

Poetry
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Lecture No. 20
George Herbert

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George Herbert (1592-1633)



- Historical and Literary Context
- George Herbert
- Shape poetry
- “Easter Wings” and “The Altar”
- “The Collar”
- Analysis
- A Nautical Reading



If John Donne is the Chief of the Metaphysical Poetry School, George Herbert is a chief follower of this metaphysical school of poetry. He was a good friend of John Donne. We will see the historical context and literary context which shaped the poetry of George Herbert. Actually, George Herbert became seriously interested in a concept called ‘Shape Poetry.’ He took care to print his poems in certain shapes about which he wrote poems. For example, “Easter Wings” and “The Altar.” In this lecture, we will spend more time with his well-known poem “The Collar.” We will analyze it using linguistic and rhetorical strategies and then finally offer a nautical reading that is some knowledge of this sailing, marine travel we will use for understanding this poem “The Collar.”

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Historical Context



- Persecution of Puritans
- The Pilgrim Fathers and Mayflower ship to America in 1620
- Change of monarch in 1625
- A anti-parliament King Charles I
- The English Civil Wars (1642-1648)
- **William Laud** (1573-1645)
Archbishop of Canterbury (1633-45)
Aggressive promotion of Catholic rites and symbols
- The Bishop and the King executed in 1645 and 1649, respectively



The historical context of George Herbert and Donne and others is really interesting for us now to know many things that happened. It was a time of persecution of the puritans, a group of puritans called the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ went to America in 1620 with that ship called ‘Mayflower.’ We have the change of monarchy in 1625. The new changed Government became Anti-Parliament that means, the king Charles first did not care for the members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

It led to, the Civil Wars including the Bishop Wars, that is, the source of the battle is religious freedom and also democratic aspiration of the people. One of the reasons for unrest among Protestants is this Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 to 45 called William Laud. He was aggressive in promoting Catholic rites and rituals including visual symbols in Churches across England. He was also instrumental in forcing Scotland to follow these Roman Catholic practices but, people did not like and so, the bishops, this bishop William Laud and the king were executed in 1645 and 1649 respectively.

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Literary Context



- **Magdalen Herbert:** Herbert's mother; a patron scholars and poets, including John Donne
- Devotional poetry
- Francis Quarles (1592-1644): English poet known for *Emblem, Divine and Moral* (1634)
- Jacob Cats (1577-1660) a Dutch Poet, *Moral Emblems*
- Jonson and Donne were popular at the court.
- Herbert and Vaughan: Welsh (Catholic) poets did not have much chance to grow during the Commonwealth



It is quite interesting to see Magdalen Herbert, Herbert's mother a patron of scholars and poets including John Donne. John Donne was able to some extent to survive much more happily than George Herbert. Herbert and many other were writing devotional poetry at this time. Some of these poems are called Emblems two writers of this time promoted this poem called Emblem poetry. Francis Quarles in England and Jacob Cats, a Dutch poet; they were responsible for popularizing this Emblem poetry at this time.

Johnson that is Ben Johnson and John Donne were also popular at the court. But we have two other metaphysical poets George Herbert and Henry Vaughan. They are from this Welsh background, that is, they are catholic poets and they did not have much chance to grow in this predominantly protestant society or even later at this time of the Commonwealth.

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George Herbert (1592-1669)



- Cambridge educated
- Donne's friend and admirer
- Member of Parliament from Montgomery (1624)
- Disillusioned with worldly life after some attempts
- Just before three years of his death he was appointed a rector at Bemerton
- Noted for intense spiritual conflicts
- *The Temple* (1633) published posthumously
- Influenced Vaughan, Crashaw, and other poets
- Pictorial printing of "The Altar" and "Easter Wings"
- Poem for study: "The Collar"



George Herbert was educated in Cambridge University. He was a friend and admirer of John Donne. He became a member of parliament from one Constituency called Montgomery . But then he was disillusioned with the worldly life after making some attempts to join the mainstream. Just before 3 years of his death, he got this chance to become a rector at Bemerton a rural area far away from this city life.

George Herbert was noted for the kind of intense spiritual conflicts which we will see later in Hopkins. Herbert's poem "The Temple" was published posthumously after his death. Herbert influenced Vaughan, Crashaw, and many other poets of his time. His chief contribution is to this pictorial printing of "The Alter" and "Easter Wings" and many other poems in his book 'The Temple.' The poem that we have chosen for discussion is "The Collar." Let us see this poem now.

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Easter Wings

LORD, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victory:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.



As an example of Shape Poetry, we have ‘Easter Wings’ we need not read this our interest is to show you how the poem is shaped like Wings.

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The Altar.

A broken **A L T A R**, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.
A **H E A R T** alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name.
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed **S A C R I F I C E** be mine,
And sanctifie this **A L T A R** to be thine.



The next poem is ‘The Alter.’ The Alter as we have in a Church is presented to us. The poem deals with the Alter and it is printed or the shape of alter is brought into the poem itself.

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“The Collar” - I

- I struck the board, and cried, “No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
5. Loose as the wind, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?
10. Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.

