

Language, form, and
meaning in passion
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The poem “ Passion” written by Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) was strongly inspired by the poet’s complicated love life. Besides, she was largely influenced by her model, the poet William Blake, as his idea concerning the duality of emotions of two extremes interested her. This concept of two opposites is used in the poem to change the tone radically throughout the stanzas. It is permitted through the use of Nature and Religion imagery which also influences the tone. Nonetheless, the tone is mainly linked to the double meaning of the title, creating an ambiguous sense. Indeed, “ Passion” comes from the Greek word *patior*. It means “ pain”, “ suffering”, but also has the connotation of “ the longing for love” or “ limitless, unconditional love”. Throughout the analysis, we will see that both meanings apply to the poem.

The mood in the first three stanzas is dark and melancholic. A feeling of passivity and powerlessness is marked by the poet’s incapacity to control her own life. It is conveyed through the image of her looking at the sky and the clouds. The scene is depicted by the metaphor “ the sky wounding me” (l. 1-2): the sky hurts her, yet she remains passive. She just lets herself agonize as, at this point, she seems to have utter disregard for her wellbeing. Indeed, she gives the impression of living in such a way that she is constantly unsatisfied. This impression is largely due to the fact that the poet seems to be torn apart by two contradictory feelings. On one hand, the metaphor of the clouds seen as ships symbolizes the feeling that she is continuously missing something important. She can’t grasp the one thing she wants as it is out of reach, unless she goes after it. On the other hand, she clearly states that her inner soul requires peace: “ each tree possessing

what my soul lacked, tranquility". This contradictory state creates a feeling of frustration: she can't have both but she can't choose. She is in a position of stalemate, for she lacks control over the situation and is indecisive. Consequently, this impasse shows that the poet is struggling vainly against passivity, accentuating the feeling that she has a monotone and mediocre. The poet seems annoyed by herself, and the tone is full of disappointment and regret. The global structure also expresses this impression, with the presence of enjambments as well as the rhyming triplets. We can also note that the poem is constituted of eight tercets forming three distinct sections. This format is quite unusual and emphasizes the little control the poet has over her own work, underlining her lack of self-confidence. In the second stanza, the image of the metaphorical telephone call accentuates the lethargy and the passivity of the poet. As a matter of fact, we can interpret the muteness in two different ways. She is waiting for her lover to call her but the phone remains silent, or she is trying to reach her inner self. Her spirit is divided and her frustrated side is trying to shake her passive side into action, pushing herself to act but she is unable to speak or listen to her heart. Either way, she is expressing the heartbreak deeply affecting her: "my body grew weak with the well-known and mortal death, heartbreak", although the later-on image of the conches, with which one can hear their own heart, suggests that the poet is in fact incapable of hearing hers. The poet's despair persists in the third stanza: she describes the significant impact of her heartbreak. The allusion to the Greek poet Homer depicts the extent of her desolation that even affects her capacity to write. The link connecting her to the past has been severed, inducing the loss of her ability

to create any decent piece of writing. The poet thus displays a depressed mood and a negative tone.

The following three stanzas and the personification of the sky represent a shifting mood. The poet's feelings are implicitly expressed, as it is the sky who is speaking and she is listening, underlining the weak-willed personality of the poet. She appears like a person who always complains about life and who needs to be heard but nobody hears her complaints, except the sky. He understands her frustration and addresses the poet in a solemn and stern tone, guiding her and embodying the assurance she doesn't have. The construction of his phrases is quite peculiar, with words changing places: "This your nature is." The reader has to stop and meditate on meaning. The sky is seen as the only 'person' the poet can confide to: "Familiar as the heart, than love more near.", although the line "You have what you desire" could be seen as irony, as if the sky is mocking her. Moreover, the word "desire" doesn't rhyme with the last words of the two other lines, "clear" and "near", breaking the rhythm of the poem as if to mark the harshness of the sky's words. Even though his speech is quite mysterious, she clearly understands that two options present themselves to her: either she lives or dies. If she lives, she will enjoy plainly the rest of her life, while if she wants to die, she can just end her life and be done with it. Here we can consider that it is a possible allusion to the Carpe Diem philosophy: seize the day, enjoy the moment because life is too short to waste it by doing nothing. All she needs to do to in order to reach happiness is to come and get it. The sky commands her to get her life together, get on with living: "Sleep in the tomb, or breathe the living air, this world you with the flower and the tiger

