

Bobby Example

Teacher's Name

Course Name

Berryman Essay

Date

Vice within Vice: The Effects of Desperate Uncertainty in "Sole Watchman"

John Berryman had two consistencies throughout his short and tragic life: poetry and vice. Berryman was noted for both his poetry and his excessive use of alcohol. However, his alcoholism, like some of his poetry, was only a symptom of a deeper issue in his life. This issue was overshadowed by his myriad accomplishments in the field of poetry. Berryman committed his life to poetry and the teaching of poetry, and his commitment showed in both the classroom and the printed word. The gradual evolution of his poetic career from consistent but un-inspired craftsman to a truly original poet masked his personal troubles from those that did not know him well, as did his magnanimous teaching style. Those that did know him well were aware of his alcoholism, but this knowledge, like the alcoholism itself, masked a larger problem.

This larger problem is reflected in one of his final works of poetry, "Sole Watchman." In this poem, Berryman battles with his various desires, and through those battles reveals that the issue driving his life and work is his lack of self-confidence. This fact is well-hidden behind his plethora of faults; however, his repetitive use of imperative structure, his unintentional spotlight on his drinking problem, and his use of ambiguous word choice around emotionally troubling topics combine to send a shiver of self-doubt through the poem.

Berryman's use of many imperative structures throughout "Sole Watchman" might be the most obvious evidence of his self-confidence issues. These structures shape and drive the poem,

leaving the reader with the sense that the narrator is both demanding and begging for something consistently throughout the work. Berryman begins this impression with the first line, which opens with a noun of address and jumps right to a request and demand: “guard me / from my flicker of impulse lust” (Berryman 1-2). This is only the first of many request/demand/pleas from Berryman to God. He has the deep-seated feeling that he is incapable, on his own, of fighting off the “flicker” of lust as it arises within him. His next imperative structure, “Teach me / to see them as sisters & daughters” (Berryman 2-3), is a reasonable plea considering his first request, but the power begged for in his requests rises dramatically in the following stanza.

It is clear by the end of the second stanza that Berryman struggles to hold on to anything in his life, not simply his control over lust. He begs God to “Grant” him “sleep nightly,” to “soften his dreams,” and even to “achieve in [him] patience” (Berryman 6-9). As his requests mount, so does the reader’s inclination to view him as weak-willed. The reader learns that the narrator not only fails to control his lust, but is incapable of controlling his patience or even something as common as a sleeping schedule. It is at this point that Berryman’s true lack of self-confidence steps from behind the façade of his earlier requests and reveals itself for what it is: a painful deficiency in the life of the author.

Berryman’s lack of self-confidence shows itself even further in the following stanza, which shows not only his inability to face basic facts of life on his own—traveling the “common path of death”—but also the centrality of alcohol in his life. He uses an opening dependent clause once in this poem: when he faces the problem of drinking. He asks God that “when all hurt nerves whine shut away the whiskey” (Berryman 10). Note that the author never asks God to bar whiskey on any other occasion: merely “when hurt nerves whine” (Berryman 10). This can be read as either an attempt by Berryman to limit his alcohol only when it will negatively

affect him, or recognition by him that alcohol gives him problems only when he gives into the need for it under stress (i.e., when “hurt nerves whine”). The double meaning of this passage may signify the author’s own uncertainty and angst regarding alcohol, as may his misuse of verbs later in the poem.

Two powerful words split themselves into multiple possible meanings at two different points in the poem: “Make” (line 9) and “Fill” (line 14). In line 9, Berryman writes “Make me from time to time the gift of the shoulder.” This can be read in two different ways. Berryman could be asking God to give him a shoulder—to cry on, as the saying goes—or he could be asking God to make Berryman into a shoulder, so that others could cry on him. If the reader keeps in mind the author’s lack of self-confidence, the ambiguity resolves itself: Berryman both needs help and needs to be needed. He needs a shoulder to cry on as much as he needs someone to rely on him to “give the gift” of his shoulder. The stress of needing someone and needing to be needed overtakes Berryman in this line, and reveals itself through a single divergent word.

Berryman’s instability in his self-confidence becomes more evident in his second ambiguous word choice: line 14’s “Fill.” The author states that “Cross am I sometimes with my little daughter: / Fill her eyes with tears” (Berryman 13-14). Much like “Make” in line 9, this word can be read in two ways. The reader might, upon first reading, believe that the narrator is announcing that his crossness toward his daughter fills her eyes with tears. However, the colon at the end of line 13, combined with the earlier use of imperative structures, can also lead the reader to believe that the narrator is asking God to fill his daughter’s eyes with tears. The obvious question to arise in this interpretation is “Why would the narrator want this?” It seems confusing on the surface, but in light of the author’s lack of self-confidence, the reader can see that the narrator is at once both apologizing for being cross to his daughter while also asking God

to fill her eyes with tears when he does so in order to see the magnitude of his error. The outward act of tears can serve to remind him of the error of his ways, and allow him to continue to “achieve in [him] patience” (Berryman 7).

Berryman’s “Sole Watchman” reveals a great deal of the inner strain that the poet suffered in the later years of his life. At the heart of everything, both in the poet’s life and in the poem itself, is a lack of self-confidence. The poet has a clear and obvious inability to face the situations in his life—both ordinary and extreme—and turns to a higher power for support. This is hardly a rare phenomenon, but the poet’s obvious fragility regarding his self-confidence in the poem is more extreme than expected. Perhaps even more unexpectedly, it is the fragility of his self-confidence that forms and drives “Sole Watchman,” making the poem more powerful and revealing than might originally be expected.

Works Cited

Berryman, John. "Sole Watchman." *Poetry Speaks*, expanded edition. New York: SourceBooks MediaFusion, 2007. Print.