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Understanding and Sense: Investigating William Blake's "Ah! Sunflower"

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Some recent theories of literary criticism based on the concepts of structural linguistics have undoubtedly opened new vistas of literary comprehension and appreciation, sidelining the traditional, impressionistic and representational modes of interpretation. Bruss rightly points out that in the late 1960s "the Anglo-American literary community, which had been created on the rock of Johnsonian empiricism and Arnoldian sensibility, found itself suddenly possessed by an alien spirit of speculation, infected by an unspeakable cant of theoretical abstractions" (1982: 3) As a result of it, new text-based discourses have overwhelmingly come to the fore, focusing the readers' attention on the linguistic structure of a text, bringing forth the fictional experience veiled in the suggestive functioning of words. Consequently, the process of extracting thematic content and authorial meaning from the text-so dear to the academic critics has been marginalized.

Among other issues involved in reading a poem, the issue of discerning and determining inner experience in the web of words has assumed pivotal importance. It is, nevertheless, surprising to note that some critics of repute are still averse to grasping practical possibilities of this approach. Jonathan Culler (1973) is one of them. He, indeed, assiduously and scholarly advocates the importance of the reader's response in his book, *Structural Poetics*, overlooking the nature and functioning of the words in a literary text. In order to differentiate the role of the intentional content in a text from the process of evoking and evolving imaginative experiences embedded in the verbal structure, it is appropriate to have a look at a poem. Let us take a poem, entitled 'Ah! Sunflower', by William Blake that has been quoted for discussion by Jonathan Culler in his book cited above (see, Culler 1973: 115-16) and Harold Bloom in *Visionary Company* (1961: 247):

Ah! Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveler's journey is done;

Where the youth pined away with desire,
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves and aspire;
Where my sunflower wishes to go.

Harold Bloom instead of revealing a unified imaginative experience in the poem, has directly linked the subject of the poem with intention of the poet: it is "asceticism" and "repression of sexuality" found by him which shapes the thematic purpose presented as the meaning of the poem. Bloom has as such explicitly dealt with the subject of the poem.

Culler, agreeing with Harold Bloom, has drawn a thematic statement from the poem under discussion. He has tried to pinpoint meaning of the poem in the context of "a given system of conventions" (1973: 116), known or supposedly known to the reader. He says that the flower in the poem has the predilection to follow the sun by 'counting' and 'seeking' after that sweet golden clime; thereby affirming "an instance of human aspiration" (1973: 115). He further relates and extends the meaning to the end of "temporal time", resulting "in eternity". He, furthermore, points out the convention of thematic unity "producing effects", in relation to the aspirant young man and his sweetheart.

Agreeing again with Harold Bloom, Culler says that the poem symbolizes "repression of sexuality" (1973: 115), as pointed out by Bloom in the *Visionary Company*. It is therefore noteworthy that Jonathan Culler's interpretational study, emphasizing the meaning in adherence to the "convention", is in no way different from the study of Harold Bloom. Both critics have explicitly laid emphasis on the specification of meaning. Their studies as such are interpretations, fragmentary,

desultory and purposive. They forged that a poem essentially remains a multilateral unified whole by virtue of the creative arrangement of words, and each and every word functions in a suggestive manner. Culler has distanced himself from the concept of unique role of words. He has as a whole overlooked the essential linguistic structure of the poem which includes symbolic words like "sun flower" and "snow". He has also ignored a harmonious dramatic situation created by the "traveler", his "journey, shroud of snow", the "youth" and "Virgin; their rising from the graves" etc.

Basically we have to remember that it is not the poet, but the poetic persona in a fictional text that attracts the attention of a reader. It is the persona who creates, extends and witnesses the internal events and happenings that confront him. The persona in the poem makes his presence felt right from the first word, "Ah!" of the first line of the poem:

'Ah, sun-flower weary of time.'

His tone is sad, meditative and intimate; it is, nevertheless, unemotional. He, despite calling the sun-flower as "My Sun flower", and despite his close attachment and association with the flower, transforms him into an 'objective correlative'. He is sensitive, intelligent and lover of Nature. His association with Nature is so close that he becomes an integral part of it.

