

Fulfillment on the susquehanna: billy collins's message



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There comes a time for many people when the gruffness and chaos of the real world becomes too much and they crave a break from it all. Throughout the poem "Fishing on the Susquehanna in July," Billy Collins is able to convey this desire to remove oneself from the chaos of the real world and escape into a tranquil state of being. Through the use of metaphor, tone, and diction, the author is able to depict the narrator's longing for an experience that brings him peace and a sense of calm. As the reader progresses throughout the poem, it becomes evident that the idea of fishing on the Susquehanna is a metaphor for experiencing the bigger things in life and trying to achieve a more physical and natural connection with the world, instead of living on the surface and remaining concerned merely with oneself.

Collins's narrator is trapped in the throes of daily life, and needs to find a way to disconnect himself from the chaos of life and find a greater reason for living. The first stanza initiates the reader's understanding of how trapped the narrator has become in his simplistic routine, and of the need for him to break free. The lines, "I have never been fishing on the Susquehanna or any river for that matter to be perfectly honest" emphasizes the lack of connection that the narrator has had with the world outside of his or her personal life. The phrase "perfectly honest" suggests that the narrator is almost ashamed of the lack of exploration and freedom in his life and doesn't want to admit to the fact that he has never experienced the world in a manner greater than his own individual life. This automatically allows the reader to sympathize with the narrator and root for him to achieve the level of serenity and sensation that he craves so intensely. Ultimately, it is not so

much the fact that he has not experienced fishing on the Susquehanna that he is ashamed of, but rather the regretful fact that he has never been exposed to the pleasures and serenity that fishing can bring in any form, or on any river. The narrator goes on to elaborate on just how little he experienced outside of his individual life. He claims that “ Not in July or any month have I had the pleasure - if it is a pleasure- of fishing on the Susquehanna.” It is at this point that the tone of the narrator becomes more sardonic and almost spiteful; he is envious of the fact that he has never been given the pleasures of living life more wholly while apparently so many others have. He questions the validity of people’s claims about what it is like to fish on the river, and in an attempt to justify his lack of experience, challenges whether or not fishing on the Susquehanna is indeed a pleasure.

Furthermore, the narrator finds himself leading a much less fruitful life than that of one fishing on the Susquehanna. The narrator depicts his life as one where he is “ more likely to be found in a quiet room like this one - a painting of a woman in the wall, a bowl of tangerines on the table”; a dreary and seemingly lonesome assessment. Along with this, these lines depict the narrator’s inability to capture the essence of being on the Susquehanna and reflect it in his own life, no matter how desperately he tries. The imagery in these two stanzas also conveys the idea that the narrator feels isolated; he sits alone in a room with only a mere bowl of oranges and painting of a woman on the wall to accompany him. While the narrator doesn’t allude to wanting to have company, his words suggest that he deeply craves being a part of something that so many others have experienced. The narrator has placed himself in a bubble where he is exposed only to his own personal

problems and experiences and is shut off to the vastness and possibility of the outside. The reader can conclude from this statement that the narrator finds little joy in his everyday life and has enabled himself to be closed off to the greatness of the world. However, despite the narrator's inability to function outside of their bubble, it is evident that he desires the ability to do so and even attempts to, "manufacture the sensation of fishing on the Susquehanna." The word "manufacture" carries a very sterile and cold connotation and contributes to the lackluster manner in which the narrator lives his life. The narrator is in such desperate need to experience the world outside himself, that he has tried to imitate it within his lonely bubble; a fruitless attempt. The poem progresses as does the narrator's yearning for the pleasures that fishing on the Susquehanna is praised for bringing to individuals who embrace it. The narrator deems that, "there is little doubt that others have been fishing on the Susquehanna", suggesting that while he is stuck in the squalor of a dull life, others are out embracing the splendors and freedoms of the Susquehanna. The narrator becomes envious of those who have taken the opportunity to welcome the rawness of the world.

After discussing what he imagines it is like to travel along the river and be a part of its beauty the narrator resumes his discussion of how, despite his wishes, how distant he has have been from attaining the pleasure and glory that fishing on the Susquehanna can bring. He admit that "the nearest I have ever come to fishing on the Susquehanna was one afternoon in a museum in Philadelphia when I balanced an egg of time in front of a painting"; a melancholy realization that depicts just how far the narrator is from reaching the river and the joys that it can bring. The idea that the

narrator was only able to balance a mere “egg of time” suggests that his ability to connect to the greater meaning of the world is minuscule. Along with this is the concept that his only connection was with a painting and not the real world itself allows the reader to conclude that the narrator is far from attaining the sense of clarity and pleasure that fishing on the Susquehanna has to offer. This realization is so apparent that even the narrator addresses it in the line, “that is something I am unlikely to do, I remember saying to myself and the person next to me”. Admittedly, the narrator has not opened himself up to accepting the sensations of life and instead has remained a sort of bland and uninteresting figure. The manner in which the narrator addresses the artwork in the second to last stanza contributes to the dullness of his life. The lines “Then I blinked and moved on to other American scenes of haystacks, water whitening over rocks, even one of a brown hare who seems so wired with alertness I imagined him springing right out of the frame” convey a feeling of a monotonous and muted life. Haystacks themselves evoke a feeling of dullness, as it is merely a tan pile of dried grass. Similarly, the image of “water whitening over rocks” alludes to a very cliché and simplistic interpretation of nature and the world’s surroundings. These are very stereotypical images that provide a clue into the simplicity of the narrator’s life and the reasoning for their zealous search for some semblance of newness and pleasure in their life. The only sense of salvation for the narrator comes from the final line of the poem. When the narrator concludes the poem by describing a photo of a hare, he exclaims, “even one of a brown hare who seemed so wired with alertness I imagined him springing right out of the frame”. This provides the reader with a hope that the narrator’s ability to imagine such a vivid and

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unrealistic proposition suggests an openness to looking at the world with a bigger perspective and seeing it for more than just a simplistic platform to live life on.

The narrator of “ Fishing on the Susquehanna in July” finds himself paralyzed by a world that revolves around unimportant and minuscule issues that are relevant to him alone. He craves a life in which he can view the world with a wider scope and develop the ability to see past the materialistic and move into developing a naturalistic perspective on life. Despite idealizing the sensation and pleasure that fishing on the Susquehanna in July is said to bring, the narrator is imprisoned by routine and unable to escape from his bubble. He cannot see past himself as an individual in the world; thus, he remains in his bland and fruitless cycle of life.