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Now, we can move on to the poem for study. This poem has a number of lines in one group. We have divided this poem into several sections for sake of our discussion for our reading. Section 1 or the poet cries;

“I struck the board, and cried “No more,

I will abroad!

What? shall I ever sigh and pine?

My lines and life are free, free as a road,

5. Loose as the wind, and large as store,

Shall I be still in suit?

Have I no harvest but a thorn,

To let me blood, and not restore

What I have lost with cordial fruit?

10. Sure there was wine

Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn

Before my tears did drown it.”

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“The Collar” - II



- Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it,
15. No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
20. On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
25. And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.



Section 2,

“Is the year only lost to me?

Have I no bays to crown it,

15. No flowers, no garlands gay, all blasted?

All wasted?

Not so, my heart, but there is fruit,

And thou hast hands,

Recover all thy sigh-blown age,

20. On double pleasures; leave thy cold dispute

Of what is fit and not, forsake thy cage,

Thy rope of sands,

Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee,

Good cable to enforce and draw,

25. And be thy law,

While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.”

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“The Collar” - III



- Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;
30. He that forbears
To suit and serve his need
Deserves his load.”
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
35. Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied *My Lord.*



Section 3,

- “Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call I thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;
30. He that forbears,
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.”
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
35. Methought I heard one calling, Child!
And I replied my lord.”

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Leading Questions



1. What is the pun intended in the title?
2. Why does the speaker cry out?
3. Why does the speaker feel free and yet constrained?
4. Why does he think about the fruit?
5. What severe loss does the speaker feel?
6. How does he assert his own will?
7. Where does the voice come from?
8. How does the poem move from rejection (rebellion) to acceptance (obedience)?



The Collar is a poem of 36 lines with 3 sections we have divided for our sake for discussion. We have some leading questions which will enable us to understand the poem and appreciate it. What is a pun intended in the title 'The Collar?' Why does the speaker cry out? Why does the speaker feel free and yet constrained? Why does he think about the fruit? What severe loss does the speaker feel? There is something which is troubling the speaker. How does he assert his own will? Where does the voice come from? And finally, how does the poem move from rejection that is rebellion to acceptance that is obedience saying my lord.?

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Thematic Contrast



- Faith and Doubt
- Freedom and Restriction
- Rebellion and Obedience
- Frustration and Fulfilment
- Anger and Acceptance
- Man and God



We have a thematic contrast within two major ideas in this poem. The poet is actually, in conflict; conflict between faith and doubt, should he follow the path of God or should he follow the path of the world? Should he have his freedom or be constrained by the scriptural or Church practices? Should he rebel against God and follow his own ways of life or obey God and serve God? What happens to a person when he is frustrated? There is no question of joy at all. But, then at the end an element of fulfilment comes when the anger of the poet subsides and then he accepts God. This is a poem that deals with the relationship between man and God. We have several shades, several levels of our relationship with God.

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Poetic Devices



- **Irony:** rebellion and obedience
- **Symbol:** cage, restriction as freedom in 17th century
- **Metaphor:** collar, harvest, cage
- **Rhetorical question:** Shall I be still in suit?
- **Simile:** free as the road,/ Loose as the wind, as large as store.
- **Pun:** collar, fruit
- **Paradox:** rope of sands; freedom



A number of poetic devices can be found in this poem as well. Irony is chief one. At the beginning the poet rebels against God but, then at the end he accepts. He need not have rebelled against God at all. But then, his heart did not allow his to keep quiet. He feels constrained by The Collar that chain. He feels chained to one particular way of life, that is, Christian way of life; he wants to be free.

We have the symbol of cage, restraining the freedom of people in seventeenth century and that is well indicated through this Collar as well. The metaphor of Collar, harvest, cage, all play together to convey that if you are confined to religious way of life, you will not be able to have or enjoy the fruits of material world.

So, he asks a Rhetorical question shall I be still in suit and confine myself avoid all the pleasures of life? He says, no at the beginning but then, later on he accepts. Through these similes free as the road, he considers himself free. He considers himself loses the wind as

large as store. Why should he be confined to this Church and one particular way of life? We have a pun on this word Collar. Collar is that which we have use in a dress and also the Collar that is used to chain animals.

We have again a pun on fruit, fruit the result, the result of life, the fruit of worldly life and the fruit of spiritual life. The paradox is well exemplified through rope of sands. How do you build a rope of sands? how do you have freedom in a confined society? that is the question George Herbert asks. Finally, he accepts.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** Variable and yet some pattern can be seen:
 - Wild, child; word, lord
- **Rhythm:** sudden and jerky
- **Irregular line lengths:** 4, 6, 8, and 10 syllables
 - Line 14; 7 syllables;
 - “Have I no bays to crown it”
 - Line 16: 3 syllables; “All wasted”
- Rapid discordant movement from line 1-36.
- From restlessness to rest at the end.
- **Meter:** Iambic di, tri, tetra, and pentameter



When we come to rhyme, rhythm and meter, we notice that the rhyme is variable. However, we can find some pattern. For example, in words like wild, child, word, lord. The rhythm of this poem is jerky. We do not find this rhythm slow gradual movement. There are irregular line lengths like 4 syllables, 6 syllables, 8 syllables and 10 syllables indicating the conflict experienced by the poet. In line number 14 we have 7 syllables, the example is, “have I no base to crown it”.

