

Views on the penal system: the dungeon and the convict essay



Upon first glance there is a slight contradiction within *The Convict*. It is written in typical ballad form (as favoured by Wordsworth) - a light, jaunty rhythm.

This may be appropriate for the first stanza but soon seems to contrast with the subject matter - that of a forlorn convict in a prison cell. This is a problem with Wordsworth's insistence on a rigid form which may not always be suitable, however it may also present us with a hidden meaning on the penal system: if you are a convict, do not despair as you should realise that there is a 'jolly' life outside of the prison, as the salvation of nature awaits you. A key theme within *The Convict* is that of nature, and Wordsworth contrasts this greatly with the idea of imprisonment to air certain views on the penal system. Nature's beauty and glorious power is emphasised; "The glory of evening" highlights the difference between the joy of the free world and that of the convict. Further, there is sensory irony in "the joy that precedes the calm season of rest/Rang loud through the meadow and wood", as joy is an internal emotion but it is described as tangible by the senses. This praise of nature is necessary for its stark contrast later with the life of the convict, for example as Wordsworth sympathises with the harsh reality of punishment within the country's infrastructure: a convict simply cannot enjoy such natural pleasures.

In the third stanza the reader becomes more aware of Wordsworth's opinion of the imprisonment as he describes the cell with increasing hostility. The "thick-ribbed walls that o'ershadow the gate" together with the "glimmering grate" gives the reader a sense of the lack of light within the cell. Both natural light and intellectual light (appreciation of nature) could be implied

<https://assignbuster.com/views-on-the-penal-system-the-dungeon-and-the-convict-essay/>

here. Furthermore the short, broken sentences implying a sad sense of slow rejection contrast with the languid flowing sentences of the first stanza. The description of the convict himself accentuates Wordsworth's antagonistic feelings about the system of punishment. The almost oxymoronic¹ phrase "With steadfast dejection his eyes are intent/ On the fetters that link him to death" shows the prisoner's determined, elective sadness.

The foot-shackles could be metaphorical as well as literal - in addition to being physically bound he cannot walk happily as a free man. Wordsworth goes on to say that just as nature cannot survive without the nourishment of water, so too the convict's "life-blood is dried"; he may as well be dead, without freedom there is no real life. Moreover the poet imagines terrible images of the captive's suffering ("My fancy has pierced to his heart, and portrays/More terrible images there"). It seems that Wordsworth empathises with his situation, and as a result despises the penal system for causing such suffering.

The following stanza describing the King's arrival at the prison cell has an abundance of literal interpretations, fully pregnant with meaning. His "dark synod" reinforces the idea that it is nature's light that is true goodness (rather than physical comforts), and the reference to dark may also mean evil and sinister (revealing the poet's enmity towards the governing power, and therefore the penal system which is controlled by it). The alternative to where the King has emerged from is a "blood-reeking field", connoting carnage and slaughter. These two places (synod and battlefield) reflect the two powers and responsibilities of a monarch: the Church and warfare.

However, even with all this power we are told that “ the monarch is led”, implying that there is a higher force behind the throne.

This may be a criticism by the poet of the penal system in that it can be hard to find someone to blame as the responsibility for punishing the wrongdoers is passed around. The soft alliteration of “ All soothers of sense their soft virtue shall yield” perhaps indicates the King’s material luxury and that he is in fact cushioned from reality. Combining this idea with the bloody slaughter of the battlefield and we are presented with the contemptuous view that in a time where the starving common folk could be convicted for even stealing a loaf of bread, the King’s sins are probably worse, yet he not only walks free but does so within a life of pampered and ignorant luxury. It could even be suggested that it is the monarch himself who is trapped, only it is his power, rather than fetters, that constrict him. Wordsworth could be illustrating not only that the penal system can be unfair, but also that there is not much difference between the sordid morality of the royal and that of the people at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Wordsworth continues this motif in the eighth stanza, where he compares the lives of the King with the convict.

He explains that the King is also guilty; it is just that he forgets about it amidst his lavish lifestyle (“ in oblivion would doze”) and that he ignores his guilty conscience, “ And conscience her tortures appease”. His conscience has appeased the desire to torture. By denying his conscience (i. e.

its desire to do good) the King is acting unnaturally, a harsh criticism, seeing as obeying nature’s will is a characteristic romantic standpoint. Wordsworth contrasts this with a description of the convict’s “ tumult and uproar” in his “

comfortless vault of disease". The disease may be referring to actual illness, or to literally, dis-ease, a lack of comfort; this compares with the King's comfortable way of life. In order to fully show his despair at the penal system for treating convicts so badly the poet goes on to fully describe the pain of the "poor victim".

