

The Passionate Writings of George Herbert

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Throughout many of George Herbert's poems, the reader becomes aware of the writer's thoughts and feelings, as well as his religious and political beliefs. Although some may argue that Herbert lived an ordinary life and was in some ways disappointed with his life and work, I would strongly disagree. In fact, despite the many different political views and lifestyle choices of his friends and peers, which he could have easily mimicked, George Herbert remained true to what he knew was right-this is passion. Herbert was truly passionate about his life and beliefs in God and love, as shown in his poems "The Altar," "Redemption," and "Love," thus disproving any assumption that he was unfulfilled or that he lived a mediocre life.

Passion is defined as "a strong feeling, especially of anger, love, or desire" (*Merriam* 244). George Herbert was a passionate human being. For instance, in his poem "The Altar," he writes, "Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine, / And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine" (Herbert lines 15-16). He basically is praising God by saying, "I will take up my cross and do Your will," something that Jesus, himself, urged his followers to do. Herbert is obviously speaking about the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on the cross and is begging that the sacrifice Jesus made be his own. This is passion. Not only does he desire to take the sacrifice of Christ and put it upon himself, but he also wants to be a sacrifice. He wants to sacrifice his life for that of his Lord and for the sake of the Gospel. To do this, he must offer himself as a sacrifice to God on "this ALTAR." What is significant about Herbert's suggestion is the way he offers. He says, "sanctify this ALTAR," which only means that he recognizes his own inability to do such a thing.

“Sanctify” means to “make holy” (*Merriam* 298), and Herbert is not willing to give anything but the best. To clarify, Herbert does not want to physically sacrifice his body, as with martyrdom or the like, but hopes to attain something much more meaningful and difficult. Herbert wants to “die to himself,” which indicates that he wants to give up his own selfish will and desires, in order to achieve what God would have him do and accomplish. Once again, this is true passion.

As his poetry often reflects Biblical imagery, I am reminded of a passage in 1 Corinthians 9:27 in which Paul is speaking to the church in Corinth; Paul there says, “I treat my body hard and make it my slave so that I myself will not be disqualified after I have preached to others” (*The Holy Bible, New Century Version*). Herbert is doing just this; he deliberately writes about God and his beliefs and speaks to God through his poetry, while also speaking to an audience to show how real his relationship is with his maker. Although he hesitated to become ordained, Herbert eventually lived the life of a pastor and cared for his small congregation. This exemplifies his desire to give up anything that would take away from his ultimate purpose and destiny, as he was not interested in money and fame, but only in serving the Lord.

Herbert's other poems further display his beliefs and thoughts toward his maker, such as his poem, “Redemption,” which literally means, “buying back” (Greenblatt 661). In “Redemption,” Herbert speaks in the first person, as he does in “The Altar,” but the poem itself refers to a time before Herbert even existed, as the reader discovers in the end. He begins his poem: “Having been a tenant long to a rich Lord” (Herbert 1), personifying God as a “landlord” and himself as an unhappy tenant. He goes on to explain the lengths he would go to in order to have the rent lowered and, in effect, uses incredible imagery. What type of rent is he paying that he considers it so burdensome as to ask for it to be lowered? The rent is equivalent to sin. Herbert recognizes his sin as burdensome and wants to lighten the load. Not until the end of the

poem where he describes his encounter with the landlord as, "Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied, / Who straight, 'Your suit is granted,' said and died" (Herbert 13-14) does Herbert see how burdensome it [the rent] truly is. Once again, I am reminded of a scripture in the Bible, Romans 6:23, which declares, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (*KJV Bible*). God grants his wish of lowering the rent by sending his son to die for Herbert and, in so doing, covering his debt. Herbert is watching his own sin put Jesus on the cross, and he is passionate about owning his place on the cross with Jesus Christ. Some readers may take this as an attempt to pawn his beliefs onto them. On the contrary, I see this as Herbert personalizing the passion of Christ on the cross to himself in a practical way.

Herbert definitely had a strong sense of who he was and what he believed. In fact, when describing his own collection of works, he portrayed them as "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul" (Greenblatt 659). Intriguingly, in "Redemption," he admits he has conflict with God. Yet, through his poetry, this conflict begins to resolve itself. Herbert is faced with a difficult image of God or himself and seeks out answers; he then delves into the problem headlong and writes that which is revealed to him—this, in itself, is amazing. Furthermore, he was completely confident in his faith, in his God, and in his idea of love, and his primary view of love was expressed in his poem.

It is obvious that Herbert had many thoughts on the vast topic of love; however, I feel his primary outlook on the subject is seen directly through his poem called "Love." In this poem, the reader easily can ascertain that the love to which Herbert is referring is the love of God and that every time he uses the word "love" he means God. In Herbert's eyes, love is patient, kind, and unselfish, and thus so is God. He is obviously using 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 as a backdrop for his poem (*KJV Bible*). How remarkable it must have been to share these precepts and to be able to

write down the deepest thoughts of his soul with such grace and simplicity. In his poem, Herbert recognizes just how unworthy he is to be the object of God's love. Within the first two lines of the poem, the reader sees how well Herbert comprehends God's love for him, when he says, "Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, / Guilty of dust and sin" (Herbert 1-2). This puts the notion of guilt into man's hands and out of God's. Herbert shows all too well how, even after God has forgiven a person, through His son Jesus, the same person has a difficult time accepting that forgiveness and, thus, finds himself guilty.

