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The Retreat

BY HENRY VAUGHAN

For B.A Part-1 (English Hons.) & Alternative English (50 mks.)

Text

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
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,
Could see a glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,

And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
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
Bright shoots of everlastingness.

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,
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;
But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came, return.

NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

During the 17th century a group of English Poets , described as Metaphysical Poets by late 18th century critic Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), reacted against the Elizabethan literary style and ideas. They rejected the conventional ideal of love held by Elizabethan poets and their indifference to real experience. Where the Elizabethans saw love as a romantic pleasure to be described in general terms the Metaphysicals attempted to analyse personal and intimate experiences of love on particular occasions. The emphasis was on the experience – things happening now, and so, immediacy was a particular characteristic of their poetry. They rebelled against accepted ideas and their themes were usually serious, and often satirical. Religion was a constant topic and the problems of the time were often reflected in the poetry, especially the religious issues. However, their poems were not aimed at a 'public' readership, but rather at the intellect of their own closely-knit group.

Besides John Donne who was the leader of the Metaphysical School of Poets, the names of George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan are worth mentioning. Henry Vaughan (1621 – 1695) was a Welsh metaphysical poet, author, translator and physician, who wrote in English. He is chiefly known for religious poetry contained in *Silex Scintillans*, published in 1650, with a second part in 1655. Vaughan's early poems, notably those published in the *Poems* of 1646 and *Olor Iscanus* of 1651, place him among the "Sons of Ben," in the company of other imitators of Ben Jonson, such as the Cavalier poets Sir William Davenant and Thomas Carew. His poetry from the late 1640s and 1650s, however, published in the two editions

of *Silex Scintillans* (1650, 1655), makes clear his extensive knowledge of the poetry of Donne and, especially, of George Herbert.

The major poetry of Vaughan, all religious in nature, was published in 1650 and 1655 in the two parts of *Silex scintillans* (*Sparkling Flint*). Some of the best poems in it are "The Morning Watch, " "The Retreat, " "Childhood, " "The Dawning, " and "Peace." He published more religious verse and prose in his later years.

Henry Vaughan's poem 'The Retreat' is about the loss of heavenly innocence experienced during childhood, and a desire to regain this lost state of 'angel infancy'. It 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.

"Happy those early days! when I

Shined in my angel infancy.

Before I understood this place..."

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.

"...Appointed for my second race,

Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought..."

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.

"..... 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..."

Thus, 'The Retreat' focuses on the double meaning of that word, 'retreat': both a place of refuge and the act of withdrawal. Childhood is viewed by Vaughan as a happy place, a world of innocence and bliss which the adult Vaughan has lost sight of. Vaughan talks of his mortal life as his 'second race', suggesting that our life on Earth follow on from a previous, heavenly existence which we enjoyed before our birth. In those early days of his life, Vaughan found it easy to fill his soul with 'a white, celestial thought': indeed, such heavenly thoughts were the only ones he was capable of having. Vaughan talks of Christ as his 'first love'. Vaughan says that he longs to travel back to those childhood years when he felt closer to God – in this respect, 'The Retreat' anticipates a nineteenth-century Romantic poem like Thomas Hood's 'I Remember, I Remember', especially its concluding lines (where Hood remarks that in adulthood he is farther off from heaven than when he was a boy).

Throughout 'The Retreat', Henry Vaughan refers to our (short) time on Earth, contrasting it with the eternity of heaven.

'*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. Vaughan being a Metaphysical Poet, uses extended metaphors to explore complex psychological, philosophical, and religious ideas. But there is also a delicate and careful deployment of language in 'The Retreat': look at how 'fancy' softly picks up on 'infancy' from three lines earlier, suggesting the light and carefree time of fancy that is our infancy.

'The Retreat' is almost proto-Romantic, evoking Thomas Hood and William Wordsworth among others, in its nostalgic vision of childhood as a time of innocence, bliss, and spiritual wholeness. Henry Vaughan may have written about looking backwards in 'The Retreat', but as this analysis has endeavoured to show, in a curious way this poem sees him looking forward to, or anticipating, a future movement in English literature.