

Close Reading Notes for "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

How do poets use the sounds to develop characters and conflicts?

Robert Hayden's elegiac "Those Winter Sundays" illustrates how sonic devices may be used for dramatic effect. In this poem, sounds dramatize the complex reality of a father-son relationship. With allusions to several master narratives in the Western rhetorical tradition, controlled changes in rhythm, and highly patterned instances of consonance, Hayden examines the lives of these characters. Through the mastery of these techniques, he creates a concise illustration of a multifaceted relationship, marked by sacrifice and suffering. Reciting this poem carefully and savoring every sound reveals the genius of the sonic patterning.

Beginning with the word "Sundays," Hayden makes the first of several references to Christianity, conjuring images of a resurrected son, sacrificed by his own father. Building upon the same tensions found in this familiar story, the speaker shares bittersweet remembrances of Sunday mornings with his father, using descriptions that feature lumbering phrasal verbs such as "got up" and "put on." In addition to a colloquial diction associated with the speaker's father, the lines "from labor in the weekday weather made/ banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him." firmly establish the pattern of particular sounds which are associated with him. The dominant sounds of z, k, and b in words such as "clothes" and "blueblack" become particularly labor-intensive for the mouth in a sequence of single-syllable stressed words "banked fires blaze". In this somewhat ominous image of his father stoking a fire, the **consonance** of the letter b and the consecutive stressed syllables decrease the pace of the rhythm, demanding a graver tone. The stanza is then punctuated with a terse sentence describing a sore silence "No one thanked him," which literally closes the mouth of the performer in a recitation.

Woken by the very sounds associated with his father, the speaker hears "cold, splintering, breaking" in the next stanza. He then introduces the somehow comforting yet contrasting **alliteration** of "when the rooms were warm," as the speaker begins to characterize himself. In contrast with the description of his father's morning routine, he uses not phrasal verbs, but the more sophisticated "And slowly I would rise and dress." Then, in perfectly iambic rhythms, stressing the pronoun "I," the speaker talks plainly about his conflicted family life. The line "Fearing the chronic angers of that house," he once again drops in the hard k motif and draws us back into the world of allusion, with the word "chronic" which is rooted in the Greek myth of Cronus, the patricidal son who then eats his own offspring for fear of their revolt. The revolt indeed comes to pass after the birth of Zeus, who then

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rises to an exalted position. Like the Christian story of God's son Jesus, suffering, sacrifice and exaltation are prominent themes.

Through these allusions and careful attention to the effect of sound, Hayden paints a grim picture of a father who sacrifices a great deal for his son, but also brutalizes him. The speaker's anger and guilt smolder in the first two stanzas. However, his use of the past tense and references to time (of day, week, and year) throughout the poem suggest that, over time, the speaker has reached a new vantage point and tenders perhaps a reluctant forgiveness for his father.

In the final stanza, the speaker's actions become sonically connected to his father's when he uses the initial verb "speaking." Then the z, b, and k sounds associated with conflict are "driven out" by the tender images of his father "who had driven out the cold/and polished my good shoes as well." This image captures the speaker's guilt over his father's self-sacrifice but also the source of the father's fear and anger, subservience to his better-educated son.

The final stanza focuses on the internal conflict of the speaker who wonders "What did I know, what did I know/of love's austere and lonely offices?" The repetition of "what did I know" opens many emotional possibilities ranging from utter regret to bitterness. Also, the evocative adjectives "austere and lonely" combined with the word "offices," suggests a dutiful love at best, as the term "offices" carries a the secondary meaning of a monastic position in the Catholic Church.

Key Terms

Alliteration: The repetition of speech sounds in nearby words

Allusion: A reference explicit or indirect, to a well-known person, place, event, or to another literary work or passage

Iamb: A foot made up of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (Iambic is the adjective form of iamb)

Stress: A relatively stronger accent placed on a syllable