Robert Bly Essay, Research Paper

Throughout the 20th century, Robert Bly has provided a wealth of poetry on a

wide variety of topics. Alongside his themes, Robert Bly has also developed

different stylistic methods to convey those thoughts. Such themes vary to this

day, dealing with issues that have personally affected him, and also those of

society in general. His poetry is a time-line pondering solitude, the Vietnam

War, nature, frustration and relationships among all sorts, conveyed not only in

conventional stanzas, but in a form called "prose" poetry as well.

Contributing and inspiring to many, the work of Robert Bly provides an

interesting take on American poetry. Robert Blys’ first collection of poems were

released in 1962, titled, Silence in the Snowy Fields. Divided into three

sections: "Eleven Poems of Solitude," "Awakening," and

"Silence on the Roads," all combine along with the title to explore as

Richard P. Sugg states: "human nature as twofold, consisting of both the

conscious and the unconscious. . ." A poem "Return to Solitude"

explores the conscious and unconscious aspects of human nature, relating a

desire to exist in the purest, solitary state; one of inside the womb.

"Return to solitude" seemingly jumps between the conscious and

unconscious state, all the while conveying a yearning for a more solitary

existence. The first stanza, portrays solitude via the imagery. "It is a

moonlit, windy night. / The moon has pushed out the Milky Way." Envisioning

these two lines invokes a sense of remoteness, a picture of a single, bright

moon in the night sky without any stars. "Clouds are hardly alive, and the

grass leaping. / It is the hour of return." With the clouds hardly alive,

or non-existent, the moon is now explicitly alone in the sky; an obvious image

of solitude. "It is the hour of return" in effect, makes the first

stanza a conscious thought, since it is a statement, a bold declaration that is

consciously put forth. The unconscious comes to play in the second stanza.

"We want to go back, to return to the sea," communicates a sense of

yearning within the speaker, almost as if a true desire were being confessed.

The sea is then described: "The sea of solitary corridors / And halls of

wild nights," whose imagery portrays a birth canal, a corridor and also a

hall where sexual intercourse, hence the "wild nights" would occur.

"Explosions of grief, / Diving into the sea of death," correspond to a

sexual climax, but are understood by the speaker as negative. By these events

occurring, it is creating a person and hence eventually the birth of him/her and

the inevitable loss of the pure, solitary state. Hence the explosive climax is

labeled as grievous and paired with an ominous image of "Diving into the

sea of death." The third stanza ponders what would happen if the pure state

of solitude was ever reached. "What shall we find when we return? / Friends

changed, houses moved, / Trees perhaps, with new leaves." These images give

a sense of a renewed life, a different life with different friends and a

different home, and even perhaps a rejuvenation in one’s self, as conjured by

the new leaves on trees. Robert Bly’s "Return to Solitude" is one of

the many poems within Silence in the Snowy Fields that conveys a dual side to

humanity: the conscious and unconscious, and also explores solitude. Following

Silence in the Snowy Fields came the turbulent Vietnam War, where Robert Bly

took an incredible anti-war stance, seen not only in his poetry but by his

frequent activism in protests and rallies. In 1967, Robert Bly published The

Light Around the Body, a three sectioned collection of poetry that leaped into

current issues. "Asian Peace Offers Rejected without Publication" is

such a poem that portrays a different theme and a different methodology in

bringing it to the surface. "Asian Peace Offers Rejected without

Publication" promotes a realization regarding mankind’s misconception of

war, while making a statement to never forget the atrocities that have already

occurred in the past. "Men like Rusk are not men: / They are bombs waiting

to be loaded in a darkened hangar." Here Rusk and his fellows have lost all

their human qualities, thereby losing the ability to be compassionate and

understanding. The speaker then labels Rusk and his cohorts as bombs, the

embodiment of modern carnage and destruction. "Rusk’s assistants eat

hurriedly, / talking of Teilhard de Chardin," An interesting twist then

takes place, with the speaker introducing the idea that those favoring

destruction, claim to do it under a seemingly noble guise and hence justify it

to themselves. The irony follows in the imagery of the last line: "They

start the projector, and show the movie about the mad pro-/fessor."

