

A prayer for my daughter: the poem

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A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER The poem by WB Yeats portrays how a father, blessed with a daughter, prays for the future happiness and wellbeing of her. The poet hopes that instead of growing up to be a woman of immense beauty, his daughter should be blessed with attributes of a virtuous and a great soul. She should be well-mannered and full of humility rather than being strongly opinionated, to avoid any intellectual detestation that could drown her in misery.

The prayer for his daughter beyond its personal scope is a prayer for the evolution of a culture and human society based on values of decency and courtesy, magnanimity, innocence and ceremony. It is a prayer for the whole world. The poem begins with a vivid picture of a storm brewing in the seas. The storm is symbolic of the turmoil going on in the apprehensive poet's mind regarding his newly-born's future in a world marked with bloodshed and violence. Between his daughter and the raging seas, there stands 'one bare hill' and 'Gregory's wood' which might not thwart the storm from reaching the hapless child.

The poet is naturally worried as he senses the gale striking the tower and 'the arches of the bridges'. In his mind, the storm presages the future years of his daughter arriving in a 'frenzied', delirious agitation, mounting from the 'murderous innocence of the sea'. As a father, the poet wishes beauty for his daughter but not in such voluptuousness to engross the others to distraction or make her vain. He knows that people of immense superficial beauty consider beauty to be an end in itself.

They are blindfolded by their overwhelming beauty when they behold themselves 'before a looking glass', lose their 'natural kindness' and become inadequate to make the right choices in life. They are often lonely souls unable to respond to 'sincere love' or 'find a friend'. The poet does not aspire his daughter to be bereft of kindness. He shudders at the thought of her daughter turning out to be another Helen of Troy, who finding life 'dull and flat' eloped with Paris only to ignite a war that completely destroyed the city of Troy.

He cites the example of Queen Aphrodite who, having no guardians to impose restrictions on her, chose a 'bandy-legged smith' for a husband. This substantiates his statement that women of exquisite beauty are often unpredictable and choose a 'crazy salad' to go with their 'meat'. He puts forward a slice of his own life as an example of true exquisiteness and charm which his wife exudes. He philosophically remarks that 'hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned'.

Though men often are initially enticed by bewitchingly stunning females, it is really the compassion and warmth of the women by which they get enamored in the end. The father in the poem is keen that his daughter should be like a humble tree giving succor and shade to the people when she grows up. She should live a life of constancy deeply rooted to her culture and traditions. Yeats wants his daughter to be like the 'linnet' whose songs infuse pure and unadulterated happiness in others. He hopes that she would be like the laurel tree, standing firm on her convictions.

The poet realizes that his mind, after being enticed by all the beauty that he had been attracted to, has 'dried up', become drained of all ideas and intelligence. He realizes that hatred is the worst of all evils. If an individual decides not to succumb to hatred, the no force, however violent and detrimental, can't tear the linnet from the leaf'. He goes on to give a paradigm of 'intellectual hatred' in the form of Maude Gonne who due to her 'opinionated mind' had to give away everything.

The truth rings in poet's mind that by eliminating the malady of hatred, the soul not only recovers the 'radical innocence' but also embarks on a journey that is 'self delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting'. It is only then would his daughter be able to face every storm or 'scowl' happily. Finally, Yeats hopes, as a father, that his daughter would be betrothed to a man who has forever steered away from 'arrogance and hatred'. Their marriage should a custom for spreading peace and happiness like 'the laurel tree'.