In line number 16 we have 3 syllables “all wasted” so, up and down movement or probably something like the waves coming to the shore and going into the sea. We have a rapid discordant movement from first line to the last line, that is, 1 to 36. This rapid movement of lines, the conflicting experiences, emotions expressed by the poet all indicate a movement from a state of restlessness to a state of rest at the end. The meter is Iambic but then, we have different lines. So, di, tri, tetra, and pentameter we have. That is, 2 feet, 3 feet, 4 feet and 5 feet we have in this poem.

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Overall Impression



- The frustrated speaker cries out to express his anger against god.
- The insistent questions reveal his anger.
- He thinks he has freedom to assert himself and reap the fruit of his labor.
- The irregular rhyme and lines indicate his quest for freedom restlessly.
- He builds up a faith in himself and gets ready to go out to the world.
- He hears a voice saying “Child” and then he says “My Lord.”
- The **wild child** melts into a **mild child** without needing words.



On the whole, Herbert’s poem, ‘The Collar’ presents to us a frustrated speaker, crying out, expressing his anger against God. This anger, can be found through the insistent questions that he asks throughout the poem. The speaker thinks he has freedom and he can assert himself and reap the fruit of his labor, living his life. The irregular rhyme and lines indicate the speaker’s quest for freedom restlessly. He builds up a faith in himself as against faith in God and gets ready to go out to the world and enjoy the benefits of the world. As he cries out raves, he hears a voice saying, ‘Child’ and then the poet replies ‘my lord.’

So, paradoxically we find the wild child, the whining child meting into a mild sweet child without needing words at the end keeping quiet, becoming pacified.

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A Nautical (Marine) Reading



- The speaker’s wish for a worldly voyage (Levitt and Johnson)
1. **Collar**: a principal of the main mast
 2. **Board**: the deck of the vessel
 3. **Road**: an offshore anchorage
 4. **Store**: ship’s storehouse
 5. **Suit**: a spread of canvas, a suit of sails
 6. **Bays**: ports
 7. **Garlands**: a wreath of ribbons festooning whaling ships



An interesting nautical reading we have for this particular poem. If you want to know more about it, you can read the article by Levitt and Johnston. The whole poem is about the speaker's wish for a worldly voyage. He wants to go out to the world and enjoy himself. So, throughout the poem, we have nautical or marine or sailing images. It begins with The Collar. Collar, we said is the dress that could prevent the person from moving out of the Church but, in the context of this sailing it is said, Collar refers to a principal of the main mast.

Next, we have board. It is not only striking the board or a table. It is the deck of the vessel that is a ship. Road here is not just one road that can take you anywhere. In the context of sailing, road is an offshore anchorage where, a ship can be harbored for a while. Store is not just worldly store. In the context of nautical reading, we have a ship's storehouse.

Similarly, suit need not refer to dress alone it can refer to a spread of canvas, a suit of sails which govern the movement of the ship. Bays can refer to ports where ships can stay. Garlands also can refer to a wreath of ribbons festooning whaling ships. So, the whole context of this poem is 'sailing' that is what Levitt and Johnston argue and then proceed further.

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A Nautical (Marine) Reading

8. **The hands:** the crew members
 9. **Cage:** a beacon to the harbor signaling a navigable channel
 10. **Rope of sands:** boundaries of the land
 11. **Away:** aweigh – to raise the ship's anchor for setting sail
 12. **Death's head:** fear prompting but exchanging it for a banner
- "The Collar" is a poem of spiritual storm and calm.
 - Two ways of life: action and contemplation



The hands, refer to the crew members of the ship. Similarly, cage can mean a beacon to the harbor signaling a navigable channel. Rope of sands also could indicate the boundaries of the land. Away play with meaning can refer to raising the ship's anchor for setting sail. The last one death's head can indicate the kind of fear that can prompt but also exchange it for a banner that is showing we are ready to go.

Thus, we see The Collar is a poem of spiritual storm and also calm. We can notice two ways of life; one is the way of the world another is the way of the Church. One is action another is contemplation; the poet is drawn towards action that is where he feels the conflict with his own life of contemplation.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- George Herbert
- Shape poetry
- "Easter Wings" and "The Altar"
- "The Collar"
- Analysis
- A Nautical Reading



In summary, we can recall that the historical and literacy context in which George Herbert was writing, that is, devotional poetry or shape or emblem poetry enabled him to write poems using certain shapes like, Wings in Easter Wings or Alter in the Alter. The Collar, also deals with a spiritual experience, a spiritual conflict and this is contrasted with sailing into the world though that world is not free from conflicts at all.

Thus, a nautical reading of the poem tells us, the poet's interest in travelling out into the world or sailing out into the world but, we have to realize that whatever way we may choose each world has its own problems if we accept and choose to live life as it is then it is fine for George Herbert, the poet.

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We have some references as I said you could read the article by Levitt and Johnston from this journal studies in philology and enjoy the fruits of the nautical reading. Thank you.