Coincidentally, those that are showing the "mad professor" do not

realize the fact that their desire for destruction, their justification for war

and bloodshed are in essence crazy and unwarranted, similar to a madman’s

motives. Together, the first stanza sums up a misconception toward war; the

simple dismissal of death and the carnage associated with war because in

someone’s eyes it is a just and good war. Stanza two brings images of America’s

own similar atrocities, and a call to remember them through vivid imagery.

"Lost angels huddled on a night branch:" portray an image of those who

have died, watching the consequent images pass. Images invoking colonial

intrusion upon native American lands, the westward expansion at the expense of

those natives and lives of workers building the railroad. All these deaths,

release the feeling of "something inside us / Like a ghost train in the

Rockies / About to be buried in snow!" This feeling that the speaker refers

to, this embodiment of pain and despair cries out, "Its long hoot / Making

the owl in the Douglas fir turn his head" asking a symbolic representation

of America, to take notice and realize that what has happened in the past, is

what is occurring with Rusk in Vietnam. "Asian Peace Offers Rejected

without Publication" and many other poems within Light Around the Body

showcase a developing Robert Bly. The themes have changed, with a previous

concentration on solitude and the conscious and unconscious being replaced by

political poetry expressing personal views toward society’s path. His poetry has

changed in that it began to include direct references, specifically to Dean Rusk

and theologian Teilhard de Chardin. Throughout Silence in the Snowy Fields,

Robert Bly was consistent in not including specifics and always promoting his

theme through imagery, rather than an embodiment of associations found in

specific personas. Light Around the Body showcases these changing facets of

Robert Bly’s poetry and the beginning of his continued development as a poet. In

1979, Robert Bly published another collection of poetry, titled This Tree Will

Be Here For a Thousand Years. Considered a sequel to Silence in the Snowy

Fields, there are similarities in its return to similar elements such as nature,

but in this case Robert Bly concentrates more on the relationship between man

and nature. As Sugg put it, This Tree Will be Here For a Thousand Years

"affirms Bly’s metaphysics concerning the interdependence between the

individual and the natural laws that sustain him." "Black Pony Eating

Grass" is a typical poem showcasing such a relationship. The

interdependence between nature and man is portrayed within "Black Pony

Eating Grass." The first lines invoke a sense of a whole, singular

relationship; that everything is inter-related. "Near me a black and shaggy

pony is eating grass, / that crunching is night being ripped away from

day," gives a sense of revealing. For night and day to be ripped away from

each other portrays a scene where there are no differences, where nothing is

contrasting and everything is one. There is no differing night or day, it is

just a wholesome existence, thus marking the beginning of the human – nature

relationship. "Our life is a house between two hills." The imagery

provided here supports a relationship between man and nature. Man’s home, could

be placed in another context, but for it to be placed between hills makes it

seem like a normal part of nature. "Flowers stand open on the altar"

continue this sense a natural relationship, since what is normally sacred texts

or candles, instead lie flowers, a representation of nature. What normally is a

close relationship, that of humankind and religion, is in this case shown by

nature, portraying a close relationship between nature and humankind. Stanza

three continues, "In a few years we will die, / yet the grass continues to

lift itself into the horse’s teeth," shows that man is merely a part of

nature; that man will die, but the speaker does not view that as tragic. Rather,

the speaker portrays an image of the horse eating grass, portraying death as

part of a natural cycle, hence showing the relationship between nature. A blunt

declaration of humankind’s relationship with nature is defined in the last

lines: " A star is also a stubborn man – / the Great Bear is seven old men

walking." Here the stars are being considered men, literally defining a

relationship between nature and humankind. Throughout "Black Pony Eating

Grass" instances of a relationship between humankind and nature become

apparent, and are commonplace within Robert Bly’s This Tree Will Be Here For a

Thousand Years. Thus Robert Bly’s thematic interests develop over time, from an

interest in the psyche and solitude, to political poetry to relationships

between humankind and nature. 1981 saw the release of Robert Bly’s The Man in

the Black Coat Turns where relationships were now taken to the personal level.

