

Poetry
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Lecture No. 21
Henry Vaughan

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Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Henry Vaughan
- "The Retreat"
- "The World"
- Analysis
- Critical Questions



Hello, in this course on poetry as part of metaphysical school of poetry, we are discussing 4 major poets, John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvell. We have already discussed two poets, Donne and Herbert. Now, we will deal with two poems of Henry Vaughan, another major metaphysical poet who was born in 1621 and passed away in 1695.

The same historical literary context one shares with Donne and George Herbert and also Marvell. However, we will look into some specifics and then see how he was able to become a poet and then look at two poems one is, "The Retreat" and another is "The World." We will pay attention, more attention to 'The World' and then raise a few critical questions about this poem which are available in the literature on Vaughan's poetry.

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Historical and Literary Context



- Rising tensions between Anglican Royalists and Protestant Parliamentarians
- Conflict of power
- The English Civil War (1642-1648)
- King Charles I beheaded in 1649
- The Commonwealth
- The Royalists and Anglicans were attacked and divested of power, e.g. Bishop King, Thomas Vaughan (Henry Vaughan's brother)
- Metaphysical and Religious poetry



As we noted similar historical and literary contexts are found in the case of Henry Vaughan as well. We found rising tensions between Anglican royalists, protestant parliamentarians. This is primarily for power, who wants to have more power and this power struggle led to the English civil war from 1642 to 1648. At this time, we have this king, King Charles I, because of his conflicting relationship with the parliament he was found to be guilty of neglect of duty and then he was beheaded in 1649. The commonwealth took on the responsibility of governing the society.

However, we find the tensions between the Royalists and Anglicans continuing and taking shape in many different forms. When the Royalists and Anglicans were attacked what happened was, they were removed from their power of position. For example, we have Bishop King. He was a priest but he was removed from his priesthood. Similarly, Thomas Vaughan, a brother of Henry Vaughan was also removed from his parish. And this kind of situation has led to what we call metaphysical poetry and a major part of this metaphysical poetry is religious poetry, devotional poetry perhaps questioning the right way of life. What is this way of life? when we have so much of conflict between two groups of people worshipping the same faith that is Christianity.

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Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)



- Herbert's friend and follower
- A mystic, identified himself as a Siluerist (Wales)
- Known for his religious poetry
- Belief in childhood and innocence like Wordsworth
- Faith in sympathetic bonds between microcosm and macrocosm
- *Silex Scintillans* (1650) expanded in 1655
 - "Friends Departed"
 - "The Retreat"
 - "The World"



Herbert, we noted was a friend and admirer of John Donne. Now we notice that Henry Vaughan was a friend and follower of George Herbert. Like Herbert, Henry Vaughan was a mystic, he identified himself as a Siluerist, that is, a place from Wales and he identified with his own place. He was majorly known for his religious poetry and we observe that he had some faith in childhood and innocence like what we have in Wordsworth later on.

This sympathetic bonds between the microcosm and the macrocosm is something noticeable in Henry Vaughan. His collection of poems is called 'Silex Scintillans' published in 1650 and it was later on expanded and published in 1655. Three poems are well known from Henry Vaughan, 'Friends Departed,' 'The Retreat' and 'The World.' We will pay some attention to The Retreat and we will examine The World in more detail.

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The Retreat -I



- Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my **angel infancy**.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
5. Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought;
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space,
10. Could see a glimpse of His bright face;



Here is The Retreat, we have divided the poem into different sections for the sake of convenience. Let us start with section 1,

- “Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race.
5. Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white , celestial thought;
When yet I had not walked about
A mile or two from my first love.
And looking back, at that short space,
10. Could see a glimpse of His bright face;”

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The Retreat -II

- When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
15. Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
20. Bright shoots of everlastingness.



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Section 2,

- “When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity.
15. Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had a black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
20. Bright shoots of everlastingness.”

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The Retreat -III

- O, how I long to travel back,
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain
Where first I left my glorious train,
25. From whence th' enlightened spirit sees
That shady city of palm trees.
But, ah! my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.
Some men a forward motion love;
30. But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came, **return**.

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Section 3,

- “O how I long to travel back,
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain
Where first I left my glorious train,
25. From whence th' enlightened spirit sees
That shady city of palm trees
But ah! my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.
Some men a forward motion love;
30. But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came, return.”

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Thinking about “The Retreat”



- A poem of 32 lines anticipating the Romantic poets exploring their origin into a happy childhood and the pure life before birth.
- Human beings, Society, Nature, Soul, and God
- Not a military retreat but a spiritual retreat from the world into a personal dialogue with one's own original soul, God
- Possibility of seeing God and enjoying the company and grace of God
- Our attraction to the corrupt world may delay our step towards God.
- But there is no forward exit but happy return to God with realization of one's pure soul.



