

Model poetry answer - Grief

Margaret's whole life is now dominated by her sorrow over her missing son, who has been gone for 'Seven years, alas!' She torments herself with fears that he may have been 'Maimed, mangled by inhuman men,' or 'summon'd to the deep'. Her grief is one of not knowing. Ben Jonson's grief in 'On My First Sonne' is that of a father who has lost a much loved child, his 'first sonne'. He is the 'child of my right hand', an almost religious reference to Christ who sat on the right hand of God.

Both grieving parents have nothing but praise for their sons. Jonson's was 'his best piece of poetrie', which suggests that his successful career as a poet was nothing compared to the brilliance of the son he had fathered. Margaret's description of her son is full of praiseworthy adjectives. He was 'among the prime', 'beauteous', 'Well born, well bred', as well as, 'ingenuous, innocent and bold.' It is interesting that she uses the past tense, almost accepting, at one point, that he may well be dead.

Jonson tries to comfort himself with the thought that his son has 'scap'd worlds, and flesh's rage', and the 'miserie' of ageing. Margaret has nothing to comfort her except the faint hope that her son may have been 'prosperous'. Jonson blames himself for perhaps having 'too much hope' of his 'lov'd boy', whereas Margaret never blames herself. 'Kind mother have I been'. She feels she could have done no better for him.

It is here that the two poems differ. Jonson is grief-stricken and saying 'Farewell', hoping that his son will, 'Rest in soft peace', the word 'soft' suggesting tenderness and love. Margaret, on the other hand, after praising her son, begins a monologue devoted to her own self-pitying suffering, which begins to make us wonder exactly why her son left. She uses much of the poem to try and create sympathy for herself, from the opening line, 'Where art thou, my beloved son?', to the final line, 'I have no other earthly friend.' We hear of her 'apprehensions' and her 'dread' and she says she spends a great deal of time looking 'for Ghosts'. She talks of 'darkness' and 'shadows' to explain her misery.

While it may be true that Jonson knows his son is dead, he does not reduce himself to self-pity but rather acknowledges that the child was only 'lent' to him. There is an acceptance of what has happened. Margaret, on the other hand, is in a worse position, in many ways, but her attempt to create sympathy for herself seems overdone and her feelings, therefore, less sincere.

Simon Armitage also writes about the relationship between a parent and child but this differs in that he is the child and is not dead or missing, just leaving home. He examines the feeling of closeness, yet distance by describing moving into his own home with the help of his mother and measuring up, presumably for carpets, wallpaper, etc. Mother holds one end of the tape, which is compared to a kite string. She is his 'anchor' who is 'unreeling the years between us' and he is the 'kite'. The joy in finding freedom from parents is described as reaching 'towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky', though he realises that he may 'fall or fly' and it is important to him that his mother remains his 'base'.

This poem has a feeling of lightness and space compared to the others. He describes the 'acres of walls' and the 'prairies of the floors' and likens his journey to a 'space-walk' but perhaps he doesn't mind the idea that his mother's 'fingertips still pinch', even though this gives the impression she is reluctant to let go. In this, mother seems a little like Margaret.

Finally, a totally different aspect of relationships is seen in Anne Hathaway'. She describes her relationship with Shakespeare in terms of great joy and magic, looking back on their love life after his death and remembering the magical world of 'forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas'. There is no sense of mourning the dead for her 'living, laughing love' is still held in 'the casket of my widow's head.'

It seems there are different ways of saying goodbye to a loved one and the affect this has on individuals varies according to their natures.