Jonson's son passed away seven years to the day after his birth, and Jonson could mean this to be that the "just day" to return to God is on the day one was born.

While "On My First Son" is certainly Christian in its religious approach, the beginning of the poem is quite ambiguous as to whether it is a religious focus at all. The first line of the poem, "Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;" is unclear as to whether Jonson is referring to his son, Benjamin, or whether he is referring to his writing as the product of his right hand and the joy of his life. Further investigation reveals that Jonson most likely intends both meanings to the first line.

Benjamin was the name of Jonson's son, which when the Hebrew name is translated into English, means "child of my right hand." In the Bible, when Benjamin was born to Rachel and Jacob, Rachel refused to call her son Benjamin, instead calling him Benoni, which means "son of sorrow" in Hebrew. Rachel died shortly after Benjamin's birth and Jacob changed his son's name to Benjamin (Jonquil). The end of the line, "and joy," represents the

fact that Benjamin was Jonson's true joy; his writing was a creation of his right hand, but it was his son who was of true value to him and who brought joy into his life. Also, "and joy" may subtly reject "son of sorrow," or Benoni, the name that is closely related to Benjamin. Jonson named his son Benjamin, not Benoni, and this small statement at the end of the first line may emphasize the worthiness of his son and reiterate that his name is Benjamin and not Benoni, despite the sorrow that he is feeling now at the loss of his son.

Jonson continues his ambiguity in lines nine and ten when he writes, "Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry." He arranges the words such that the reader must make a deliberate effort to interpret his meaning, whether he is being self-indulgent or attempting to downplay his own accomplishments in lieu his son's worthiness. The word "poetrie" in Greek means "maker." Jonson, through the creation of this poem, has described two acts of creation—fatherhood and writing. The meaning of the line is uncertain because it was a common Renaissance thought to refer to poems as children. Though Jonson may have been writing about his pride and love for his son, the composition of this particular elegy in memory of his son may have been the best piece of actual poetry he had ever composed, simply because of the act of writing about his son. Aristotle, in his *Nichomachean Ethics*, discusses the amplified affection poets often have for their poetry and how they love their poems as parents love their children (University of Buckingham). Yet Jonson may be saying something entirely different; his creation of poetry may seem paltry when compared with the creation of his son. If the line "Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry" is interpreted in this manner, it appears that his son, who is also named Ben Jonson, is the best piece of work ever composed by Jonson and the epitaph only serves to emphasize this point.

The self-promotion of how great Jonson's creation was when he made his son is tempered by the tenderness of the line and the gentle rhythm of the heroic couplet and its meter. The alliteration of "b" with "Ben" and "best" make the two—Jonson and his best piece of poetry—synonymous. However self-promoting the line seems, Jonson is not quite as self-indulgent as it may appear. He downplays his work, which he creates alone, but his son, whom he created only half of, is what he considers to be his best work. This is a typical sentiment of fathers, so it is not surprising that Jonson feels this way. It is surprising, however, that he makes a direct comparison of the creation of his son to the single-handed creation of his poetry. Two interpretations of this are possible: Jonson is indirectly making a statement about the involvement of women in the raising of a child, or Jonson is emphasizing his son's worthiness. The former is unlikely, given the state of gender differences at the time and that women were primarily responsible for raising children. The latter, however, is most likely the case, given the surrounding text and the poem's elegaic structure.

The final two lines of the poem are most representative of how Jonson resolves to overcome his grief about the death of his young son, Benjamin. The heroic couplet of "For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such / As what he loves may never like too much" is a general statement, but it implies much about Jonson's future attitude towards love, and also provides general closure to a poem that speaks so profoundly of loss. The two lines are didactic, offering a possible means to consolation. Yet they imply one must have foresight and be cautious in attaching oneself to another. Specifically, Jonson alludes to a notion that a person can love another but must temper one's "like" of the other person in order to avoid pain upon loss of that person. The switch between "love" and "like" appears to be unintended, but it is likely that Jonson executed the word choice for a particular reason. Love is a difficult

emotion to prevent from happening, especially where children are concerned. Parental love is something that originates the moment a child is created, and only increases exponentially from that point. Jonson's sin is that he loved his son too much and, as a result, he lost his child. He will no longer make the mistake of loving too much; in the future, he will temper his love for those whom he is attached to. Liking someone, however, is not a natural occurrence, and occurs only with the passage of time and with learning about a person.

