

Ode to evening



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Tuesday, March 6, 2007 Ode to Evening - William Collins Introduction: “ Ode to Evening,” is one among the most enduring poems of William Collins. It is a beautiful poem of fifty-two lines, addressed to a goddess figure representing evening. This nymph, or maid, who personifies dusk, is chaste, reserv’d, and meek, in contrast to the bright-hair’d sun, a male figure who withdraws into his tent, making way for night. Thus evening is presented as the transition between light and darkness. Collins’ Construction of Evening: Collins slowly constructs Evening as an allegorical figure with many attributes, and many aural and visual characteristics.

Collins piles up epithets; Eve is “ chaste,” “ reserved,” “ composed,” “ calm,” “ meekest”; her ear is “ modest. ” The figure of Eve so far is only yet a sketch, but her attributes add up to the idea of an attractive, calm woman who is not restless or forcefully active. Contrast of Evening with the Daytime: According to the poet, Evening possesses “ solemn springs” and “ dying gales” Daytime activity gives way to calm as the wind literally often dies down in the evening. Some activity now supplements our picture of Eve. The gentle movements of water and the air ensure that her figure is not static.

Eve’s contrast with the daytime world is even more obvious when Collins compares her to the setting sun. The glaring “ bright-haired sun” sits regally in his tent of clouds, the “ skirts” or edges of which seem to be made of many-colored braided cloth. This ethereal (heavenly) cloth evokes a picture of a vivid sunset; the sun is descending to its “ wavy bed,” behind an ocean or lake. The day is almost done, and the sun not at the height of vigor (he is in his tent), but the implication is that he rests only after an active day. The Journey of the Pilgrim into the world of Evening:

After the sunset, at “ twilight,” the world is not yet attuned to Eve’s mood. The air is hushed, except for some annoying sounds: the bat’s “ short shrill shrieks” and sound of the beetle’s “ small but sullen horn. ” The bat’s weak eyes and “ leathern wing” are not pleasant, nor are the many beetles as they are borne (by the a breeze, I assume) up against the pilgrim on his quasi-religious journey. The beetles’ horns together can be characterized a making a humming noise; in any case they are heedless of the annoyance they cause. The Poet in a Prayerful Mood: Up until now, Collins has simply been addressing Evening.

The grammatical unit of the opening of the poem is not completed until Line 15: “ Now teach me. ” The mood of this verb is not imperative, but prayerful. In the drama of the poem, the speaker is at first unsure of himself but gradually gains confidence. Evening has finally arrived: darkening, still, genial, cheering, vital, and beloved. The poet prays for Eve to teach him to write a poem which praises her. This is Collins’ way. Description of Evening: Now the poem blossoms. Collins begins to build up, not a literal picture of Evening, but a picture of the allegorical figure of Evening composed of details which evoke more of her attributes.

A “ car” or processional vehicle is being prepared for Eve in which she can progress through the evening surrounded by her attendants. The picture Collins gives us of a ceremonial car would have been more familiar to his audience than to us. Her attendants add to her characterization. Her car is prepared by The Hours (goddesses who order the seasons and are given to adorn things), and accompanied by sprightly elves who sleep in flowers, river goddesses wreathed in sedge and shedding freshening dew, and pensive

Pleasures. These are active and by-and-large beautiful figures, without being at all bustling or too dazzling.

They all embellish the figure of Eve, delicately balancing her qualities: active yet calm, beautiful and cheerful yet chaste and reserved. The Spirit of Evening: Collins then asks Evening to lead on as she progresses to this lovely day's end. She moves from the lowly heath, lighted now only by a reflection of a totally calm lake. Moving upward where Evening can be seen for the last time, the lake's light cheers an ancient building and an upland field. Note that Eve is addressed a "vot'ress"; presumably like the poet she worships the spirit of Evening. The Other side of Evening: Collins now expands on his definition.

So far, his description of Evening has been calm and beautiful. But Collins' Evening is not just beautiful. She also includes "chill blustering winds" and "driving rain." When he cannot walk about, the poet hopes to look out from a "hut" on a mountainside, rather like the place from which many Claude scenes are viewed. He will see wild scenery and flooding rivers, as well as the poem's first traces of ordinary civilization: "hamlets brown, and dim-discovered spires." Now night falls as Eve's "dewy fingers draw / The gradual dusky veil." Evening as seen through the Whole Year: Collins then takes Evening through the year.

As before, some of the associations are not pleasant. Spring is nicely associated with both water and the movement of air (showers and "breathing tresses"), Summer with sport and half-light. Autumn is less lovely (sallow), but is generous with leaves. Winter is nasty, "yelling through the

troublous air and attacking Eve's train (of attendants? of her dress?) and even rending her robes. Evening can be attacked and is vulnerable, but she is not defeated. Collin's characterization leads us from the beautiful picture of the poems first 32 lines to a picture of Evening's strength to endure through good and bad.

All in all, Collins has accomplished what he evidently set out to do—catch lovely time of day in all its transitory aspects. Evening as a State of Mind: Lessons from Evening: From the beginning Collins has asked Evening to lead him on, to infuse his heart and mind with the ability to see her and write about her. The progress in the poem has not just been the gradual unfolding of Evening, but the gradual education of the poet about what Evening is—from the early visions of shadowy beauty to the qualities that endure through bad weather.

These qualities have obvious human analogues. In short, Evening becomes, not only a time of day, but a state of mind that develops in the pilgrim/poet by contemplating and experiencing and writing about the literal evening. Literal evening is not just associated with but actually helps cause this wonderful calm, happy, contemplative, intelligent, happy, open, creative, sympathetic state of mind, the state that feeds Fancy (as in the writing of this poem), Friendship, Science(that is knowledge and learning), and for that matter physical, and by extension mental, health.

It is no surprise that these qualities sing a hymn of praise to Evening—a hymn that is a sharp contrast to the yelling of winter a few lines before. [21] Conclusion: This poem points ahead. He is enabled by this state of mind and

moves forward. Ode to Evening is one of the masterpieces of Collins. Collins' odes, do not point morals. Rather they dramatically define their subject by building up a personified and vividly pictured allegorical character. it is the best of the mid-century odes and provides a good bridge to the great Romantic poets. - With due acknowledgements to Prof. George Soule