share". Furthermore, he tells her that she should accept herself as she is. We can deduce that the poet is bringing the sky to life, personifying him to make him a separate entity although it is in fact her own conscience speaking to her. The contrast between conscience and subconscious comes back to the idea of two extremes like the life/ death, delicacy/ ferocity, plant/ anima. Accordingly, this stanza illustrates the poet's belief that everything is linked and that we are all equal, all part of one unique entity. The description of such opposites reflects the general contrast of the poem. It is a turning point in the mood of the poem, the transition from a depressed, negative tone, a pessimistic mood, to an optimistic tone and mood.

In the last part of the poem, the mood and tone are optimistic, as the poet finally understands the sky's message. She wakes up and embraces the full meaning of his words. The mysticism is at its height in the last two stanzas. As mentioned earlier, the mood here is positive, marked by the poet's satisfaction/ delight of having found what she has been looking for. The tone is confident and almost cheerful compared to the initial situation. Life seems to unravel, unfold before her and she tries to understand through Christian religion. Indeed, religious imagery is also omnipresent in the last two stanzas: " immortal", " judgment day", " holy", " eternity". These terms refer to the final battle between Heaven and Hell, good and evil, but also the apocalypse. That is, the destruction of the world which proceeds a time to rebuild it, reshapes it into a better one. The line " I saw every visible substance turn into immortal" shows that the poet's spirit is elevating, that she is in a new state of mind, she has attained spiritual enlightenment. She is merging with the universe, thus acknowledging her place in the world, in

heaven and in the sky. The poet describes the great change almost as if she could see her own self transforming: “ every cell new born”, emphasizing the mystical aspect of the poem. The line “ This world I saw as on her judgment day” could be understood as the spirit of the poet being judged and found worthy, detaching from her body. The last two stanzas both contain irregular rhymes; the last one’s two first rhymes have two sounds in common: “ day, away” unlike the last rhyme: “ eternity”, while the penultimate stanza’s rhymes only have the -n sound in common. This stresses the change as the poem’s whole structure is disrupted. Consequently, we can tell that the poet found her path to renewal through destruction of her own soul and spirit. The tone is solemn but optimistic, full of newfound hope concerning the future: “ When the war ends, and the sky rolls away”. The final mood is blissful which is characterized by the final line “ And all is light, love and eternity”. In the end, we can say that the tone and mood have evolved from being negative and depressed to being very positive and hopeful.

We can say that “ Passion” is a poem imbued with mystic imagery and strong contrasts. The result of William Blake’s work on Kathleen Raine is noticeable: the image of Nature that is ubiquitous with the sky, clouds, and trees, conveying the message that we are all at one with Nature and the world. The poet uses natural elements and personifies them, gives them human qualities to show that she is jealous of these inanimate objects, envies them. She also uses religious terms to explore the change operating in her inner self. We therefore see that by including her belief to a relation of opposition the poet expresses her heartbreak, her experience of love. Hence, contrasts and paradoxes are constantly present throughout the poem, and

lead to the transformation of the poet. We find the notion of two opposites, extremes, a parallelism between life and death, love/ passion and heartbreak, but also a clear change of mood between the initial loss of hope and the awakening, the newfound pleasure of living. We could also assimilate the contrast of the mood to the Chinese philosophy, the yin yang which represents the balance between all the elements of the world. The yin and yang parts are opposites but complete each other, are constituted of a bit of the other one and cannot exist without each other, otherwise chaos would reign. Likewise, the poet is trying to find her own balance as it has been compromised by her heartbreak, going from depressed and negative mood and tone to hopeful and positive ones.