

2012 Question 1 (Poetry)
Sidney – “Thou Blind Man’s Mark”
Anchor Essays

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In his poem entitled “Thou Blind Man’s Mark” Sir Philip Sidney characterizes desire as a force able to take control of a man’s mind. Consequently, this man strives for shallow, material satisfaction as opposed to true self-fulfillment. The speaker’s contempt for desire is clearly portrayed in his harsh description of it and the effect it has had on him, as well as his declaration that he will no longer yield to it’s power.

The poem begins with a series of accusatory phrases, each of which frame a negative aspect of desire, as viewed by the speaker. He calls desire a “blind man’s mark,” implying that no man able to see desire for what it really is would willingly be attracted to it. When he says “blind,” the speaker does not literally mean a person whose eyes are damaged or defective; In context, a “blind man” is one who lacks a sense of direction or of vision for the future, thus making him susceptible to the manipulating forces of desire. Desire preys upon the “blind” and lures in the “fools” because they are easily beguiled into thinking that lusting after one’s desires is all there is to life. The speaker claims desire can reduce men to just “dregs of scattered thought,” which illuminates the speaker’s perception of desire as a sort of monster, capable of ripping a man’s mind to shreds, destroying his natural sense of intuition and reason, and replacing it with incohesive, raggedy desires. Man’s ability to form his own thoughts has been replaced by his obsession with his desires, a crime for which the speaker considers desire to be the “band of all evils.” This is quite a hefty condemnation, and it reflects the feelings of the speaker; he uses seven phrases, in the first four lines alone, to declare his passionate feelings towards desire. This extensive list of insults, coupled with the fact that the speaker personifies desire and endows it with malevolent monster-like qualities, demonstrates that the speaker genuinely does feel that desire is a combination of all evils known to man. He says “I have too dearly bought, with price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware,” revealing that his attitude stems from his personal experience with the power of desire to ruin a man’s mind. The speaker especially laments that his mind was wasted on desire when it should have been preparing to “higher things” of more substance and value.

However, the speaker also offers a glimmer of hope and severs his mind’s ties to desire. After describing the force of desire as an evil one, he proclaims he will no longer be victim to it: “But yet in vain thou hadst my ruin sought; [...] In vain thou kindlest all thy smoky fire.” The speaker makes three consecutive claims that desire has attempted “in vain” to lead him down the wrong path; this repetition emphasizes the speaker’s liberation at having cast off the shackles of desire. He has regained the power of his own mind, and in doing so, has regained a powerful sense of self. No longer controlled by his desires or even distracted by the spark or smoke desire may create to try to lure him back, he professes a new goal: “Within myself to seek my only hire, desiring naught but to kill desire.” The conclusion of the poem provides a significant resolution; the speaker has learned to look inward and not outward to find true fulfillment, and the only desire he will follow is the desire to fight manipulating forces which attempt to rob him of his autonomy.

The speaker’s portrayal of desire as a powerful enemy to the freedom of his own mind highlights the difficulty of maintaining control over one’s own mind when faced with adversaries that are alluring or manipulative. Through his struggle with and subsequent defeat of the force of desire, the speaker inspires us to do the same with similar forces in our lives.

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Many people live their lives solely for their dream—a goal or purpose to which they aspire. Yet, on a simpler more base level, dreams are simply desires, or the want for something. Desire, unlike what dreams are commonly thought as, have their own negative qualities such as distraction and a disintegration of concentration. In the poem “Thou Blind Man’s Mark”, by Sir Philip Sidney, the idea of desire is attached as detrimental to one’s life, yet at the same time is conveyed as unavoidable and impossible to remove.

Sidney first describes the evil, malicious nature of desires, utilizing poetic devices to accentuate this description. In the beginning lines of the poem, Sidney compares desire to “Thou blind man’s mark, thou fool’s self-chosen snare/Fond fancy’s scum, and dregs of scattered thought” (Sidney 1-2). In these lines, desire is associated with the qualities of not very desirable men—blind men, fools, and fond fancies. To further accentuate these men to the idea of desire, alliteration is frequently used, as in the case of “blind man’s mark” (1) or “fond fancy”. Such alliteration aids in tying together desires to undesirable men, implying that desire itself is not an admirable trait. Desire is not desirable precisely because of its ability to distract and divert—Sidney mentions that desire has cost him “the price of mangled mind” (6) when he “should [my mind] to higher things prepare” (8). Ironically, desire, or the want for something, according to Sidney, is a negative quality precisely because it distracts him from another desire—the want to achieve “higher things” (8) in life. Hence, it can be concluded that desire, when alone, may not be malevolent to one’s nature but that when more than one desire exists the conflict of desires is what causes the distracting nature of this trait.

