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British Literature 6th
March 1, 1999

The Value of Life as Emphasized in “The Argument” and Other Poems

The author of these poems greatly values the experience of life, and enjoys realizing the intricate beauties of it. He loves nature, and he loves to describe its beauty in terms of it. He feels that life should be celebrated, because before long, we will die, and we will not have the time to realize and enjoy the beauty of life. The author explains these points in “The Argument.” In the first stanza he tells us he will sing of Nature. In the second, he tells us he will “write of youth.” In the third, he tells us he will “sing of times trans-shifting,” meaning he will tell us about the process of life, from youth to death. At the end of the last stanza, he tells us that he writes “of hell, I sing (and ever shall) / Of heaven...” Since the earth lies between heaven and hell, the author is essentially telling us that he will sing of the entire human experience, and shows us in his other poems how Nature, youth, and death are all important parts of life. By relating the other poems to “The Argument,” the first poem in the author’s book, we find evidence of the great emphasis the author places on realizing and enjoying the beauty of living.

In the first stanza, the author tells us that he will “sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers; / Of April, May, of June, and July flowers.” All of these things he will sing of are different features of Nature. The author seems to have a special feeling for Nature because he writes about it often in his other poems. In the first line of “Upon a Child that Died,” he describes the child as “a pretty bud,” telling us not to “stir / The earth that lightly covers her.” In another poem, “Upon Prue, His Maid,” the author tells us that from Prudence Baldwin’s “happy spark here let / Spring the purple violet.” The author tells us to “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” in “To the Virgins to Make Much of Time.” In “Art above Nature. To Julia,” the author “behold[s] a forest spread / With silken trees upon thy head,” comparing Julia’s hair to a silken forest. “Corinna’s Going A-Maying” contains the heaviest use of nature-related words since it is a poem about

springtime, when Nature is reborn. In this poem, the narrator tells Corinna to “Rise, and put on your foliage, and be seen / To come forth, like the springtime, fresh and green.” The author describes the town where Corinna lives in terms of nature when the narrator tells Corinna to “mark / How each field turns a street, each street a park / Made green and trimmed with trees; see how / Devotion gives each house a bough / Or branch.” These are five instances in which the author describes what he sees in terms of flowers and other features of Nature; he told us that he would “sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers” in the first stanza of “The Argument,” and he does.

In the second stanza of “The Argument,” the author tells us he will “write of youth.” In many of his poems, the author makes extensive use of youthful words to describe what he sees. For instance, in “Upon Julia’s Clothes,” the author describes “how sweetly flows / That liquefaction of her clothes,” and goes on to describe this as being a “brave vibration each way free.” From this, it appears that the author is inspired by Julia’s clothes, and is awestruck by watching their movement; in the last stanza of that poem, he tells us, “Oh, how that glittering taketh me!” The author goes on to emphasize the importance of youth in “To the Virgins to Make Much of Time,” in which he contrasts youth with death, and as a result, urges us to take charge of life and “seize the day.” We see this in the first stanza of this poem, where he tells us “Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles to-day / To-morrow will be dying.” Such a simple thing as the movement of clothes evokes a great sense of feeling in the author, and this, coupled with the fact that he appears to be very concerned with time’s passing, tells us that he is sensitive to the events of life. However, we have not yet understood why he has such a sensitivity towards life; he will tell us why in the third stanza of “The Argument.”

In the third stanza of “The Argument,” the author tells us that he will “sing of times trans-shifting.” A likely interpretation of this line, based on the lines that follow, is that the author is trying to write about the human experience of living. In the following line, he tells us that he writes about “How roses first came red, and lilies white,” which is something that was determined far in the past, when the rose or lily was born. In the last line of this stanza, he ends by writing “of hell, I sing (and ever shall) / Of heaven, and hope to have it

after all.” Going to either heaven or hell is something that will be determined at the end of the author’s life. From this, we see that here in this stanza, the author touches upon the two endpoints of existence: birth and death. Furthermore, the author probably would not have been writing about birth and death if he was not slightly interested in the experience of living.