Let us spend some time thinking about ‘The Retreat’ and then move on to the poem we have chosen for discussion that is The World. This is a poem of 32 lines anticipating the romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge exploring their own origin into a happy childhood and the pure life even before birth. Human beings, they have some connection with the society and the relationship between the two is understood in terms of the connection with nature and this relationship is further extended to God through soul. This is a kind of microchasm and macrocosm that we noticed in Henry Vaughan and later romantic poets.

This poem is not exactly about a military retreat withdrawing from the forward position. It is actually a spiritual retreat from the world into a personal dialogue with one's own original soul, perhaps something like God. There is a possibility of seeing God and enjoying the company and grace of God. “Remember I saw the eternity the other night” Herbert declared. Henry Vaughan also shares similar spiritual connection with God.

Our attraction to the world, particularly the corrupt world may delay our own steps toward God but there is no forward exit for Henry Vaughan as he realizes but a happy return to God with the realization of his own pure soul.

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The World -I

- I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
5. Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.
The doting lover in his quaintest strain
Did there complain;
10. Near him, his lute, his fancy, and his flights,
Wit's sour delights,
With gloves, and knots, the silly snares of pleasure,
Yet his dear treasure
All scatter'd lay, while he his eyes did pour
15. Upon a flow'r.



Here is The World, we have here again divided the poem into several sections, section 1,

- “I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
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And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
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Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
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Yet his dear treasure
All scatter'd lay, while he his eyes and did pour
Upon a flow'r.”

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The World - II

- The darksome statesman hung with weights and woe,
Like a thick midnight-fog mov'd there so slow,
He did not stay, nor go;
Condemning thoughts (like sad eclipses) scowl
20. Upon his soul,
And clouds of crying witnesses without
Pursued him with one shout.
Yet digg'd the mole, and lest his ways be found,
Work'd under ground,
25. Where he did clutch his prey; but one did see
That policy;
Churches and altars fed him; perjuries
Were gnats and flies;
It rain'd about him blood and tears, but he
30. Drank them as free.



Section 2,

- “The darksome statesman hung with weights and woe,
Like a thick midnight-fog mov'd there so slow,
He did not stay nor go;
Condemning thoughts (like sad eclipses) scowl
20. Upon his soul,
And clouds of crying witnesses without
Pursued him with one shout.
Yet digg'd the mole, and lest his ways be found,
Work'd under ground,
25. Where he did clutch his prey; but one did see
That policy;
Churches and altars fed him; perjuries
Were nets and flies;
It rain'd about him blood and tears, but he
30. Drank them as free.”

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The World - II

The fearful miser on a heap of rust
Sate pining all his life there, did scarce trust
His own hands with the dust,
Yet would not place one piece above, but lives
35. In fear of thieves;
Thousands there were as frantic as himself,
And hugg'd each one his pelf;
The downright epicure plac'd heav'n in sense,
And scorn'd pretence,
40. While others, slipp'd into a wide excess,
Said little less;
The weaker sort slight, trivial wares enslave,
Who think them brave;
And poor despised Truth sate counting by
45. Their victory.



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45. Their victory.”

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The World - IV

- Yet some, who all this while did weep and sing,
And sing, and weep, soar'd up into the ring;
But most would use no wing.
O fools (said I) thus to prefer dark night
50. Before true light,
To live in grots and caves, and hate the day
Because it shews the way,
The way, which from this dead and dark abode
Leads up to God,
55. A way where you might tread the sun, and be
More bright than he.
But as I did their madness so discuss
One whisper'd thus,
"This ring the Bridegroom did for none provide,
60. But for his bride."



Section 4,

- “Yet some, who all this wild did weep and sing,
And sing, and weep, soar'd up into the ring;
But most would use no wing.
O fools (said I) thus to prefer dark night
50. Before true light,
To live in grots and caves, and hate the day
Because it shews the way.
The way, which from this dead and dark abode
Leads up to God,
55. A way where you might tread the sun, and be
More bright than he.
But as I did their madness so discuss
One whisper'd thus,
The ring the Bridegroom did for none provide,
60. But for his bride.”

You would have noticed through the highlights or highlighted words certain significant aspects of this poem by now.