Yet Sidney also seems to imply that despite this negative nature, it is futile to try to remove desire from one’s life. The repetition of “in vain”, in lines 7 to 11, all accentuate the impossible nature of removing desire. This is precisely because desire is inexplicably linked with itself—trying to remove desire, in a way, is desiring itself. The rhyme scheme—which has only three rhymes— -are, -ought, and -ire, clearly show this contradiction in lines that rhyme with -ire, which coincidentally rhyme also with desire: “in vain thou madest me to vain things aspire” (10), or “Desiring naught but how to kill desire” (14). As the last line illustrates, to desire and to not desire is a basic element of human nature itself; one cannot remove desire, or want, without wanting to remove want itself. This contradiction of wants is what instills desire firmly in human nature—and makes it preventible and impossible to cure desire.

Sidney, through use of certain poetic devices, has hence demonstrated that desire’s negative characteristics stem from conflict of desires, and that desire in itself, however, cannot be removed from human conscience because of its essential and integral role. If desire, as Sidney demonstrates, is truly inevitable, however, then perhaps Sidney’s true message is not that desire is just negative, but maybe how humankind can cope with that inevitable feeling of want and resolve the conflict of needs that arises from multiple desires.

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How can one escape the clutches of desire? In the poem “Thou Blind Man’s Mark,” Sir Phillip Sidney discusses his hatred of desire and outlines his struggle to free himself from the temptations of desire. He fights against the alluring nature of desire, claiming finally that his purpose is to kill desire in himself.

Sidney personifies Desire and addresses his problems to Desire himself. Through this apostrophe, he places the actual blame on Desire, removing the blame of himself being tempted by Desire. He gives himself a concrete enemy whom he can defeat, and ultimately kill. He calls to Desire, “Thou web of wills, whose end is never wrought,” feeling that Desire has formulated a complex plan in

which to trap him. By assigning to Desire human thoughts and actions, Sidney creates a rival not just in himself. He takes his own ease of temptation out of himself and focuses all of his energy on this monstrous Desire.

To build his enemy and truly personify him, Sidney employs metaphors and imagery describing Desire. He describes Desire as a snare that entangles the foolish and the weak. He says Desire is “dregs of scattered thoughts,” bringing to mind the ends of useful thought, what was left behind as waste. He describes how in the past he has been tempted and succumbed to buying Desire’s “worthless ware.” However, now Sidney says that he is not effected by Desire’s “smoky fire,” not even a true fire that could represent passion or power. The “smoky fire” of Desire is shadows and false promises. The images and metaphors Sidney uses characterize Desire as false and worthless.

As his metaphors depict Desire, the structure of the English sonnet describes Sidney’s battle against Desire and his final personal mission. In the first stanza he describes the general evils of Desire, giving the audience an initial impression of his disgust of whomever he is addressing. In the second stanza, he announces his subject, “Desire, desire!” he calls out to desire, angry and a little sad that he had fallen for its guise. He says he has been tempted by it in the past, but in the third stanza, he promises no more. Using anaphora for emphasis of uselessness of Desire’s efforts, he says “in vain” has desire tried to tempt him. He says he has learned an important lesson of virtue, which he explains in his heroic couplet. He states that now he will seek in himself and only desires the death of Desire. He closes the poem and resolves his problem with this final closing purpose. Throughout the poem he builds up his hate and desires to defeat Desire somehow. With the heroic couplet he hits home his purpose and in a way seems to have already defeated his own desire.

Sidney employs apostrophe, imagery, and the structure of the English sonnet to describe his feelings toward desire and to state his purpose pertaining to desire. He creates his enemy as a thoroughly personified adversary, and he vows to use his own virtues to defeat its alluring vices.

6

In the “Thou Blind Man’s Mark”, the speaker establishes an overall negative but nonetheless intricate and complex, attitude toward desire. With the usage of various poetic devices, Sir Phillip Sidney describes all that he feels in opposition of desire. Specifically, through the usage of repetition, syntax, and figurative speech, the speaker creates a representation of desire that is anything but desirable as it is shown to be malicious and for the figuratively blind.

Repetition is present throughout the entire poem. There are two primary examples that showcase its impact as a poetic device, depicting desire as something worthy of disgust. The word, “thou” is repeated throughout the poem. It is used twice in the first line as well as once each in lines 9-11. By repeating it so often, the speaker forms an accusatory tone, as if he were making allegations in a courtroom or having an argument. He describes how “In vain thou madest me to vain things aspire”, accusing “desire” of attempting to push him toward aspiring for vain and useless “things”. Secondly, the speaker repeats the phrase “in vain” from lines 9-11. He details desire’s unsuccessful attempts and how it sought for his desires, attempted to make him aspire for worthless things, and tried to kindle his fire (essentially keep the speaker desiring for desire). This shows desire to be relentless and cold, forever attempting to hurt the speaker.

