
Frustration and Despair in Walter Raleigh's Poetry

A Study in some Selected Poems

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In spite of the fact that most of the anthologies of English literature classify Raleigh as a minor poet, yet he wrote a kind of poetry that only prominent poets were able to write. He wrote a kind of reflective and introspective poetry which reflects his changing life, his rise to power and his downfall. His poetry, marked by melancholy and despair, was not in harmony with the common mood and the spirit of the age. Though the Elizabethan poetry was marked by the beauty of form and content and the love of life, Walter Raleigh's poetry presented an opposite attitude through its rejection of life, frustration and despair. Most of his poetry is characterized by frustration and melancholy which were caused by many reasons some were personal and others were related to his connection with the court. What survived of his poetry were about fifty poems. The majority of those melancholic poems were written in prison; this justifies the melancholic tone that characterizes them.

The first poem that shows his frustration and despair is “The Lie” in which Raleigh presents his melancholy in a pessimistic way. It is a political and social criticism through which he commands his soul to go "upon a thankless errand" and tell various people, classes, and abstract qualities about their misdeeds and wrongdoings. Moreover the poem shows the state of hopelessness felt by the poet. In this poem the personal frustration has led to public frustration, for the speaker sees no hope any where. In this poem nothing escapes Raleigh’s criticism; his attack reaches every aspect of life as Socorro Suarez puts it “The Lie is a gallery of negative portraits ranging from the Church to the Court, through Physics, Art, the City and the Potentates.”¹ Raleigh begins the poem with a determination to expose the truth, though he knows very well that this act will not be well-received by his society:

*Go, Soul, the body's guest,
Upon a thankless errand;
Fear not to touch the best;
The truth shall be thy warrant:
Go, since I needs must die,
And give the world the lie.*²

(L.1-6)

From this point the poem moves quickly through a variety of scenes and situations of falsehood and corruption, all of which Raleigh condemns severely and disrespectfully. The second stanza

accuses the court of being arrogant and yet wholly rotten, the church of being inactive and apathetic despite its teachings. The poet also accuses those in government of favoritism and greed, respecting only those who are rich and powerful:

*Say to the court, it glows
And shines like rotten wood;
Say to the church, it shows
What's good, and doth no good:
If church and court reply,
Then give them both the lie.*

(L.7-12)

This stanza based on his actual experience with the court. According to Andrew Sanders the stanza shows clearly Raleigh's eruption with bitterness against the court which glows and shines like rotten wood.³ The source of this eruption could be the bad treatment which he received after being dismissed from the court. He knows better than anyone else about the falsehood of the court because he was close to it. He was not only dissatisfied with the court, but even with the church which was severely attacked by him. He blames the church for the hypocrisy of its rulers; they show people the way of "good, and doth no good". The poem is dark and full of sorrow and sadness, this sorrow and sadness have led to skepticism and doubt. For Raleigh nothing is true in this life, life is a big lie in which there are no friendship, no kindness, no honour, no virtue and no justice. In addition to that the poem

reflects the extent of despair and frustration the poet has reached. Raleigh intensifies his belief that nothing is certain and nothing is trustworthy in this life. The absence of certitude is the main reason behind his frustration. Throughout his life he tasted the rise into power and the downfall many times. This changing life played a great role in shaping his belief of the uncertainty of man's fate and fortune. The poem epitomizes the course of his life, it is a mixture of Raleigh's waning state and what causes it.

*Tell fortune of her blindness;
Tell nature of decay;
Tell friendship of unkindness;
Tell justice of delay:
And if they will reply,
Then give them all the lie.*

(L.55-60)

.....
*Tell faith it's fled the city;
Tell how the country erreth;
Tell manhood shakes off pity
And virtue least preferreth:
And if they do reply,
Spare not to give the lie.*

(L.67-72)

This poem can be seen as journey into a state of frustration and pessimism through which Raleigh pessimistically and melancholically rejects the world in which he lived, proving that it is a big lie. This total rejection for the world is painfully expressed

throughout the poem by a person who once had enjoyed the shining face of life which blinded him to see the other face which is completely different. For this reason one can notice the bitterness of the speaker's tone and words:

*Tell age it daily wasteth;
Tell honour how it alters;
Tell beauty how she blasteth;
Tell favour how it falters:
And as they shall reply,
Give every one the lie.*

(L.37-42)

