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Literature



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Full “ The Flesh and the Spirit” A Close Analysis of the Puritan Debate by Anne Bradstreet “ The Flesh and the Spirit” is an enlightening piece of lyrical poetry by Anne Bradstreet, a greatly accomplished ‘ New-World’ poet from colonial America. Her poetry is well known for the Christian ideas incorporated in most of her works. She is also labeled as a heretic sometimes, because of the conflicting ideas presented in her writings in relation to puritanical beliefs. This poem, ‘ the Flesh and the Spirit’, however, is far from being heretic. The poem is a rhythmically written debate between her flesh, which denotes materialism, and her spirit, which signifies spiritualism.

The poet attempts to compare spiritualism and materialism through a conversation between two sisters, namely, the flesh and the spirit, who place their own viewpoints in support of their individual quests. The flesh tries her best to convince her sister, the spirit, that her pursuits of inner happiness and heavenly bliss are vain, and that worldly pleasure and riches await her indulgence.

She asks spirit on how she can survive on meditation and silent contemplation that has no tangible reality. How could she dream of things beyond the Moon, and fantasize of residing in heavens that are beyond man’s reach? There are enough riches on Earth, more than “ eyes can see and hands can hold”. She tempts the spirit with immortal fame and riches that are tangible and long lasting.

The spirit retorts back, condemning her sister of disturbing her “ settled heart” and vows to fight her until her last. She says that though they are twins, having the same father, her real father resides in the heavens. She accepts that she had given in to her sister’s charms and was slave to worldly

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pleasure, but now she will hear no more. She craves for “ manna” (heavenly food) and the riches of heaven, where the flesh will never be allowed to enter.

Both the sisters, the flesh and the spirit, signify the body and the soul of a human being, and the dilemma that every individual faces while choosing between right and wrong. According to Aschoff, “ as long as the believer lives on earth, both natures- the flesh and the spirit- are present in him and fight each other (3). In this poem, Bradstreet is the spectator who is witnessing a battle between her own body and soul.

The first part of the poem is from the narrator’s viewpoint, where she hears the conversation between the body and soul. The flesh is the only speaker in this part of the narration. In the second part of the poem, there is a shift in narration and the spirit is the sole speaker. The poet shows impartiality towards any one of the speakers by writing it in the role of a spectator and observer. The poem is metaphorically written and bases itself on the Christian puritanical belief of the ethical dilemma between a person’s body and soul.

Christianity is a common theme that runs through almost all of Anne Bradstreet’s works. In this poem, the spirit seems to have vanquished the flesh, though the poet tried to present an impartial outlook. This poem mirrors the poet’s own contemplation of spirituality and materialism, and signifies the firm puritanical belief in the Christian faith.

Works Cited

Aschoff, Christoph. Biblical Ideas in Anne Bradstreet's " The Flesh and the Spirit". Proseminar: An Introduction to American Poetry. Saarland University, 2007

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