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Songs for the Divine

John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14" and Donald Justice's "The Wall" both address aspects of Christianity, Donne is salaciously pursuing God while Justice is disillusioned with God's creation. Their messages are distinct, however their intentions are the same - to question and criticize the church's doctrine. When "Holy Sonnet 14" was written, the church advocated severance of the impure body from the spiritual mind, commending a monkish life. His work disrupts the prevailing ideology, and suggests that a relationship with God is incomplete without the body. Erotic language is used as an extreme manifestation of physical pleasure and its profanity shocks and disrupts religious norms. "The Wall" also initiates a dialogue with religious convention, questioning whether or not Eden is a paradise. "Holy Sonnet 14" uses the orderliness of sonnets and their tradition of being a profession of love to reinforce the disruption of a religious paradigm that separates the body from God, while "The Wall" proves that the idyllic Garden of Eden is a distorted interpretation of the truth using orderliness to a similar effect, but alters the traditional love sonnet to become a story of disillusionment instead.

Typically in a sonnet, the speaker professes their love to their beloved. In "Holy Sonnet 14" the speaker is professing their love for God using corporeal language to disrupt the scripted way to write about God, meanwhile "The Wall" breaks this tradition and the characters fall out of love with The Garden of Eden, disputing the canon utopian Eden. The speaker in "Holy Sonnet 14" amorously pursues God, begging for Him to "batter his heart" (Donne 1). Donne uses the physical action of battering to describe the divine love desired by the speaker, which he hopes will lead to a transformation of heart and mind by salvation. The speaker directly confesses that "dearly [they] love [God]," which is characteristic of sonnets (9). Donne realizes that sonnet are often declarations of love and innovates on the form. He writes to God instead of a human lover and uses the opportunity to warrant the use of erotic language to describe the desire for a physical relationship. Justice also innovates on the sonnet form, but inverts the convention of writing about the beloved and instead writes about becoming disillusioned with a place that was once loved. Initially the inhabitants "could find no flaw / In all of Eden," (Justice 5-6). Justice is describing Eden according to the biblical description, a flawless and heavenly place. Eden's perfection is subsequently described as "the first omen," followed by the second omen - a women who dreams of a "lion sharpening his claw" (7). The perfection of Eden is paradoxically revealed to be its greatest flaw. The only way to achieve this perfection is through the control and fear of the angels, which is represented by the lion sharpening his claw. The woman is the first to become disillusioned and fall out of love with the idyllic scene that traditionally inspires many artists

and encourages Christians to follow a path that will return to Eden. Justice inverts the traditional convention of the love sonnet to invert the picturesque dream of Eden, which is distinct from Donne who harnesses the power of the love sonnet to illustrate the lustful yearning for a physical relationship with God.

Sonnets are an inordinately ordered form of poetry, which Justice and Donne take advantage of to structure and balance the chaos their poems instigate. Eden initially functions like a fascist state, it is carefully controlled and monitored by the angels. The “angels [are] as common as birds or butterflies,” whose wings instill awe in the inhabitants, yet when they were furled “they felt no awe” (Justice 3,4). Awe describes the fascination the humans have with the angels, but also their fear of them. Justice suggests that the angels are overseeing the humans, monitoring their freedom, maintaining the peace with their authority. The woman is like biblical Eve who “[eats] from [the tree]” which causes “[her] eyes [to] be opened” to the reality that she is an animal in God’s cage (New International Version, Gen 3:4). The walled paradise breaks down into chaos and “the gate [stands] open” after the woman disobeys (13). Opening Eden’s gate in the bible is like opening Pandora’s box and venturing into an evil flawed world, however in “The Wall” it represents the infinite opportunity in the free world. In both endings, the inhabitants are venturing from peace to chaos. The descent into chaos is ironically given structure by writing a sonnet. Similarly “Holy Sonnet 14” employs the sonnet form to provide order to chaos, however the chaos originates from Donne uniting the corrupt body and God, which unsettles the church’s doctrine. The speaker desires to unite body and spiritual mind when he asks God to “break, blow, burn and make [him] new,” by transforming him through salvation (Donne 4). Divine transformation is usually considered a mental process, but by asking God to have a direct physical impact on the speaker, he is impiously praying for God to affect his impure body. Even more profanely, the speaker begs god to “ravish [him]” (Donne 4). Using sexual language when praying to God would be considered unseemly, yet Donne uses it to shock and disturb pious readers. The language suits the desires of the speaker, who longs to explicitly feel God and become connected with Him like a lover desires to be connected with their beloved. “The Wall” and “Holy Sonnet 14” are similar because they both use the structure of the sonnet to contain the chaos ignited by the criticism of religious doctrines, yet they differ because “The Wall’s” chaos is most evident in the plot, while “Holy Sonnet 14’s” chaos is most evident when analyzing for meaning.

Donne and Justice both experiment with different manipulations of the sonnet to emphasize the theme of their work. “The Wall” and “Holy Sonnet 14” both interrogate Christian norms about God or the heavenly Eden, using a highly structured sonnet to order the disturbance they’re creating. They differ because “Holy Sonnet” conforms to the traditional love sonnet, while “The Wall” reverses the convention to convey a story about falling out of love.

Works Cited

New International Version. [Colorado Springs]: Biblica, 2011. BibleGateway.com. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

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