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Questions

1. How does the poem begin?
2. Why does the poet contrast Eternity with Time?
3. How does the poet illustrate the different worlds?
4. What do the lover, the statesman, the miser and the epicure have in common?
5. How do the people of this world treat Truth?
6. How does the poet compare the human world with the divine world?
7. How does the poem end?
8. Why does the poet bring in the bridegroom and the bride at the end?
9. What do the rings in the opening and closing lines do?
10. What is the attitude of the speaker to the world?



We have a number of questions which will help us understand this poem much better. These questions are part of the oppositional strategy that we use to understand and appreciate the poem. How does a poem begin? Why does a poet contrast eternity with time? How does the poet illustrate the different worlds that he finds around him? What do the lover, the statesman, the miser and the epicure have in common?

How do the people of this world treat truth? You can recall he uses a word 'despise,' people despise truth. How does the poet compare the human world with the divine world? How does the poem end? Why does the poet bring in the bridegroom and the bride at the end of the poem? What do the rings, ring in the opening and ring at the end have in common? or what do they do? What is the attitude of the speaker to the world? From the poem you will understand the poet looks at two different kinds of world, one is this worldly life, material life and other is the spiritual life.

The poet drawn to the spiritual life looks at this material life and finds 'oh, so sad' these people are despising truth, despising God, going away from God, thinking about themselves, forgetting another world, the better world.

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Organization

- 60 lines: four stanzas 15 lines each
- **Structure:** three parts
 - I – The Way of God
 - II – The Ways of the World
 - a. the doting lover (8)
 - b. the darksome statesman (16)
 - c. the fearful miser (31)
 - d. the downright epicure (38)
 - III – The poet, the world, and God
- Organizing principle: Bridal mysticism



The poem has a wonderful structure. It is organized very well as you can see the poem has 60 lines and they are organized into 4 stanzas of 15 lines each. But there are three parts that we can see. The first part dealing with the way of God, the second part dealing with the ways of the world. Within the ways of the world, we find some pictures of the doting lover, the darksome statesman, the fearful miser, the downright epicure and other people.

At last, we find the poet in the world, trying to move away from the world to God through one concept in poetry called Bridal mysticism. We have great examples in Walt Whitman and also Rabindranath Tagore. So, the whole organizing principle of this poem can be called Bridal mysticism. The poet has a dialogue with God and he wants to reach God.

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Thematic Contrast

- The way of god and the way of the world
- Eternity and Time
- Light and dark
- Day and night
- Bridegroom and bride
- The human and the divine



We have a thematic contrast as we have already indicated between two different ways of life. One is Godly life; another is this worldly life. This Godly life is about eternity and this worldly life is about temporal life. One gives light, another gives darkness, one is day, another is night. God is the groom and the poet, the speaker, considers himself to be a bride for God. So, we have this intense relationship between the human poet and the divine God in this poem. But there is always this problem of this worldly attraction, we are attracted to the world and forget about our own origin, our own divine source.

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Poetic Devices

- **Simile:** Like a great ring (2), Like a vast shadow (6), Like a thick midnight-fog (17), like sad eclipses (19)
- **Transferred Epithet:** sad eclipses (19)
- **Metaphor:** the ring, clouds of crying witnesses (21), clutches his prey (25)
- **Personification:** Eternity, Time, Truth
- **Blazon:** the doting lover (8), the statesman (16), the miser (31), the epicure (38)
- **Chiasmus:** weep and sing, / And sing, and weep (46-47)
- **Paronomasia:** the way, the way (53-54)
- **Symbol:** the ring (2) and the wedding ring (59)



A number of poetic devices are found in this particular poem. We have simile, transferred epithet, metaphor, personification, another thing called blazon that is cataloguing, listing and chiasmus, paronomasia and the symbol. We have a good number of examples for simile like a great ring. The poem actually begins with this ring, ring of light. We also have in contrast to this light we have like a vast shadow, like a thick midnight fog, like sad eclipses. In these sad eclipses, we have this notion of transferred epithet, eclipses themselves are not sad but the idea of sadness is attributed to them.

Metaphor, we have in the form of ring, clouds of crying witnesses and clutches his prey. When it comes to personification, we find eternity, time, truth these are all personified to be something great associated with God. The listing we start from the doting lover, the statesman, move on to the miser and last, at last we have the epicure. The chiasmic structure that we have in this poem is weep and sing and then you can see sing and weep or interchanged and sing and weep. This is what happens in life, this repetition of the word or phrase the way, the way here is a special repetition. First the way ends one line and then then

second way begins the next line. That is where we have this paronomasia. The symbol of the ring connected with the wedding ring, the ring showing light and the wedding ring connecting the poet with God.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** triplets and couplets (1-3, 16-18, 31-33, 46-48)
- **Feminine rhyme:** double and single syllable words rhyme alternately; provide, bride; be, victory
- **Eye rhyme:** scowl and soul; abode, god
- **Variable feet:** 2, 3, 4, 5
 - Iambic di-, tri-, tetra-, and penta-meter
- **Alliteration:** silly snares (12), weights and woe (16) dead and dark (53), etc.