The convict in the cell is unable to sleep and while the King's oblivious dozing whiles away the memory of his slaughter, the prisoner's slumber only dims the memory of his crimes. The sentence which runs on between two stanzas "The wretch on his pallet should turn,/While the jail-mastiff howls...

" suggests a mounting, almost unlimited amount of pain. The "terror" that "shall leap at his heart" could be a fear of hell or death, but either way it takes the form of physical disturbance: "A thousand sharp punctures of cold-sweating pain". It seems clear from the conclusion of the poem that the poet clearly sympathises with the convict's situation. He addresses him as "poor", states that he only means good ("But one, whose first wish is the wish to be good") and claims that they are both equal (he calls him a "brother"). Wordsworth chastises the penal system for imprisoning the convict thus, claiming that prison doesn't encourage reform (i.

e. the system of punishment is askew); rather it stilts growth. It is a bad atmosphere for flourishing, and it is only nature's salvation that can offer proper growth and moral reform. He also declares that he would override the penal system if he were able to, "My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,/Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again" - if he had

authority he would release him. This ties in with Godwin's idea that transportation to a new location offers a time to start afresh².

There are also hints at Coleridge's feelings on the English penal system within "The Dungeon". The name of the poem itself suggests a dark, sinister place symbolising punishment and hence the oppressive penal regime. The structure of the poem concentrates firstly on the inadequacy of what we do to people and secondly nature's healing capacity. The nature of the criticism is more focused on men to other men: "this place our forefathers made for man!". It also appears to be more declamatory and public than *The Convict*. In Wordsworth's poem he speaks about himself and his imagined personal relationship with the convict (repeated use of 'I') whereas Coleridge is more all-inclusive: "To each poor brother who offends against us", "Then we call in our pamper'd mountebanks".

Coleridge is using dramatic language (this extract is taken from a play) and the use of rhetorical questions ("Is this the only cure?") to invite others to share his damning views on the penal system. The use of 'pamper'd mountebanks', or quack doctors, to connote judges, lawyers and representatives of the legal system shows how just like the monarch in *The Convict*, they too live a pampered lifestyle. The 'cure' given for admonishing bad behaviour is this "uncomforted/And friendless solitude", indicating that the dungeon is like a social oubliette. Similar to *The Convict*, Coleridge makes sure to describe the extent of suffering caused by imprisonment in order to air his views on the failure and injustice caused by the penal system: "groaning and tears..."

and savage faces". The lack of nature's light (which is so praised by romantic writers as a replenishing energy) is alluded to in *The Dungeon* as well as *The Convict*. " Seen through the steams and vapour of his dungeon,/By the lamp's dismal twilight". *The Dungeon*, and by extension the entire penal system is hence medieval, old-fashioned and barbaric. It is necessary to start finding other ways out. One ' other way out' of the restrictive penal system may be that of nature.

Wordsworth uses transplantation to suggest this, while Coleridge refers to the redemptive, healing quality of nature: " O nature! /Healest thy wandering and distempered child". In *The Convict* one criticism of being a prisoner in the confines of a cell is the inability to appreciate nature, specifically its ringing joy. This musical reference is alluded to in *The Dungeon*, " Thy melodies of woods, and winds, and waters..

. a jarring and a dissonant thing... dance and minstrelsy". The metaphor is at first complimented by the relaxing, almost lyrically legato alliteration of the ' w's.

There is a sense of contrast between music and words. Words come from the intellect, though the convict cannot seem to trust conventional wisdom, and therefore feels more comfortable with a musical acquisition of knowledge. Finally, there is a point proved through irony in both poems. Wordsworth has written of appreciating the world through a " wise passiveness" (*Expostulation and Reply*) and in *The Convict* the poet stands alone on a mountain.

What is the difference between being alone on a mountain and being alone in a cell?! It seems that the difference lies in choice: in a “ wise passiveness” one chooses to be alone, so the poet is in fact airing his views on the penal system’s poor and unjust rulings which place someone in solitary confinement and dismal conditions without their consultation.