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A Poem and Its Painting

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Jenny Lee

Gleason

20th Century Poetry

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“Sacrifice of Isaac” by Caravaggio

Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Sacrifice_of_Isaac_by_Caravaggio.jpg

Dostoevsky by Charles Bukowski

1 against the wall, the firing squad ready.
2 then he got a reprieve.
3 suppose they had shot Dostoevsky?
4 before he wrote all that?
5 I suppose it wouldn't have
6 mattered
7 not directly.
8 there are billions of people who have
9 never read him and never
10 will.
11 but as a young man I know that he
12 got me through the factories,
13 past the whores,
14 lifted me high through the night
15 and put me down
16 in a better
17 place.
18 even while in the bar
19 drinking with the other
20 derelicts,
21 I was glad they gave Dostoevsky a
22 reprieve,
23 it gave me one,
24 allowed me to look directly at those
25 rancid faces
26 in my world,
27 death pointing its finger,
28 I held fast,
29 an immaculate drunk
30 sharing the stinking dark with
31 my
32 brothers.

Taken from <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2005/08/29>

A Poem and Its Painting

Charles Bukowski, one of the most controversial poets of the 20th century, loved very few things- alcohol, sex, his typewriter, and classical music. His poetry is considered down-to-earth and easily relatable, but it is still able to maintain a high level of artistic and literary merit. His skill as an artist becomes clear when his poem “Dostoevsky” is juxtaposed with Caravaggio’s famous painting, “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” This painting depicts an angel stopping Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac. Although these pieces come from different artistic media, painting versus the written word, their shocking similarities are a testament to the universality of human experience. They have the same characters, as both depict the story of a man struggling against forces he cannot understand. In addition, they have the same setup, with an intervention by a deity that delivers the protagonist to a higher state of existence. Finally, both have generally dark and despairing tones. These similarities show clearly that, thematically, both pieces glorify the idea of salvation by a higher power and are highly reverent of their respective gods.

The consistencies in thematic meaning between the two pieces stem from similarities in characters and plot. Both works of art focus on the struggle between a character and an undefined, impersonal, and indomitable outside force. In the painting, Isaac is the protagonist while his father, motivated by God’s instructions, becomes the antagonist. It is a convoluted situation, and Isaac is left completely defenseless. He does not know why his father, whom he trusts and respects, is attempting to kill him. In Bukowski's poem, too, there is a main character struggling against forces he cannot fully understand. The narrator is subjugated by the "factories... whores... rancid faces... death pointing its finger" (Bukowski 12-27). The antagonist can be described as consumerism, homogenization, and poverty, but these summations cannot capture the vastness of the opposition. At the same time, though, in both works of art, the plot

includes an act of salvation by a higher power. In the painting, before blood can be drawn, God concludes that Abraham is faithful and stops the murder, saving Isaac. The painting, therefore, celebrates God's knowing and merciful interference. For Bukowski's character, Literature is God. Throughout the course of the poem, Dostoevsky's works save the character's battered, wearied soul, "[getting] me through the factories... lifted me high through the night /and put me down / in a better / place" (Bukowski 12-17). Much as God saved Isaac, literature acts as a distraction and transports Bukowski's character to a "better place." Therefore, it is clear that similarities in character and plotline of both pieces demonstrate a celebration and a worship of the divine.

Although thematic similarities are important to consider, both the poem and the painting are similar on a technical level; they have a generally dark tone that contrasts with the "bright" and favorable characterization of the savior element. The first image Bukowski invokes is one of an execution, with the "firing squad ready" (Bukowski 1). Later, he paints a picture of an unfeeling, cold world, where the potential death of an influential, striking, and powerful author

"wouldn't have

mattered

not directly.

there are billions of people who have

never read him and never

will." (Bukowski 4-10)

There is an unmistakable air of defeat and dark hopelessness in this tone. Even when the character is lifted to a higher state of existence by literature, he is still "an immaculate drunk/ sharing the stinking dark" (Bukowski 29-30). In the painting, the colors are gloomy and

depressing. It is nearly impossible to make out what is happening in the background, because the coloration is so dark. It is interesting to note, though, that these overall tones do not take away from the theme of the works. In the poem, the character celebrates his surroundings because he believes he has transcended them through Dostoevsky's work. Therefore, the shady depiction of his setting only exaggerates the power and glory of literature. In the painting, the light source is coming from the upper left corner, the corner that the angel intervenes from, as seen by the highlights and shadows of the painting. It is brighter than the light from the sun in the upper right of the painting. Although the majority of the painting is sinister, God, as exemplified by the angel, is a point of light. Through a careful examination of the contrast between a generally dark tone and a bright depiction of a higher power, the reverent nature of both the poem and the painting become clear.

A careful analysis of Bukowski's poem, "Dostoevsky," and Caravaggio's painting, "Sacrifice of Isaac," shows many important similarities. For one, both have similar characters and plotlines. In addition, both the poem and the painting are dark in tone and color, which sharply contrasts with their characterizations of the respective deities. Both are incredible works of art that should be respected on their own and in context of the connectivity of the human experience.