Victoria Frenkel Harris, in The Incorporative Consciousness of Robert Bly states

"The poems of Coat tend to be less visionary, more a record of life in the

daily world. . .The public man, for example, is at times viewed in Black Coat as

victim rather than villain, as one whose externality has developed in response

to cultural, familial, and historical demands." With this new level of

exploration, Robert Bly takes on a new stylistic change seen in a section of his

book called "prose poetry." "Eleven O’Clock at Night" is an

example of Robert Bly’s developing poetic taste. "Eleven O’Clock at

Night" introduces the speakers various frustrations in his life and a sense

of yearning for an alternate life. It begins with the countless frustrations in

the speaker’s life which build upon each other. "I wrote down some thoughts

on sacrifice that other people had, but couldn’t relate them to my own

life." Here the speaker admits failure, and begins his downward descent

into self-loathing. "I wanted the mail to bring me some praise for my ego

to eat, and was disappointed." The speaker searches for a way to lift his

spirits, hoping someone has written to him, but again is disappointed.

Frustration again is found, with only $65 in his bank account, pending bills of

over a thousand. The speaker’s own distaste for his life is found in another

confession: "There is no way to escape from these. Many times in poems I

have escaped – from myself." Acknowledging his own desire to leave his real

life, he does so through poetry, a testament to the fact that he yearns for an

alternate life. The speaker then admits, "Now more and more I long for what

I cannot escape from. . ." and proceeds to list solid truths that define

reality as having no solution, as lacking a way to get away from. The thematic

aspect of "Eleven O’Clock at Night" and its concentration on exploring

the self seem reminiscent of Silence in the Snowy Fields, yet stylistically

differ. "Eleven O’Clock at Night" utilized a style called "prose

poetry." Robert Bly had previously experimented with this style previous to

the release of The Man in the Black Coat Turns, but had never dedicated a full

section of his collections to prose poetry. Ralph J. Mills Jr. nicely stated the

purpose of prose poetry, "it further encourages the writer to float about

freely in his perceptions by affording him space – blocks of prose paragraphs -

where his consciousness can exercise a flexibility not constrained by problems

of the line." Thus with time a new facet of Robert Bly’s changing poetry

becomes discovered. Robert Bly followed up in 1985 with Loving a Woman In Two

Worlds, another collection of poems which concentrated on inter-personal

relationships. Victoria Frenkel Harris adds ". . .Bly feels to be

harmonious as well as between the masculine and feminine dimensions of an

integrated psyche." Robert Bly’s poem "A Third Body" explores

that region of psyche between the male and female. "A Third Body"

portrays a relationship between two people characterized by a third body,

seemingly the psychic manifestation of their love. " . . .they do / not

long / at this moment to be older, or younger, nor born in any other nation or

time, or place. . ." show that they are content regardless of titles or

location. Noting this relationship is important since "Their breaths

together feed someone whom we do / not know." The third body, the

manifestation of their love encompasses these feelings the man and woman hold

for each other. Since the man and woman’s breath comes from within, this third

body is made up of all their heartfelt secrets and cares, explaining why they

obey it and promise to love that body. The final lines help give a wider sense

to this third body, "as they breathe they feed someone we do not know, /

someone we know of, whom we have never seen." This gives a sense that

everyone has a third body, since it is commonly known, yet that third body

retains a sense of individuality, unique to every person’s relationship. In a

sense Robert Bly proposes that everyone knows and acknowledges the existence of

this "third body," this representation of a male – female

relationship, but also the fact that it is quite attainable by all. The thematic

exploration between male and female relationships is another different approach

taken by Robert Bly, but the style in "A Third Body" is also

noteworthy. Here Robert Bly has abandoned the traditional structured, stanza by

stanza poetry, nor does he continue with his prose poetry. Instead Robert Bly

chooses to convey his ideas through line poetry that sometimes is incomplete.

This use of placing certain phrases on a single line brings about emphasis on

the particular words, giving a new sense to what is being portrayed. Robert Bly

never ceases to experiment and develop his unique approach to poetry. Robert Bly

continues to be an active force in the world of poetry and literature, whose

work has developed and changed over a period of time. Beginning with various

explorations of the conscious and unconscious, to political statements, to

better understanding relationships not only with nature but with men and women,

Robert Bly has continuously explored new regions of poetry. Experimenting with

traditional, stanza based structure to wild "prose poetry" format, he

has additionally attempted different methods in conveying his ideas. An

influential member of the literary world, Robert Bly is a poet that truly

deserves recognition.