

Of pain and regret:thematic strands in roethko, hayden, and bishop essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Poetry is one of the most versatile and most potent forms by which human emotions seep out into cultural consciousness. Poets, through verse, elucidate human experience and attempt to convey their thoughts, feelings, and desires in the pursuit of artistry. And yet, happiness and optimism are not the only avenues which are explored through the art of poetry. For some, depression, loneliness, and regret are also potent sources of inspiration. In this regard, the transition between the poetic and artistic movement of modernism and postmodernism is fertile ground. The key figures here are Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Hayden. Pioneers in the realm of postmodernism, Roethke, Bishop, and Hayden led the way into a retreat into the author's consciousness. A thematic strand that connects these three poets is that of pain and despair in broken relationships, and each of them utilize a wide array of imagery and symbolism in their work to explore this theme. By doing so, they utilize unorthodox means to create a discourse between the reader and the text, successfully articulating their very human experiences through verse.

The theme of the pain of broken relationships in Theodore Roethko's poetry may be readily seen in " My Papa's Waltz", published in 1942. Immediately, the beginnings of postmodern poetry may be seen in the poem. It has no traditional narrative, and it addresses – supposedly – Roethko's troubled relationship with his father. It may not be a romantic or erotic relationship, but it is a deeply human one nonetheless. Roethko's utilization of imagery is clear even in the first few lines: " The whiskey on your breath/Could make a small boy dizzy;" (Roethko 1081). Here he immediately evokes his father's alcoholism. He does not condemn it, and even regards it with a childlike

fancy. Although the following stanzas also evoke an imagery of child abuse, a closer reading would allow otherwise: “ We romped until the pans/Slid from the kitchen shelf;/My mother’s countenance/Could not unfrown itself” (Roethko, 1081). The stanza above provokes an imagery of enjoyment for the young Roethko – an enjoyment that is equalized by his mother’s disapproval of his father’s drunk playfulness. This playful dancing is emphasized further by the author’s “ clinging to [his father’s] shirt, as he is waltzed off to bed – a concrete sign of longing and enjoyment for the young Roethko. Nevertheless, the alcoholism is still apparent, and the resulting strains between father and son’s relationship due to it seeps through Roethko’s verse. In fact, the imagery of the entire poem evokes the “ dance” as an allegory for the child’s beating at the hands of the father.

In “ One Art”, by Elizabeth Bishop, the thematic strand of the pain of broken relationships is also explored. The poem deals with “ the art of losing”, and immediately in the first line, Bishop declares that it is “ not hard to master” (1097). She surmises that so many things are lost every day, such that one loss amounts to “ no disaster”. Moving from little objects, such as door keys, into bigger and bigger subjects, such as “ two cities”, Bishop declares her denial as to the pain of losing and failing. At times, by verses, the author repeats herself, saying repeatedly that “ the art of losing is not hard to master”. By approaching loss and failure in such a way, she evokes a sense of denial and concealed regret and pain. Her imagery moves from door keys to “ two cities”, evoking a sense of impossibility and sarcasm as the poem goes along in its conversational pace. For Bishop, thus, the art of writing and the art of loss is a strained relationship within her own abilities.

Finally, in Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage", the author narrates the troubles and concerns of African slaves transported to America. At the heart of the narrative in the poem is Cinquez, characterized through an unheard-of witness. The narrators of the poem include a deponent at a hearing, a slave trader, a survivor of a rebellion, and an unknown narrator. The troubled and pained relationship here is one between races – Africans and Caucasians, affected by an institution that treats human beings as chattel and as animals ready for trade. Thus, Hayden writes:

" Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,/ The dark ships move, the dark ships move,/their bright ironical names/ like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;/plough through thrashing glister toward fata morgana's lucent melting shore/weave toward New World littorals that are/mirage and myth and actual shore".

Conclusion

The early postmodern poets of the 1960s and 1950s used imagery to explore the very human themes of pain and regret in broken relationships. Although not always erotic or romantic, the relationships that Hayden, Roethko, and Bishop explored are all still distinctly human relationships.

Works Cited

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