

Critical Analysis of Poetry

The Swimmer's Moment

The Swimmer's Moment

For everyone
The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say
'This is the whirlpool, then.'

By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.

And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.

Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous centre

That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy,
So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret

Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary)

First Reading:

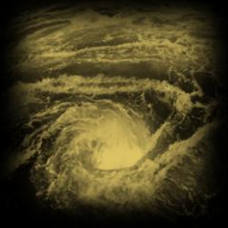
- The reader gets the impression that the word 'moment' in the title and the second and third lines is important. The word suggests something brief, as in momentary, or spur of the moment.
- A reader may also get from this poem a sense of danger. There's talk about a whirlpool, the black pit, and death. It sounds like some people may have drowned while others may have survived — those onshore and one or two of the swimmers.

Poet and Poetic Voice (gained through research)

- Examining the Poet
 - Margaret Avison is a Canadian poet who certainly had her share of difficulties growing up in rural Ontario.
 - She would probably be considered a spiritual poet as she converted to Christianity in her poetry-writing years.
 - That spirituality could describe her risk-takers in this poem (perhaps).
- Examining the Poetic Voice
 - The voice in this case seems to come from a silent bystander; one who neither takes the leap or stays at the whirlpool's edge. Why?
 - The speaker seems to know the thoughts and fears of the 'swimmers', but is not an active participant in the action.
 - This also might speak to the spirituality of the poet. Why?

Context

- This is purely guesswork on the part of the reader, although learning about the poet helps.
- In this case, Avison may have written this piece in response to her choice to follow Christianity and jump in the whirlpool, so to speak.
- Her newfound spirituality could be the 'silver reaches of the estuary'.



Thinking About the Title

- 'The Swimmer's Moment', after careful consideration of the poem, speaks about choice.
- The different swimmers in this piece each have 'moments'; they either choose to risk or not.
- These moments define these swimmers. Taking risks pays off for some and not for others, but the moment is the important thing.

Looking Up Words/Allusions

- It is important to read literally and figuratively (metaphorically).
 - Contesting (trying or challenging)
 - Ominous (carrying evil or harm; threatening)
 - Gaping Vertical (interesting metaphor—think of a tornado in water)
 - Boon (a gift or a blessing; something to be thankful for)
 - Privacy (why choose this word?)
 - Estuary (where a river meets the sea)
- Others?

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Paraphrasing Difficulties

On the rim of suction
They will not recognize

Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous centre
That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy

So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won...

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Key Images and Patterns of Image

- References to nature throughout poem:
 - Whirlpool, rapids, estuary
- Many have to do with death/danger:
 - Black pit, deadly rapids
- Some are more positive:
 - Knowledge, breadth, won, silver

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Underlying Conflicts:

- People Refusing (we)
 - Passive onlookers
 - Making safe choice
 - Refusal of the challenge
 - Dare the knowledge
 - Pale and forever on the rim
 - They will not recognize
 - Cannot penetrate
 - Turn away.../with a despair.../for/Ourselves
 - Failure, frustration, loss
- The Swimmers (them)
 - Active participants
 - Risk-taking minority
 - Facing risk, danger, death
 - Contesting the challenge
 - Bland-blank faces
 - Gaping vertical/ominous centre
 - Their secret
 - Eternal boon of privacy/the mysterious, and more ample, further waters
 - Where one or two have won
 - Possible success, fulfillment, victory

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Noting Tone

- Remember that tone refers to the speaker's attitude towards the subject matter of the poem (usually expressed as an adjective).
- In this case, we might say that the speaker's tone is one of fear, at least at the beginning. As we approach the end of the poem, however, the tone seems to change and the speaker seems almost hopeful and/or a little jealous of the bravery of those who risked it all.

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Noting Mood

- At first glance, the mood that is created by the poem is one of anxiety. Through the imagery, there is a strong sense that the whirlpool is dangerous.
- There is also a mood of melancholy (so that we turn away from their defeat). Initially, the melancholy seems to be for the lost swimmers, but it is also for those who feel sorry for themselves because they cannot know what the swimmers know.

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Form, Technique, & Style

- The poet chooses long, unpredictable sentences perhaps as a way of taking the reader along, like the swimmer in the whirlpool.
- The poet also takes the reader on a journey from the dangerous (whirlpool) to the safe (estuary).

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Diction & Images

- The poet purposely addressed the poem 'for everyone'. All people will eventually come to crossroads or turning points (whirlpools).
- The whirlpool is the most obvious image, suggesting a moment of risk or crisis.
- Another key image - silver reaches of the estuary - an image of peace. The special swimmers have their 'moment' and achieve a special private place, dimension, or condition about which only they have 'knowledge'.

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More About Diction

- Avisa chose her words very carefully when writing this piece.
- The words chosen signify danger:
 - Black pit, deadly rapids, mysterious, rim of suction, whirled, ominous centre, gaping vertical, defeat, deaths
- They also signify a kind of peace:
 - Saved, more ample, further waters, knowledge, eternal boon of privacy, secret, anonymous breadth, estuary

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Examining Figures of Speech

- The poet uses symbols such as the whirlpool, black pit, deadly rapids, and ample further waters.
- Symbolic action would be the 'refusal' as the onlookers 'turn away', signifying their inability to face the challenge of the whirlpool or crisis.
- The poet also uses metaphors (faces turn and turn/pale and forever on the rim of suction). The passive onlookers are compared to the whirlpool - like the whirlpool, they move only in circles caused by their indecision, fears, inability to understand what the braver, more adventurous swimmers may attain.

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Structure

- What is the form? The structure?
 - In this case, it is a free-verse poem with alternating lines which - as we said - contribute to its uncertainty. Like a whirlpool, it is not separated, but continuous (without line breaks and punctuation).
- What about the overall structure?
 - In this case, we may be reading a cross between a lament and an ode. How could this be so?

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Understanding Theme & Purpose

- Everyone will face risk in his/her life and the ones that accept it may lead richer lives than those who don't.
 - There might be some not-so-obvious long-term advantages to accepting challenges and risks in one's life.
- Only by challenging oneself does one leave the door open to wonderful, mysterious, and new possibilities.
 - The problem with a 'safe' conventional life is that a person may deny him/herself opportunities for meaningful personal fulfillment.

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Evaluation

- Avision's poem is an invitation to the reader to participate in life more fully than conventionally. 'The Swimmer's Moment' weighs the advantages and disadvantages of risk-taking. It suggests that we can look beyond personal fears and self-imposed limitations in order to achieve greater knowledge and more intense life experience. In Avision's view, those people who accept risk are the ones who stand to experience life at a deeper, more significant level. 'The Swimmer's Moment' is a tribute of sorts to those individuals who have the courage, strength, perceptiveness, and fortune to 'win' a more meaningful life. In an age of uniformity and conformity, the poem stands as a beacon and testament to that minority of true individuals who 'dare'.

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Activity!

- **Due Dates:**
 - Monday, March 9 (Rough Copies for Peer Revision)
 - Wednesday, March 11 (Good Copies for Coffin Assessment)
- Students will prepare a **poetry explication** for poems selected by students and approved by Coffin, based on the style just studied.
- Activities shall be composed in **good copy** and should include all the categories studied today.

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Poetry Analysis Sites:

- www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/id-11,pageNum-1.html
- www.brocku.ca/english/jlve/criticalreading.html
- www.nku.edu/~rkdrruy/poetryexplication.html
- www.qpc.edu/~lawowl/handouts/analyzing-poetry.pdf

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Good Luck!