When we pay attention to the rhyme, rhythm and meter of this poem, we notice something significant in this poem. We have a number of triplets in this poem, in line 1 to 3, 16 to 18, 31 to 33 and 46 to 48. The rest, we have couplets. Some rhyme, strong rhyme we have suggesting perhaps the strong possibility of uniting with God. We have feminine rhyme, eye rhyme. In the case of feminine rhyme, we find double syllables and single syllables rhyming alternately like provide, bride, be, victory.

There are some eye rhymes as well. They look like rhymes like scowl and soul, abode and God. When it comes to the meter, we find that, there are many variations. We have diameter, trimester, tetrameter and pentameter, that is a foot, that is a measure. Generally, most of these lines are within this iambic structure or iambic measure. We have interesting alliterations like silly snares, weight and woe dead and dark contributing to the powerful impact of the poem on the reader.

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Overall Impression

- The speaker appears to be familiar with the world of god and human beings and chooses to unite with the bridegroom god as a bride.
- It is a religious/ mystical and metaphysical poem that crosses the different ways and levels of life effortlessly to suggest the possibility of union with god through the ritual of surrender and devotion.
- The poet can devote himself to Herbert and yet remain Vaughan, a Welsh, Anglican royalist in an intolerant individualistic, urban, middle class, and mercantile Protestant society.



To form a general opinion about this poem, we have certain ideas. The speaker of this poem appears to be familiar with the World of God and also the World of human beings. He chooses to unite with God as a bridegroom and he himself as bride. It is a religious or mystical poem in the tradition of metaphysical poetry. It crosses the different ways and levels of life effortlessly to suggest the possibility of union with God through the ritual of surrender and devotion.

When the poet can devote himself to his own friend Herbert who was committed to God and yet one could remain a poet his own individual poet as a Welsh poet, as an Anglican royalist in an intolerant individualistic urban middle-class, mercantile, protestant society. On the one hand Vaughan is devoted to his friend on the other hand he is devoted to God. But these two paths merge in their pursuit of God.

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Critical Questions



1. Is Vaughan's "The World" the best or worst poem?

2. Is it a poor imitation of George Herbert?

• **General estimate:**

The first 7 lines are fine.

The rest from 8 – 60 do not have the poetic power.

• **Kermode, Simmonds, Chambers, and others** argue that "The World" is certainly a masterpiece.

It is not witty like Donne's but serious.

Its images are well developed coherently.

It is an original poem, not mere poor imitation.



We have some critical questions on this particular poem. There are two questions, Is Vaughan's poem The World the best or worst poem? The second question is, Is this poem a poor imitation of George Herbert? So, we have critical opinions on the one hand we have the general estimate saying that, the first 7 lines are wonderful but the rest of the poem from line number 8 to 60 do not have the same poetic power that we have in the first 7 lines.

On the other hand, we have a group of poets like Kermode, Simmonds, Chambers and others who argue that The World is certainly a masterpiece of Henry Vaughan. Why do they say so? They have these arguments. It is not a witty poem like Donne's but it is a serious poem. Its images are well developed coherently throughout the poem. Finally, they say it is an original poem not just a poor imitation of George Herbert.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Henry Vaughan
- "The Retreat"
- The World
- Analysis
- Critical Questions



We have so far, examined the poems of Henry Vaughan specifically two poems: The Retreat and The World. We brought in the historical and literary context which shaped metaphysical poets and then brought in the life of Henry Vaughan as a devoted, committed, religious poet. In 'The Retreat' we find the poet retreating into himself, that is, going back in into himself and finding out his relationship with God.

The World also has similar pursuit, pursuit of uniting with God as a bride, unites with her bridegroom. The analysis of poetic devices, rhythm, rhyme and meter and also this oppositional strategy of thematic contrast, clearly shows that both poems are wonderful poems particularly The World. In spite of the critical questions raised by various scholars, we find The World to be a very interesting poem for us to think about.

Perhaps, today, we may not have that intensity of our relationship with God but then in our own moments sometimes at least there is a light coming into our life and that light may lead us to God or the origin of our own life. We have some references which may be useful to you.

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Reading Kermode's essay would be really enjoyable and beneficial, very insightful for you, thank you.