

Henry Vaughan's "The Retreat": Critical Appreciation

SUMMARY

In the poem *The Retreat* Henry Vaughan deals with the loss of the heavenly glory experienced during the childhood and expresses a fanciful desire to get back that original stage. The theme, on the surface level, appears very simple; but going into the deeper we find that the poem is founded on the diverse European idealistic, religious and mystical and philosophical theories. On the socio-cultural level, the poem can be interpreted as a reflection of the urge for liberating the human psyche from the torments of conventions of civilisation. On the philosophical level, what Vaughan's says in the poem, tallies with Plato's theory of transmigration of the soul. But above all, the purpose of the poet here is didactic, and he has given to the poem a deep religious meaning.

Critical Appreciation

1. "Happy those early days...everlastingness". (ll. 1-20)

In these lines from the poem *The Retreat* the poet Henry Vaughan laments over the loss of his childhood vision and the fading away of the heavenly glory associated with that kind of vision. Not only that, he confesses how he has moved himself away from the glory by committing various sins of the body.

The poet begins the poem with an agonizing realization that he had been really happy in his childhood. The reason he cites is that at that time he had been in that period of life, which is marked of innocence and ignorance. At that time he only had in mind the memory of the ever-radiant supreme being, God. He feels that he was not far from God then, and that he could see His bright face from a distance. Not only that, during his childhood it was possible for him to see that reflection of the eternal glory of God in the transitory yet beautiful things of the world, like a sunlit cloudlet or flower. He confesses agonizingly that all that had happened long ago before he learnt the crooked ways of life and began committing all kinds of sins with all the senses.

On the philosophical level, what Vaughan's says in the poem, tallies with Plato's theory of anamnesis and transmigration of the soul. Plato said that before being transplanted into the human body, the human soul resides in the world of Ideas, of Beauty, Truth and

Goodness. But once transplanted into matter it forgets its previous existence in the gradual growing contacts with the material world. But the next moment the poet uses an image, "a white, Celestial thought", which derives its symbolism from Neo-Platonic mysticism and Christian mythology. Neo-Platonism explains the manifest material world as merely an illuminated illusion of a light from a single, ever-radiant divine source, God. The poet finds a spiritual recovery in the Platonic doctrine of Love: he finds the reflections of the Universal Beauty in the particular things of physical beauty. That is to say, by meditating on the particular he tries to graduate to the understanding of the Universal Beauty of God.

2. "O how I ...return"

In these lines from the poem *The Retreat* the poet Henry Vaughan makes a retrospection of the degeneration and degradation of his own personal life in contrast to what he had been during his childhood. The memory of that phase of life forces him to go back to that divine world, from which his soul, he believes, came to this world.

The poet comes to an agonizing realization that he had been really happy in his childhood. At that time he only had in mind the memory of the ever-radiant supreme being, God. He feels that he was not far from God then, and that he could see His bright face from a distance. Not only that, during his childhood it was possible for him to see that reflection of the eternal glory of God in the transitory yet beautiful things of the world, like a sunlit cloudlet or flower.

He confesses agonizingly that all that had happened long ago before he learnt the crooked ways of life and began committing all kinds of sins with all the senses. That is why he expresses his peculiar desire to take a backward motion in order to reach the source, that is, heaven from which he came. Like Moses, who was once granted one side of the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, the poet wants to go back to "That city of Palm trees" or heaven. Now, he feels that his soul, after remaining for a long time in this world and drinking too much to the material things of this world, is feeble. He knows he is unsteady, yet he firmly expresses his renewed conviction that he will be able to reach the original home when his body dissolves into dust.