I am intrigued by the passion of Herbert. He was not looking for someone to blame, and he was not claiming that God was vengeful. Conversely, Herbert was acknowledging his own fault of noticing the sin that God was willing to look past, forgive, and move beyond. God wanted to overlook those areas of his life that Herbert thought were "dirty and sinful" and wanted instead to love and serve him. It is so amazing to see how Herbert makes these concepts available to the reader in such simple verse. To imagine the average person in contemporary American society with this outlook would be astounding. Most people today tend to blame others for their own issues and problems, and it is not uncommon to hear people blame God for their misfortunes. But not Herbert—he was passionate about making things in his soul right with God. Therefore, when he speaks of his writings in terms of "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul" (Greenblatt 659), he is referring to the issues and turmoil in his own soul, for which he sought correction from God. His view of love that comes from the Bible reflects passionate living, and Herbert used this passion to help others, as shown in his work and his word.

Herbert's letter, written to his mother on May 25, 1622, just five years prior to her death and while Herbert was a student at Trinity College, is a great example of how his life is reflected

in his poetry. In this letter, he was trying desperately to encourage her about her current health situation by giving her reasons to find peace and contentment. At one point in the letter, the reader finds Herbert sympathizing with his mother when he says, "For myself dear mother, I always feared sickness more than death, because sickness hath made me unable to perform those offices for which I came into the world, and must yet be kept in it ... " (Walton 12). He feels so much passion that he would rather die than be sick and, as such, be rendered useless to the duties he felt called to perform. Obviously, his poetry reflects this passion. Prior to this declaration, he encourages his mother with a sense of urgency, saying:

I beseech you to be cheerful, and comfort yourself in the God of all comfort, who is not willing to behold any sorrow, but for sin. - What hath affliction grievous in it more than for a moment? or why should our afflictions here have so much power or boldness as to oppose the hope of our joys hereafter? Madam, as the earth is but a point in respect of the heavens, so are earthly troubles compared to heavenly joys; therefore if either age or sickness lead you to those joys, consider what advantage you have over youth and health, who are now so near those true comforts. (Walton 12)

This small portion of his letter to his mother is enough to remove any doubt as to the validity of Herbert's devotion and self-reflection through his poetry; he definitely writes from first-hand experience and with his personal thoughts and reflections throughout.

Besides finding the good in everything, Herbert also rejoiced in every situation. He even encouraged his mother in his letter to do the same when he quoted Philippians 4:4, in which Paul says, "Rejoice and again I say rejoice..." (*KJV Bible*). Herbert had a passion in his life that was non-extinguishable. No matter what circumstance he encountered, Herbert persisted and

remained passionate about his life and religion. This is what I love about Herbert—his abounding zeal!

Another aspect of Herbert's life that proves him to be passionate was in charity. He was constantly giving to the poor and to his neighbors and helping anyone who was in need. He continued in this way until his health would no longer permit him to help physically, so he reverted to constant prayer and financial assistance of his parishioners. According to Izaak Walton, a friend of the Herbert family, Herbert's wife once mentioned how it "wasted his spirits" to pray steadfastly for his community like he did; Herbert's only response was that his "life could not be better spent than in the service of his master, Jesus, who had done and suffered so much for him" (23). This is just one more example of Herbert's passion in life and for Christ, and his simple remark directly reflects the basis for all three of the poems mentioned above. It echoes "The Altar" by virtue of the simple fact that he wants to serve and give his life fully to Christ. It reflects in "Redemption" in that he recognizes how much his master has done for him, and, thus, he senses a debt to repay. Likewise, it is evident in his poem "Love" as he there adopts the same tone of voice as in his exclamation to his wife that his "life could not be better spent than in the service of his master, Jesus" (Walton 23). He is expressing unfailing love to his Lord by being His servant and submitting his life to Him. Needless to say, Herbert's poetry is dripping with passion.

In closing, Herbert lived a life of passion and expressed that passion through his writings. He is passionate about his God and savior and wants to share a piece of that passion with the world through his second passion of writing, which is only possible due to his first passion. Therefore, when reading another critic's opinion about Herbert's life, stating that "the instability in his own nature, purposes, and temperament ... reflect his distress in life" (Greenblatt 659) and

thus he lived in mediocrity, I cannot help but disagree and argue completely that he lived, not a life of mediocrity, but a life of love, brokenness, and, most of all, *passion*.

Works Cited

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Dr. Whitton's Comments: *I had the privilege of having Julie in two online literature courses—English 231 and 232. On both occasions, she rose to the challenge by working independently and providing insightful comments on various readings for her classmates. In this essay, she illustrates that insight with her careful analysis of three of Herberts poems. Even though there were very few resources available, a fire having destroyed most of Herberts personal papers, Julie stuck with her project and produced a fine piece of criticism.*