This stanza expresses Raleigh's angry temper concerning his age and time. He shows his contempt for age, representing the passage of time and this process becomes for him just wasting of time. Man through his age loses his youth, power, vitality, friends and everything he likes. The stanza might be read as a record of Raleigh's personal life because he seems to sum up the course of his life in these few words. His view of life is pessimistic, because life for him is only wasting and losing of time which ends with the scene of inevitable death. This idea is recurrent, for it appears in several poems especially those written during his imprisonment. Conspicuously, we can notice his frustration and despair through the use of the phrases which end each stanza "if...reply/ give ...the lie". Therefore, we can say that Raleigh bitterly laments life in all

its aspects for its corruption and falsehood which one of the main reasons behind his frustration and despair.

“Farewell to the Court” is another poem which deals with the frustration and despair. It is an autobiographical poem that portrays a negative picture of desolation and exile. The poem presents the theme of departure from the court. It was written as an apparently successful complaint to Queen Elizabeth I. In this poem Raleigh found himself alone despairing and banished by his beloved queen and in a real fear of death.⁴ The poem depicts his anguished confrontation with his new situation, the situation that he is no longer the favourite of the queen. He lost the favour of the queen because he was falsely accused of treason. Consequently he lost the love and respect of the court and its members. Thus, his dreams and joys are all vanished and the only thing that remains is sorrow and sadness:

*Like truthless dreams, so are my joys expir'd,
And past return are all my dandled days;
My love misled, and fancy quite retir'd,
Of all which pass'd the sorrow only stays.*
(L.1-4)

As the poem moves on, Raleigh's frustration takes different shapes. He summarizes his position more clearly in the second stanza which is dominated by contraries and by the sad awareness

that man is a puppet in the hand of an always capricious destiny. This capricious destiny represents the queen and her power. Her attachment to him prevented from fulfilling his dreams.⁵ He was tied by her favour, when he lost that favour he lost everything with it. This frustration is developed at a certain stage into atheism; he rejected religion. His reference to "Fortune" shows clearly his disfavour with religion and the state of despair he reached which brought him out of the realm of religion. For him man's future lies not in his hand, but in the hand of the blind Fortune, the Roman deity of fortune and good luck:

*My lost delights, now clean from sight of land,
Have left me all alone in unknown ways,
My mind to woe, me life in Fortune's hand;
Of all which pass'd the sorrow only stays.*

(L.5-8)

Moreover, the poem depicts the feeling of isolation from the society. He is not only banished by the court, but even the society rejected him as if he was criminal. This shows the close circle of the Elizabethan society, anyone rejected by the court, the society hardly accepts him. This proves that the court played a great role not only in politics but even in the social life of England. This social rejection increased his agony and plight. The friends and lovers of yesterday became the foes and enemies of today. In this poem melancholy is the only friend to him and could be the only

consolation available. As Robert Lawson says “Raleigh’s melancholy shows that it was a delicate path to tread, and one that had clear limit.”⁶ Therefore, the melancholic tone in this poem is somehow justified, for the poet had lost everything good in his life: the queen, the court, friends, family and society:

*As in a country strange without companion,
I only wail the wrong of death’s delays,
Whose sweet spring spent, whose summer well nigh done;
Of all which pass’d the sorrow only stays.*

(L.9-12)

The poem records Raleigh’s attempts to give up politics forever because he did not gain from politics only treason and punishment that led him to suffer the rest of his life. Politics had spoiled his life completely for this he decided to depart from it without even to think of a way of reconciliation.

Raleigh’s frustration and despair take another shape in his poem “Like to a Hermit”, this poem is said to have been written the night before his execution. The poem could be a continuation of the previous one “Farewell to the Court” because the poem speaks also about the theme of isolation and departure. The poem depicts Raleigh’s tragic life and records certain stage of it. Some critics believe that Raleigh marked each crisis of his history by writing a short poem, in which the vanity of life is proclaimed.⁷ After being dismissed from the court and sent into prison, Raleigh felt very sad

and miserable. He lost his faith in everything and everyone around him especially those who were close to him. The state of loss intensified his frustration and brought him an “endless doubt” that he expressed in the opening lines. He meant to spend his life alone in unidentified place so as not to communicate with people especially those who let him down. This may give us some knowledge about his frustrated spirit when he wrote this poem. He feels he has no place in this world and he can not cope with it. Therefore, he preferred to hide himself from the eyes of people waiting for death:

