

Changing perspectives in "dayanhe--my wet nurse"

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In Ai Qing's poem, "Dayanhe-My Wet-Nurse", the eponymous wet-nurse leads a difficult and mostly painful life, but finds purpose and meaning in the perspective she is able to provide the speaker in his childhood. After Dayanhe is no longer able to breastfeed the speaker, he finds himself at the home of his biological family more regularly, a place he feels now much more unfamiliar with (Qing Lines 35-49). Because the speaker has spent so much more time with Dayanhe and her family, he has to some degree been raised under poverty. While he still has the benefits and security of having a middle class home, he witnesses a great deal of life in the poor lower class. Returning home, the speaker is still too young to become appalled by the stark difference in circumstances; however, the way in which his own home seems alien to him indicates that his perspective might not be corrupted by the complacency of his own class. Having a stronger sense of familiarity with the setting of Dayanhe's home probably serves as an early starting point from which the speaker is able to empathize with lives unlike the one of privilege he is born into. Also, because he has been breastfed by Dayanhe, he would likely begin attaching a certain fondness and gratefulness towards not just her-but the difficult life which she exemplifies. After Dayanhe has died, the speaker reflects on certain things which she never lived to see: the death of her alcoholic husband, her oldest son becoming a thief, and most importantly-the speaker now writes "condemnations of this unjust world" that she had faced (Qing Lines 103-109). Now reflecting on the total life of his adoptive mother, the speaker is able to find some solace in regard to her death. Despite her "lifetime of humiliation at the hands of the world" (Qing 95-96), Dayanhe never had to watch her family ultimately crumble into shambles. Despite all her efforts, her family falls victim to the harsh nature

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of her class. The speaker, having grown up with experiences within both Dayanhe's culture and his own, is able to observe and understand this downfall without having to be subject to it. The speaker comprehends the way in which people like Dayanhe suffer; furthermore, he knows that their experience is not only in stark contrast to that of others but largely unknown as well. This is what motivates the speaker to write critically against the imbalanced nature of the world. He empathizes with those who live painful, cruel existences—such as his wet-nurse had. Observing the imbalanced nature of the culture, he denounces it on behalf of those who are unable to speak for themselves. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker begins dedicating it specifically to Dayanhe—especially how she “loved [him] as she loved her own sons” (Qinq Lines 116-127). It is likely that this treatment from Dayanhe that has had the greatest effect on the perspective of the speaker. Dayanhe invested herself in the speaker—probably more than she did in her own children. Her love, not dependent on a biological connection, showed the speaker the importance of taking care of others without regard for labels such as class and race. Women like Dyanhe care for children whose mothers are unable to provide them milk, and are concerned with helping children—not reinforcing the structures of class. This dynamic helped develop the speaker's ideas toward justice in regard to society: that people are more focused and comfortable with aiding and helping those within their own societal vision is detrimental to an approach where the same aid is given to whoever really needs it. In this case—as in many others—the people who needed extra care were the poor. In order for this egalitarian approach to become remotely legitimate, perspectives need to be broadened in a similar manner to which the speaker's was molded. Ultimately, exposure to different

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lifestyles and cultures is crucial to building a sociological imagination capable of empathizing with others whose lives are in stark contrast with one's own.

Works Cited Qing, Ai. " Dayanhe-My Wet-Nurse. " One World of Literature.

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