

FORMAL APPLICATION – A POEM ABOUT HUMAN GREEDINESS

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Abstract: Greed is one of the seven deadly sins. It was a desire of having something more than is needed, whether it is material or social value. Through “Formal Application”, Donald Baker observed the outset of greed and how that desire grew. Donald Baker’s background as a soldier in World War II also gives a look at his views of how greed is used to gain power and how it shaped the history of the world through World War II.

Keywords: Donald Baker, greed, World War II, persona

INTRODUCTION

Formal Application is a poem written by Donald W. Baker back in 1982. Baker served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He served in Europe and Asia. This poem may not have a good musical device that is generally found on a poem, but the content of the poem has an implied message for his audience about a problem in the human psyche, which is greediness. After we know the background of Donald W. Baker and the possible content of the poem, we can make a hypothesis if this poem was made as a sarcasm for the humans’ greediness during the era of World War II.

METHOD

In this study, we employed a qualitative approach. In this research, we decided to use an internet-based research method. The Internet-based research method is chosen due to its wide range of sources. The source of data that we use as our main object for the research was a poem written by Donald Baker titled “Formal Application”. Meanwhile, to analyze the data, we used a qualitative data analysis method. This method provides us flexibility to process the data into our personal interpretation of the word.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Poem Background

Donald W. Baker (1923–2002), served in the Army Air Corps as an aerial navigator in World War II, serving in Europe and Asia. He earned a BA, MA, and PhD in English literature from Brown University. His poetry collections include Formal Application (1982), Unposted Letters (1985), The Day Before (1989), Search Patterns (1996), The Readiness: Poems from the Cape (1996), and Fought by Boys: New and Selected Poems from War (2002). Baker was an English professor and a poet-in-residence at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Formal Application took place in 1982 when Donald W. Baker served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, and most likely in the spring-time. His goal in his league was to keep the conscience of people during the horrible times of war, kept people sane. He wanted to reveal the truth of mankind, even if it was brutally honest. He said students should “judge thoughtfully, act effectively, and live humanely in a difficult world”. This affected his poems and writing because he had the perspective of fighting and serving in the war.

Title Analyzation

After reading the poem, it gives the reader a deeper understanding of the title. The “application” being about the narrator trying to become the Modern Man. A modern man, based on this poem, is a man who has the skills that demonstrated humanity’s brutal side.

Poem Analysis

In the first stanza in the line 1 to 3, which sounds: "I shall begin by learning to throw; the knife, first at trees, until it sticks in the trunk and quivers every time;" depicts how Donald Baker portrays the beginning of greed development, which is curiosity. Curiosity does not only lead to a positive way, but it may also lead to unbearable excitement after knowing something new in our grasp. The curiosity that showed in this stanza is the condition when the persona of the poem tries to learn to throw knives. The point of curiosity in this poem is shown when the persona tries to master his throwing skill. The persona threw knives to the tree continuously until it perfectly hit the part of the tree as he desired.

The following stanza, stanza 2, shows the growth or change in this person's method of learning. The first step of his training is throwing the knife freely into a tree while he stand still on the ground, then continued from a chair using only his wrist "at a thing on the ground", and lastly on the moving objects, which is "a pine cone swinging on twine", until he got around twice hit in his third attempt.

The third stanza involves him targeting a moving object. This indicates he would be inflicting harm on a living thing with his weapon of choice. With his means of weaponry defined we learn he still needed not only a moving target but a living one.

In stanza 4, this persona shows the greedy intention in the line "is a source of suet and bread crumbs". This line is a symbolization of the persona's ignorance about the effect of his act by killing this bird mercilessly. The word "teaching" here doesn't exactly mean the process of attending to one's needs and making specific interventions to help them learn particular things. Ironically, teaching in this poem is a strategy of the persona to win the birds' trust. He taught the birds how to find food and eat, but in the end killed them. He tried to be a bigger person by being a good person in the birds' point of view, but then, he turned his back to them very fast. The strategy of "teaching" was a real example of manipulation to feed his greediness. Just like any other addictive behavior, greediness craving has to be continually fed, which means that persona will frequently lie, or manipulate situations.

