

Retreat by Henry Vaughan

The dominant theme of the poem is loss of childhood innocence and all that it entails. Vaughan presents childhood as a state of "angel infancy" which he desperately wants to regain. In his idyllic evocation of his early years, the poet portrays childhood as a happy time, full of innocence and bliss. As we get older, however, we inevitably lose sight of that purity, that primal sense of oneness with the world around us. It is this feeling of unity that the poet wishes to recover.

The 'Retreat' by Henry Vaughan is a thirty-two line poem which is contained within one stanza of text. The poet has chosen to utilize a structured and consistent pattern of rhyme which follows the scheme of aabbccdd... and so on, throughout the entire text.

Before beginning this piece a reader should take note of the use of the word "retreat" in the title. Through the poet's selection of this word it takes on two different meanings. The first, that of hiding or getting away from one's life, and the other as a reference to a place of happiness. He is seeking out both a return to the past and a retreat to a happier time. The two coincide for the speaker.

The 'Retreat' by Henry Vaughan describes a speaker's desire to escape to the past where he was a younger, purer, and generally happier human being.

The poem begins with the speaker mourning for the lost days of his youth. He longs to return to a time when he was in his "angel infancy" and had yet to be influenced by the dark forces of the world. It would be a time in which he had yet to stray far from his home or realize the struggle that would take him over internally.

In the present day he worries about his own emotions and the sinful nature of them. He is concerned over his own being in a way which was not even considered when he was young.

In the final lines the speaker describes the end of his life and how he will return to the dust of the earth. This will be the penultimate ending for a man who longs for his previous life.

In the first section of this piece the speaker begins by making an exclamation, which at this point, has no defining context. On a first reading one might see this line as a celebratory statement, but after coming to a greater understanding of the text it becomes clear it is closer to grief than joy.

The speaker is looking back on the days of his youth and remembering what it was like when he "Shined in [his] angel infancy." He is long past these moments, but remembers them very fondly. They seem to him to be the clearest, purist, parts of his life. The following lines continue his reminiscence by speaking of how now he understands "this place."

He knows the world he is living in and can see all of its dark corners. Before though, this was not the case. As a youth he used to live so purely he didn't even think about how "celestial" his thoughts were. Now, thinking clearly takes a concerted effort.

In the next section of the poem the speaker goes on to describe what his life was like before he strayed far from home. It was during this period that he "had not walked" more than a "mile or two from" his "first love." He had not seen very much of the world at this point and knew nothing about its dangers.

When he looks back now he realizes this was when he could “glimpse” the face of God. It was only for a “short” span this was possible and in moments in which he gazes upon a “gilded cloud or flower.” When he was young he could spend an hour simply contemplating the beauty of the natural world.

In the final lines of this section he speaks on the glimpses of “eternity” he caught in these moments. They were only “shadows” but they felt infinitely important to him.

In the next section the poet continues on the same path of describing the life he used to lead when he was young. The speaker is remembering the years of his life which were not marked by his “tongue” wounding his own “conscience.” He didn’t worry about what was morally right or wrong, he simply lived as a young person.

This is expanded upon in the next lines in which he speaks of “black art” tainting emotions. Before he aged he did not worry about how he felt and if it was sinful. Now though, the nature of his own emotions bother him. This has been brought on by the teachings of society and perhaps religion. Rather than experience these guilty thoughts about his own life, he felt within his “fleshy dress,” or body, “shoots of everlastingness.” It seemed to his younger self that he would live forever in a perpetual state of youth.

The next part of the poem takes a turn. He stops reminiscing and instead expresses his general longing for the past. He makes another exclamation stating, “O, how I long to travel back” to the past. The speaker would rather live in the past and walk again on “that ancient track” than live as he does now.

If he could return, he might have a chance of reaching “that plain” where he left his “glorious train.” He would hope to recover his previous state of being. He knows exactly where he left it too, on the hill alongside the “enlightened spirit.” The spirit, which represents his youth, is able to see the “shady city of palm trees” from where it rests.

In the last six lines the speaker mourns for what he will never have again. He has become “drunk” with his own longings and remembrances. The speaker knows it is not a healthy way to live as he will “stagger” about his life without purpose. This fact does not keep him from changing his opinion. He knows he is unlike other men; he loves the “backward steps” rather than the “forward motion.”

In the final two lines he speaks on his own death. It will be the ultimate returning as he resumes the form of “dust.” His body will return to the earth and become again what it was before he was born.