
An Analysis of the Poem The Thanksgiving by George Herbert

George Herbert's poem *The Thanksgiving* is a work of a deceptively simple construction. With its repetitive rhyme scheme, its stanzas flow easily and sound almost musical when read aloud. It is written concisely, and despite a few antiquated old English phrases, its content is not difficult to understand. A cursory reading of the poem would suggest that this is a dedication to the Christian faith through what appears to be the author's attempt to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ. Through a close reading of certain elements of the piece's composition, however, it emerges as an almost fatalist account of being a good Christian. *The Thanksgiving* is a poem that seeks to show the utter frustration and potential futility involved in being a follower of Christianity. Throughout the piece, Herbert possesses an unwavering and seemingly imprisoned dedication to the Christian faith, yet he is not equipped with the tools to adequately reciprocate the sacrifice that Jesus made for him and all other people.

With the title of *The Thanksgiving*, the reader likely begins with the expectation that this will be written in a candid and respectful tone. From the outset of the poem, it is evident that this desire to show thanks is the subject of a strong and paralyzing personal conflict. The first stanza of the poem exclaims the subject of its attention—"Oh King of grief!" As mentioned in the parenthetical, this is a title that, out of anyone, this figure deserves. Along with 'King' being capitalized in a Biblical fashion, the image of a grieving monarch seems to be a contradiction of terms, especially in recognition of the poem's publication in 1633. In a time of powerful autocratic figures that arguably suffered the least among men, this reference appears to be in deference to the King of the Jews—Jesus Christ. Herbert's personal struggle here seems to involve the inadequacy of the author's dedication to his God. Labeling him as the "King of wounds," Herbert has acknowledgement of the grief that Jesus Christ endured as a martyr for the sake of mankind, and conversely sees the failure of his attempts to match it. As he exclaims, in what way can one grieve for your plight and suffering, "Who in all grief preventest me?" For someone who made the ultimate sacrifice, he is not given the resources to show sorrow and esteem for what Jesus Christ did for him. *The Thanksgiving* may initially conflict with our traditional connotation of the phrase as an instance of collective respect (akin to the holiday), but only in the sense that this attempt to give thanks is of a more profound and individual intention.

The end of the poem is marked with both a sudden change in the outlook of the author that is indicated by a small break in the rhyme scheme of the previous body of the poem. From the first line of the poem through line 48, there is a simple rhyme scheme. In each pair of lines, the last word rhymes. In the final pair of lines, however, the words are reminiscent of one another, but do not rhyme as clearly as the previous lines: "Then for my passion – I will do for that -- / Alas, my God, I know not what." Though 'that' and 'what' bear a visual resemblance to one another, their pronunciation is close, but obviously different. In what began as a nicely sounding and orderly poem, *The Thanksgiving* ends in disharmony. When the rhyme is compared with the content of these stanzas, the stylistic choice made by Herbert is understandable. The beginning of the poem starts out in a cry out, questioning how to best show his commitment to Jesus and his martyrdom. From the tenth line, he begins to propose a variety of ways that he will live his life in deference to the Lord. These are first phrased in the form of a question, which reveal his

unease in making decisions that he is not entirely sure about. By line 17, he graduates to more declarative statements, showing that he is more confident about the manner in which he will live in a Christian way. The soaring fidelity that he has to his Lord and religion then climbs to its peak several lines short of the end, in which he will find love in the Bible and in doing so, will proclaim God as his savior. Despite all of these proclamations, however, his words and faith simply fall apart in the last line, as these images he painted were all part of an illusion. Though he is able to imagine and romanticize what an ideal relationship with God could be, it all disintegrates in the face of uncertainty, and with the doubt which he begins the poem of all these acts not being enough.

In *The Thanksgiving*, Herbert expresses the difficulty of being a Christian as shown by the fluctuation of emotions that he depicts throughout the poem. The poem articulates at both its beginning and end that as a believer in Christianity, one is left with an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy in prayer and a lack of knowledge in how to live as a Christian should. Herbert is moved to feelings of great passion and commitment for his faith through such images as Christ on the cross and passages from the Bible, but is stripped of this solace when he questions his ability to practice Christianity properly. Instead of functioning as a commendation of Christianity, the paralysis of Herbert shows how being Christian involves great personal struggle. Like the author, one cannot help but be moved by the power and devotion of Jesus Christ, but are unable to follow in the path of the Lord and be content with their choices in light of the overwhelming sacrifice upon which the religion is based. *The Thanksgiving* is not a denunciation of Christianity, but it does succeed in revealing the great disparity between its teachings of how to live properly and the life that human beings are capable of living. Though Herbert is still racked with uncertainty by the end of the poem, the poem functions as a suggestion that to live strictly by the idealized tenets of Christianity is beyond any man's capacity, both physically and psychologically.