In the first stanza of the poem, the narrator introduces sun flower, and the sun. He in a pensive tone informs that the sun flower is weary of the passage of time-"weary of time". The words are indicative of his exhaustion and weariness caused by time. These words also suggest his desire, waiting and dismay. The narrator, in the second stanza, reveals that the flower "countest steps of the Sun". This suggests slow movement of the sun which refers to waiting of the flower. The sun has been personified and his journey is portrayed. The third line depicts the sun's desire to go to the "sweet golden clime" where the journey would come to an end. Who is the traveller? How is he related to the dramatic experience of the poem? He is either a traveller in possession of an individual identity, unraveling one more dimension of the poem or is the sun himself. His being the Sun himself appears to be probable because the flower sees his (Sun's) taking steps onwards, and his destination is "sweet golden clime". The sun's transformation into the traveller implies the vicissitudes of the travel undertaken by him.

In the second stanza the land which has been shown as much coveted destination of the sun, virtually an ideal place of sweet dream, is essentially the decline of the sun-as it becomes instantly a heaven and woeful place. This decayed land is inhabited by a young lover and his beloved (the pale Virgin) who are buried in their graves. The words "Youth" (lover) and "Virgin" (beloved) begin with capital letters, signifying simultaneously their specification and representation of lovers and sweethearts in general. The story of the young lover culminates in his death owing to suppression of "desire". The word "desire" is indicative of the emotional and sexual needs and the expression "pined away" where the youth pined away with desire suggests his

waiting, craving and desperation. The use of adjective "pale" with "Virgin" reveals love and its unfruitfulness; she, too, seems to have experienced the same emotional torture, contributing to the misery of the lover. The "Virgin in snow" clearly shows that she is buried in snow. The word "snow" suggests changes in seasons; it also anticipates misery of the Virgin as well. The lines:

Where the youth pined away with desire, And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,

indicate desolation of the sun flower's heaven-like dream which is realizable by the presence of the sun flower, changes into the cold winter in which snow becomes a "shroud". It also deconstructs the dream of the flower getting united with the Sun at the close of the journey. The aforesaid line and the following line,

'Arise from their graves, and aspire'

Jointly create a fearful multidimensional situation. The buried lover and the Virgin arise from their respective graves and surprisingly wish to go to that land which is coveted by the flower-the land where they lived and where they come to life again, but paradoxically the land turns to be their graveyard. The word "arise" does not refer to any specified time. On the other hand, it reminds of the idea of transmigration of souls-an unending system of birth, death and re-birth.

An element of irony is perceptible in the paradoxical attitude of the narrator. In his attachment to the lover, it is applicable to the flower as well. For both of them the dream land turns to be the graveyard. While revealing the heartfelt relation with the flower, he keeps an eye on his inner and outer life. Their dreaming to go to the golden land speaks of their innocence.

It is, however, the story of the poem which enthralls and invokes the sensibility of a reader. Regarding its meaning it can be said that none can deny its covert presence in the poem, but it is not the end in itself; it is, on the contrary, the inner dramatic experience which is of basic and paramount importance; it leads the reader to the satisfaction of his aesthetic sense. This, however, is to be borne in mind that the poem is not confined to one or two meanings, as has been done by both the critics mentioned above, and meaning is not to be derived from fragmented line of the poem. It is characterized by multiplicity of meanings, and it is to be seen as a harmonious whole. Apart from various human relationships, it can rise to the metaphorical level as well; it can symbolize an eternal quest of man stimulating him to discover unseen worlds; it seeks the realization of his dreams and activate him to fixed ways and means to satisfy his psychological and intellectual urges. It also could lead him to the realization that his strife, dismay and dreams result in the anguish of purposelessness. It also could bring home to the reader the futility of relationship between man and Nature and man and the universe. The allegorical and symbolic characters of the Sun and the Sun-flower also lead to multiplicity of meaning, but such exercise tantamount to counting meanings which is not in conformity with the unique and essential nature of art. It is indeed, the mysterious dramatic happening in the text that awaits revelation and evaluation.

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