*Like to a hermit poor in place obscure,
I mean to spend my days of endless doubt*
(L.1-2)

The expression of such far-reaching doubt suggests the depth of Raleigh's disillusionment with the world.⁸ The poet here wishes to spend his last days as a hermit meditating and looking for the truth. The poem can be seen as seclusion since the poet tries to conceal himself in a hidden place, alone and away from people. The poet seems to have chosen the path of hermitage by divorcing life and all its misleading ways. Raleigh realized that he is cut away from life; therefore, he has chosen the path of hermitage not for religious purposes, but to find an outlet for the state of despair he had

experienced. There, he will “wail such woes” that time can not cure:

*To wail such woes as time cannot recure,
Where none but love shall ever find me out.
(L.3-4)*

The poet passes through an experience of meditation concerning his past life. The poet shifted the scene from the outside world of “The Lie” and “Farewell to the Court” into the internal world of the self. He asserts that his sorrow and woe will continue forever because nothing is left to him except grief and misery. As a hermit he will feed himself on “care and sorrow” and water himself his own tears; and he will wear his old, weak and gray body and he will lighten the darkness of his gloomy life with a fire arises from his heart. In addition to that he assures his reader that what remains of that glory of the past is only “broken hope”. The following passage might be classified among the gloomiest stanzas ever written in English. The introverted mood with which the poem was written fits that of a desperate and frustrated person, because it is marked by the internal sorrow and plight of the speaker:

*My food shall be of care and sorrow made,
My drink nought else but tears fallen from mine eyes,
And for my light, in such obscured shade,
The flames shall serve, which from my heart arise.
A gown of gray my body shall attire,*

*My staff of broken hope whereon I'll stay;
(L.5-10)*

The woeful tone indicates the fact that the poet has reached a conclusion that he cannot reconcile with life. The poem ends pessimistically because there is no hope to restore the sweet days of the past. Moreover, “despair” awaits him at the door to “let in death”. He presents the scene of death at the end of the poem as an implication for the truth that man can not stop the wheels of time and man can not choose his destiny. Once again the poet mentions “Fortune” to express the bitter feeling that man’s destiny lies not in his hand but in some one else’s hands:

*And at my gate despair shall linger still,
To let in death when Love and Fortune will.
(L.13-14)*

The last poem in this selection is “what is Our Life?” It is one of the most famous poems written by Raleigh. The poem shows his attitude toward life in a very negative and sarcastic way. The poem is a set of metaphors through which Raleigh defines life from his own perspective. The poem starts with a rhetorical question through which the poet wants to draw the reader’s attention to his attitude toward life. The poem is dark and full of blackness because the speaker is desperately melancholic. This melancholic

tone is shown through the images the poet used to describe life. He compares life to a play acted on a stage, and all people are actors, each one plays the role assigned to him. The most famous metaphors in this poem appear in the first stanza. At the beginning Raleigh describes life as “a play of passion” then as “short comedy”. The use of comedy here indicates that life for him is not serious, and the absence of seriousness makes life absurd and meaningless. For Raleigh life is a journey of pain and misery which starts even before we are born into it. The metaphor in the third line indicates that the state of pregnancy is a tiresome experience not only for the mother, but for the baby as well. The significance of this metaphor is to show that man experiences pain even before his coming to this life. Therefore, even the infant is dissatisfied with his coming to this life as if he knows that what awaits him is only sorrow and sadness:

*What is our life? A play of passion,
Our mirth the music of division;
Our mothers' wombs the tiring houses be,
Where we are dressed for this short comedy;
(L.1-4)*

The first stanza proves that the poet is not in a good temper as if he lost the harmony with the world. He became displeased with everything around him. In addition to that, the stanza shows the state of despair the speaker reached which darkened the world in

his eyes and made him hopeless. The comparison that life is a play shows the extent of frustration he experienced through his imprisonment. His view of life is comprehensively negative, gloomy, and dark. Andrew Sanders says in this respect “Raleigh has recourse to theatrical metaphors, we are all comedians in religion, God, who is the author of all our tragedies, has Witten out for us, and appointed us all the parts we are to play.”⁹ In addition to that the poem can be seen as a philosophical interpretation of life through which the poet dialectically expresses the tension of his speculation. The poet discusses the position of man in this universe and his relation with God. Once again the poet has recourse to theatrical metaphor to describe God as a “judicious sharp spectator” who marks our action and deeds in this “short comedy”. This dialectical tension inspired Fred Inglis to suggest that this poem is “a poem of renunciation.... for the dominant tone here is one of scornful rejection”.¹⁰ The poet here rejects life in general because man is not born free; everything is predestined by a supreme power the poet named “Heaven”. Since man’s future and destiny are not in his hand, this might be another reason behind the poet’s frustration and despair:

*Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss;
Our graves that hide us from the searching sun
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.*

(L.5-8)

The poem is not only about life, it also deals with the idea of death. Another reason contributed to Raleigh's frustration and despair is the inevitability of death. He was always conscious of the two truths of life and death and their chronological order.¹¹ Through the course of the poem Raleigh presented his attitude toward life saying that life lacks seriousness "short comedy", but at the end of the poem he asserts that the only serious thing in this life is death. Death is an inevitable truth that man must accept willy-nilly. If life is "a play of passion", death, then, is the end of the show; and the "drawn curtains" at the end of the show are "our graves". The poem is an extended metaphor which sums up man's life from birth to death:

*Thus march we playing to our latest rest,
Only we die in earnest, that's no jest.*
(L.9-10)

The word "playing" here marks the culmination of Raleigh's pessimism and despair because it suggests that we act roles that we have no right to choose. Thus, we can say that Raleigh has reached this conclusion that man is born only to die. There is no doubt that these thoughts made him totally frustrated.

Finally, one can say that though some of the critics consider walter Raleigh as an intermittent and amateur poet whose body of poetry is definitely small, yet some of his poems are among the treasures

of English literature. The common and predominant features of his poetry are frustration and despair which coloured his famous poems with blackness. These two themes repeatedly appear in his poetry due to some reasons that are related to his personal and tragic life. Frustration and despair became more than moods of writing, they went further than this limit to become ways of life through which the poet reflects and records his own life. Moreover through these poems the poet expresses his attitude toward life in a speculative and meditative way which is prevailed by melancholy and pessimism.

Notes

- ¹ Socorro Suarez and Juan, E, Tazon “The Dialectical Tension in Walter Raleigh’s Life and Work”, *A Journal of Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies: University of Oviedo*. <http://www.sederi.org>. Retrieved February 12, 2009, p.47.
- ² All subsequent quotations are taken from the Classic Poetry Series edition of *Sir Walter Raleigh Poems* published by WWW.PoemHunter.com. 2004. Retrieved May 26, 2009.
- ³ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 126.
- ⁴ Miri Tashma-Baum, “A Shroud for the Mind: Raleigh's Poetic Rewriting of the Self” <http://purl.oclc.org/emls> . Page 8 of 25 pages. Retrieved April 8, 2009.
- ⁵ Socorro Suarez and Juan E. Tazon , p. 45.
- ⁶ Robert Lawson-Peebles, “The Many Faces of Sir Walter Raleigh” <http://www.yahoo.com> . Page 2 of 12. Retrieved March 19, 2009.
- ⁷ John Hannah, cited in *Sir Walter Raleigh* by Henry David Thoreau (Boston: the Bibliophile Society, 1905), p.8.
- ⁸ Miri Tashma-Baum, p. 17.
- ⁹ Andrew Sanders, p. 125.

¹⁰ Fred Inglis, *The Elizabethan Poets: The Making of English Poetry from Wyatt to Ben Jonson* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1969), p.57-58.

¹¹ Socorro Suarez and Juan E. Tazon, p.44.

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Introduction

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618) was an English soldier, courtier, discoverer, scholar, historian and poet in the same time. He was a very cultured person, and a close friend of the Queen Elizabeth I who knighted him in 1585. Raleigh had unstable life because he was accused of treason. He, as a result for that, was arrested and sent to prison many times. During the thirteen years of imprisonment he turned into writing, he wrote different books including history and poetry. These events affected him and influenced his poetry which was not in harmony with his age. He wrote fine poems that brought him a rank among good poets. Most of his poetry was self-centered which was tinged with frustration, despair, melancholy and to certain extent of skepticism. These became recurrent themes in almost all his poems.

The present paper aims at studying some of those poems and analyzing theme to see the main reasons behind this frustration and despair. The selected poems are “The Lie”, “Farewell to the Court”, “Like to a Hermit”, and “What is Our Life?” These poems are characterized by sad, melancholic and woeful tone which expresses the bitterness of the poet’s soul.