The two lines are reminiscent of Martial's epigram "Quidquid ames, cupias non placuisse nimis." Martial was a poet in the first century and is considered to be the creator of the modern epigram. In one of his 1561 composed epigrams, Martial speaks of a young slave's death. Written in Latin, the poem ends with (as translated in English), "Who was more charming than he or who fairer with his face like Apollo's [for handsomeness]? For those unusually gifted, life is brief and old age rare. Pray that what you love has not pleased you too much!" (University of Buckingham).

The closing couplet of the poem reverts back to the second line, where Jonson says, "My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy." Using logic to find a resolution to his grief, Jonson resolves to restrain his pride in his child. If he has no hope, he will have no sin, which, in turn, will result in no loss, or at the very least, less pain upon a loss. This existence that the poet has proposed is grim, but it avoids pain, which appears to be the ultimate desire of Jonson at this point in his poem. The lines also symbolize a resignation of one to the concept of loss. People lose loved ones often throughout an earthly life, and if one is to survive these losses, then a person must be willing to sacrifice some affection for people in return for less pain upon losing them. Non-selfish love will result in an outlook that is perhaps more positive about the attributes of dying at a young age. This type of love is

typical of Christian stoics, who were popular in the Enlightenment period. Though writing before the period of the Enlightenment, Jonson reaches this point in religion as a result of the death of his son.

A potential argument is whether or not these two final lines alter the emotional affect of the poem. While the poem seems to be a passionate plea for relief of Jonson's anguish over losing his young son, the end of the poem appears as a bitter resolution to the loss Jonson has experienced. Jonson expounds his son's worthiness throughout the first ten lines of the poem, but the final two lines are didactic and almost give the impression of a lesson that would appear in a fable. The implication is that experience yields lessons that are not always pleasant to learn, but if one wants to survive and not live with an inordinate amount of pain, he/she must create a life that is still pleasurable, but slightly detached; this will reduce the level of anguish felt when a loss occurs. The effect is that the reader is left feeling bittersweet, as though Jonson tidily closed the poem with a small discursive message to the general population and reduced his son's death into a lesson about life, love, and loss. Though Jonson may not have intended this to be the case, and may only have intended to end the poem before the passionate testimonial to his son's memory became trite, it nevertheless occurs that the poem seems too orderly at the end. This might be simply because of Jonson's gender and the societal expectations at the time. The poem garnered attention because of its outward lament of a father for his son; to continue on would potentially reduce the effectiveness of the expressed emotion as it was expressed through the poem thus far, and might also have reduced the patriarchal society's respect for a father and his experience of losing a child. Yet it seems more likely that the case for Jonson's work is the tradition of the elegy—since the time of Martial, epigrams were typically short and Jonson, in all probability,

continued in this tradition and, as a result, ended the poem in dedication to his son after twelve lines.

Jonson's poem, "On My First Son," is a passionate and barely controlled tribute to his son. The poem reflects not only Jonson's personal experience as a father, but his experience as a Christian and the global experiences of Christian parents. His faith allows him to yield a certain amount of acceptance for young Benjamin's death, but it is not enough to help him overcome his despair. The final couplet of the poem expresses finality on a universal level but, for Jonson, appears to bring him no closer to espousing the positive aspects of a young death that he mentions previously in the poem, in lines five through nine. The beauty of Jonson's poem is found in his emotional frailty over the loss of his son and in his dignified struggle to gain control of his grief.

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