

Gods echoes heard from the heavens english literature essay

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Ashley Wong Contemporary Poetics God's Echoes Heard from the Heavens George Herbert's Heaven is a conversation between Herbert and an echo; one that produces answers to his questions through reverberating homophones. However, despite the way the poem is structured, the couplets do not stand alone. Each line is connected to the next, and this creates a fluid conversation that not only asks and answers, but provides meaning as a result. This meaning is deeply embedded within the structure of the poem, and has much to do with the Greek mountain nymph, Echo, who replies to him (Lindemans). She is the "echo" that responds to his questions. However, the title, Heaven, suggests a more Christian perspective. Thus, Heaven unifies Christian and mythological aspects in order to appeal to people inside and outside the Church, and both sides are able to identify with and find meaning in the poem. The discrete couplets within the poem link the transient to the timeless with the metaphorical echo in order to verify the contradiction that in the barrenness of the human's core, the shadows [echoes] God's presence can be found. That which is empty is not empty; that which seems to be a reproduction has been altered. Herbert relies significantly on something as superficial as homophones; however, his clever puns are much more than just that. The homophones show a correlation through words by way of sound, and this connects one line to the next, creating a conversation between Echo, the nymph, and the speaker. However, the "echo" produced by Echo is not a mirror image of what is asked by the speaker, since it is distorted from its original form, but a new word that answers the question from the previous line. Sound in this poem is understood by Herbert in its most basic form; Herbert creates a conversation

through simple phonetics; he takes something so rudimentary such as the human's ability to listen and pick out similarities in the resonance and uses that as a medium to bring his message across. Thus, by using Echo as a device, Herbert suggests that God speaks to the reader in words that he can only understand; those which leave his own mouth. That is, he uses one theistic individual to verify the actions of another. Furthermore, the structure presents to the reader a visual inkling as to what Herbert's fundamental objective is. The title, Heaven, suggests that Echo, a mythological creature, is presented with the function of being a messenger to man she does this through the connections between her words, the language of nature, and the words of man, or the speaker. This erroneous, or somewhat faulty reiteration creates a distinctive format in which to compose his message; that the reader must transcend his own mind in order to find consistency and harmony, which are represented by God. This emphasizes the notion that although echoes usually represent empty space and hollowness, their message, Echo's message ultimately develops into something new, which provides hope and verification of something more. Heaven carries out this concept, proving that, no matter how it may seem, man is not solitary. Complete and ceaseless emptiness is inexistent, not even within an echo. Heaven and God fill this emptiness, informing the reader that mankind is never alone. However, one must not confuse Herbert's structure of distinct couplets as isolated questions and answers with no coherence or underlying message to connect them all. Though each couplet can be read on its own as a separate pun, the meaning lies in the poem as a whole. The connection is performed through repetition of the word "leaves" throughout the middle of

the poem. Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves? Echo.

Leaves. And are there any leaves, that still abide? Echo. Bide. What

leaves are they? impart the matter wholly. Echo. Holy. Are holy leaves

the Echo then of blisse? Echo. Yes.[Herbert 5-11]

The fact that Herbert exhibits such continuity within this work illustrates how this conversation is comprised not just of Echo answering his calls, but rather an engaged conversation between the two. Lines five and six represent a pun on the word, "leaves", since the leaves Echo makes a reference to are not tree's leaves, as the speaker suggested in the fifth line, but leaves, as in pages in the Bible. This is why when asked to choose between the trees and the leaves, Echo responds with "leaves". Every other response she gives is a word different from the last, except in that circumstance. Here, the words are not homophones, but rather homonyms. They produce the same exact sound, but portray different meanings. The former, meaning vegetative leaves, and the latter, meaning sheets of paper from Scripture. The subsequent lines refute Echo's answer; she acts as a teacher, guiding the speaker's inquiry. When the speaker asks what kind of leaves Echo was born from, she responds with "holy", restating her previous response. This is when Echo's play on words becomes clear to the speaker, who understands that her retort is not secular, but rather, from Heaven. He sees that he has misunderstood Echo's words, and that the world is not as barren as the trees and leaves around him. He is reminded of the leaves of Holy Scripture, and persists in his inquiry of harmony and joy in heaven. In line eleven, by affirming the speaker's implication that of the "holy leaves" are of bliss, the Echo sustains the dialogue. Thus, this back and forth exchange is a learning

experience for the speaker, and in turn, the reader. In Heaven, Herbert produces a distinct conversation that places distinct locations for the speaker's desire with respect to God, and uses this to frame the poem, making the structure seem simple, yet creative. The poem uncovers a unique yearning from the speaker, for eternal bliss, or Heaven. Herbert does this by unifying heaven and earth through juxtaposing the earthly, mortal voice of the speaker with the mystical voice of the Echo, and implying the context of Heaven, as well as the existence of God. Thus, he combines man's secular world with Echo's supernatural world and with God's divine world. Herbert continues in the confines of Echo's original myth, bringing a sense of yearning intrinsic in her being, simultaneously permitting her to give the speaker hope and condolence, surpassing her former feelings of loss and unrequited love from Narcissus (Lindemans). When Narcissus dies, Echo's voice is what laments his death. Her mortality is but a fragment of her immortality. This is challenged by the speaker, who proclaims that, "Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know." [Herbert 3] Echo rejects that this, answering with "No". She does die, and the pieces of her are scattered, but she is metamorphosed into sound; intangible, yet completely existent, and survives. It is also worth noting that without an echo, there is only silence, or emptiness. Therefore, Echo, and in this context, God's messenger, fills the space around the speaker, as well as the reader with homophonic sounds, which prove to man that he is not alone. Heaven, by George Herbert, is a dialogue in which Echo, the mountain nymph, plays the role of God's messenger to the speaker. She answers the speaker's questions about heaven and eternity with slightly altered reproductions of the speaker's

inquiries. These questions and responses are grouped into couplets, which link the man's mortal world to God's eternal world through Echo's mythological capabilities while still retaining an overall message throughout the poem. This is done to debunk the falsehood of emptiness and void in man through introducing the notion of God's existence in the depths of the echo, a medium which man can understand due to the staggered duplication of his own words. In doing this, Herbert is able to bring together both Christian and pagan schools of thought, thus acting as Echo, who simply allows the reader to find meaning in her words.