Next, on stanza 5 and 6, the poet depicts how the persona killed the bird by using bread crumbs as the bait. The bait was then placed on the pine tree, then this man scattered them and waited for the right bird to eat the bait. From these two stanzas, we can see how greedy this persona could be. He rather threw the bread crumbs and hoped for a bird to eat his bait where he could use the bread crumbs instead. The aspect of greed is where people want to have something more than they have now, so he wanted to kill a bird instead of using the supply he had, which was bread crumbs to sharpen his knife skills. Another possibility about what this persona did was killing some birds for the sake of the entertainment, which is still categorized as human greed towards innocent creatures.

In stanza 7, the poet shows ambition of the persona to rejoin the human race by killing some birds. He showed his superiority, and his greed to be respected as a modern man. Ambition and greed have a correlation where greed leads the persona to fully pursue his ambition.

Stanza 8 shows that the persona was proud of what he did and did not regret the atrocities he had made. He even named it "Audubon Crucifix". Audubon is a zoologist who studied birds, and crucifix is the symbol of Christianity and reminds everyone of the death and resurrection of Christ. It serves as a reminder of God's sacrifice of his only Son so that humanity may have salvation. Quoting from samedaypapers.me: "Through various examples in history he validates this unnecessary crucifix. "A Formal Application" rejoins the human race by immortalizing the importance of death." From the quotation, we can see a connection between this symbolization with the poem which shows us about a human greed intention by killing the bird without mercy. By this symbolization, the poet wanted to tell the reader how brutality of this persona obeys his greed led him to exploitation of animals. Another thing to consider is the fact that "Audubon Crucifix" is insulting for Audubon. His love for birds being free in nature is great and yet the persona painting him a gruesome death of a bird. However, this name is euphemism since it is an indirect word which does not make most people think of a barbaric murder of a bird by sharp knife through the betrayal of a human.

The last stanza, stanza 9, contains the word pious which relates to religion by referring to his title as holy. The persona tried to build an image that what he did to the bird was not a bad thing and commendable. He tried to make his violence seemed like a thing that can be accepted by society and religion. On the other hand, the word "pleasing" clarifies his brutality and barbaric action which disappointed humanity. Then he adds three examples of dramatic violence. The first of which is Arbeit Macht Frei, an ironic motto for the holocaust meaning work brings freedom. This phrase appear in the gate of Auschwitz, a concentration camp ran by Nazi in Poland. The second is Molotov cocktail, a weapon made of a glass bottle containing petrol, with a soaked rag around the neck of the bottle. This weapon was oftenly used in World War 2 due to its ease of produce and use. The last one is Enola Gay, the plane which was responsible for the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan.

The usage of time signals in the whole poem, such as begin; until; first; next; finally; shows the

progress that the persona made. It strengthened the perception of greediness since he did not want to accept how he is now and always wanted to be stronger by upgrading his skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Donald W. Baker was a soldier in World War II as an aerial navigator serving in both Europe and Asia. As the one who has seen the calamity of World War II, Donald W. Baker likely wants to give his thoughts about the horror of World War II. He portrayed human greed in the poem as the persona who hunted a bird. This poem basically is an analogy, how a human wanted to rejoin to become a modern man with showing his skills to kill a certain bird. When we compare this poem to what happened in World War II, it would make sense if this poem is an analogy, where Donald W. Baker compares the soldiers in the battlefield who show their “skills” in order to rejoin humanity (modern man or highly honored man) with a person who shows his skills to be admitted by killing a certain bird. Furthermore, both the soldier and the persona in the poem, together want to achieve this “rejoin humanity” concept with everything they had, which indicated their greed to be honored with the “modern human” or honored man achievement. Lastly, this poem is likely to tell the audience how humans can be blinded by greed and ambition in tandem, to reach a certain goal with everything they have without considering the effect of their acts.

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