Poetry Explication Essay, Research Paper

Poetry Explication

The second sonnet in Mark Jarman’s group of sonnets entitled The Word “Answer” can be interpreted two different ways. Is there a “right” way from which to view this poem, or is the poet simply exercising his God given right to ambiguity? Sonnet 2, as I will refer to it, revolves around someone sitting in a bathtub when suddenly there is a knock at the door, which soon turns into ringing and pounding, and finally the sound of breaking glass. Throughout the poem the person bathing debates whether or not to answer the door. By poem’s end, the reader knows no more about the outcome than before the book was opened. Yet the importance lies not in a climactic conclusion, but rather the debate whether or not to let the strange knocker inside. Mark Jarman places the following quote by Karl Barth from Prayer at the beginning of his four sonnets: “Prayer exerts an influence upon God’s action, even upon his existence. This is what the word ‘answer’ means.” Sonnet 2 is the only of the four poems that does not explicitly mention prayer or God. Yet it is clear the poem deals with the same topic as the three sonnets with which it is grouped. The ambiguity of the poem lies in deciding which of the poem’s two characters represents God and which represents the reader.

Line one presents the all-important dilemma, “There’s the door. Will anybody get it?” (Jarman 170). The bather hopes someone else will get the door because his warm bath is so soothing. The bather thinks of a substantial reason why not to answer the door. Chances are that “by the time he towels off and puts on his pajamas, robe, and slippers and goes down, they’ll be gone ” (Jarman 171). These lines present the bather as being comfortable in his present situation, soaking in a nice warm bath. Allegorically, this is representative of someone who is comfortable with the way his life is, not wanting anything to disturb their present state of living; especially not God. Then again, it could be God in the bathtub while we stand outside wondering, while we pray, if God hears us, or if He is even there; a legitimate fear we all experience at some time in our lives.

The next few lines state that, “nobody’s here to answer it but him. Perhaps they’ll go away. But it’s not easy, relaxing in the tub, reading the paper, with someone at the front door ” (Jarman 171). The question here is discovering who is the “him” being discussed. By saying, “nobody’s here to answer it but him” gives sufficient evidence that the bather is not be God, otherwise “him” would be capitalized. Furthermore, the responsibility to respond, or answer God’s knock lies solely on our shoulders. Truly, nobody else can answer it. Yet on the other hand, isn’t it God who answers our prayers? Furthermore the importance of capitalizing “him” seems insignificant within the context of the entire poem. Again the reader is left with yet another ambiguity.

The bather next hears, “ringing and pounding, and-that sounds like glass-breaking in. At least the bathroom door’s securely bolted. Or is that any assurance in this case” (Jarman 171)? The last of the first twelve lines of Sonnet 2 represent one of two possibilities. The first possibility gives validity to the idea that God is knocking at the door. He loves his children enough to try anything to get inside. Yet we, knowing that God is out there, are sometimes afraid that letting Him in will disrupt our state of comfort to which we have grown accustomed. The second validates the possibility that we are knocking at God’s door needing nothing but an answer to our prayers. Because humans have such an intense need reason and order they yearn for any answer from God.

The last two lines give closure to the poem, yet unlike the traditional Shakespearean sonnet, they do not wrap it up nice and neat with a bow on top. “He might as well go find out what’s the matter. Whoever it is must really want something” (Jarman 171). There is no resolution, just a lingering question. Will he answer the door? Though it is not an entertaining thought to picture God sitting in a bathtub reading the newspaper debating whether or not he wants to answer our prayers while we stand wondering whether there is anyone home, it is one way to read this sonnet. The more plausible possibility is that Mark Jarman is reminding us that God wants inside our hearts and it is our responsibility to move out of our warm, comfortable baths and let him in.