Now, knowing that the author is interested in describing the experience of living, it will be easier to understand the focus of other poems the author has written:

In “Upon a Child that Died,” the author meditates over a young girl’s grave. The tone is solemn, and causes us to concentrate upon the author’s words. When describing the girl as “A pretty bud,” the fact that he calls her a bud and not a flower reminds us of the fact that she is a child, whose life has not yet blossomed into being. The brevity and tone of this poem suggests that the author is disturbed by her death; since she “as soon fell fast asleep / As her little eyes did peep,” she did not get the chance to enjoy life, and the author likely feels saddened by this fact.

In “Upon Julia’s Clothes,” we feel a sense of movement and freedom from the way the author describes Julia’s clothes. We get an image of silk flowing and shifting like liquid as Julia walks; the author’s words are “Whenas in silks my Julia goes / Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows / That liquefaction of her clothes.” Next, we see how this vibrant movement and vibration causes the author to feel a sense of thrill about life: “Next, when I cast mine eyes and see / That brave vibration each way free, / Oh, how that glittering taketh me!” This lively description of movement gives a tone of vivacity and energy to the poem, indicative of life.

“Upon Prue, His Maid” is a very short poem, and often, the brevity of a poem allows us to think more deeply about the poem’s subject. His maid, Prudence Baldwin, has been cremated and “in this little urn is laid.” We see next that Prudence had a “happy spark,” signifying a certain vital quality of life. Although Prudence is now dead and reduced to the ashes within her “little urn,” the author wants us to realize that because of her vitality, she is not entirely dead. Her spirit lives on in the purple violet that grows from her ashes. By this poem, the author paints a wonderful picture of the cycle of life, as we see ashes begetting new life, and Prudence’s spirit living on. This poem reminds us that death is impermanent in a way, and that

in a sense, life always continues. In this way, the author keeps in line with his original theme of celebrating life.

“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” is another poem in which we see the author’s “carpe diem” theme. The first stanza summarizes it all: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may; / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles to-day / Tomorrow will be dying.” He states why we need to do this in the third stanza, “That age is best which is the first, / When youth and blood are warmer.” The author is telling us that we need to celebrate life because we know death will come soon, and the best time to celebrate life is in youth.

While death is a product of Nature, art is a product of vibrant human imagination. In “Art above Nature. To Julia,” the author is struck by Julia’s beauty, and tells us in the last two stanzas that “I must confess, mine eye and heart / Dotes less on nature than on art.” Art is a celebration of life, because we create it to express how we feel about life.

Finally, “Delight in Disorder” shows us another contrast between life and death, and by doing so, helps the reader to value life more. In death, vitality is lost; there is nothing but complete order in death. It is imperfection that makes life enjoyable and worth living; the author tells us this when he describes the “lawn about the shoulders thrown / Into a fine distraction.” If there were no distractions in life, or if “art / Is too precise in every part,” as the last line of the poem reads, then there would be nothing for the author to write about.

Through reading the author’s poems, we have seen that the author places much emphasis on the ordinary events and features of life. He wants us to understand that life is special; that nature and youth are things to be valued, especially when compared to death. In “The Argument,” he lays out the syllabus for his book; he sings of nature, of youth, and of times “trans-shifting,” all for the purpose of broadening our view of life, and helping us to find value in ordinary things such as the movement of Julia’s clothes. Since we do not have infinite time to enjoy the wonder of living, it becomes imperative that we do so now, and this is the likely purpose for the author’s writing of these poems.

Macbeth, act 5, scene 5

Macb. Wherefore was that cry?
Seyt. The Queen, my lord, is dead.
Macb. She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
Oh, no! It is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 12

When I do count the clock that tells the time
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
When I behold the violet past prime
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white,
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard--
Then of thy beauty do I question make
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow,
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defense
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee thence.