The speaker’s syntax also gives a negative image to represent desire. He begins the poem, as it is titled, with “Thou blind man’s mark”. In doing this, the speaker calls desire the target for a blind man. Literally, this could mean that desire is the physical object for which a blind man is aiming with a bow & arrow. As he is blind, however, this man will repeatedly aim but always miss. Figuratively, this means

that only the blind attempt to achieve their desire. In this sense, being blind is equivalent to being ignorant and unaware of how desire is almost evil and how desire should never be one's "mark". The speaker further calls desire the "cradle of all careless thought", which essentially means it is a home for careless thought. The speaker therefore suggests that by seeking one's desires, one is seeking for careless thought and is pushing one's self in the wrong direction.

There are two main ways in which the speaker uses figurative speech to present desire. In line 4 it is described as "Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought", which makes it appear to have an endless web of will. Desire does nothing but trap people with its "web". Second, from lines 5-6, the speaker says that desire sells worthless ware for the price of a mangled and confused mind as if it wants to confuse people and waste their time.

The speaker concludes the poem with the final three lines. He describes an overall negative attitude toward desire, showing it to have harmful intentions through the use of repetition, syntax, and figurative lesson. The complexity of his attitude is exemplified in his conclusion. Although having gotten over the desire which is detailed for the first 10 lines, he learns his lesson and finds a new desire, which is to kill desire itself. This is complex because he desires to rid himself of desire.

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In the poem, "Thou Blind Man's Mark", the speaker tries to convey his feelings toward desire. He expresses his attitude toward desire by using tone, diction, and a couplet.

The speaker is exasperated because of desire. He claims that the price of feeling desire is a "mangled mind". Desire has caused him to become cynical over the emotion. He exasperately calls out twice in the poem; the first time, he cries out desire itself; distraught by what has become of him because of it. He calls desire a "blind man" and "selfish" by making the speaker desire something or someone and making him have "scattered thought". He claims that desire "sought his ruin".

The speaker describes desire and its actions with negative denotation. He calls desire "the band of all evil" and "cradle of causeless care". He describes desire as a fool for trying to make him want something and for trying to bring his demise. He admits to buying desire's "worthless ware" at one point in his life. However, desire did not completely ruin him; the speaker explains that "in vain", desire had sought out to ruin him. After eight lines in the poem of the speaker cursing desire, he states "but yet", desire could not triumph over him. Everything desire did to him was in vain because through virtue, desire could not overcome him.

The couplet at the end of the poem summarizes the speaker's attitude towards desire. The couplet explains the "lesson" that he learned from virtue. He learned that only from within himself can he overcome desire; it cannot be eliminated from any external source. No matter what desire caused the speaker to feel, think, or do, through his own virtue was he able to find salvation from the tyrant he believed desire had become.

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The speaker of "Thou Blind Man's Mark" has a complex attitude towards desire. The writer uses poetic devices in order to convey this attitude. Two of the most prominent devices used in this poem are tone and repetition. Tone is the use of certain words to create a certain mood or setting in the writing for the reader to pick up on. Repetition is the repeating of certain words or phrases to get the point across to the reader very clearly. Sir Philip Sidney does exceptionally well in using these devices within his poem quite effectively.

The tone of the poem puts the reader in a dark and angry place. The tone is set in this poem through the insistent use of strong yet negative words within the short piece of writing. Words like “fool”, “scum”, and “evil” capture a sense of distrust and dislike that can be carried over to his feelings about desire. Words like “mangled”, “worthless”, and “ruin” conjure up a feeling of desperation and hopelessness. The speaker could have used that to express how he feels desire is a hopeless thing only for the desperate. He clearly dislikes desire, possibly because he doesn’t trust desire will give him what he wants. These things sound angry, especially when he uses the word “kill” to describe what he wants to do to desire. He must be in a dark place to feel this way, and he uses tone to help the reader understand his attitude towards desire.

The repetition used in the poem really helps to emphasize that he truly means what he is saying. He uses repetition when he exclaims “Desire, desire!”, this is where it becomes clear that his “mark” (target) is the feeling of desire. Another use of repetition is in lines 9-11 where he starts each clause with the words “in vain”. He expresses negative sentiments about desire in each of these, showing all the many ways desire has failed him.

He uses tone and repetition to show how his attitude towards it is very negative. However, his attitude towards it shows complexity when he says he desires to kill desire. This is ironic and the irony was emphasized through his use of tone and repetition.