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The Art of Drowning

On the surface, or after just one reading through “The Art of Drowning” (Collins, see appendix), the reader may think that the poem is only about drowning and what takes place before one’s death. Yet, after reading the poem a few times and probing deeper, it has to do with life. Life is a struggle; life has its struggles. Collins decided to explore a life that is struggling as if it were drowning and trying to survive. Life is good, and then all of a sudden individuals find themselves in a dark place, without even knowing. “I wonder how it all got started” (1).

Collins chose to use conversational, casual diction throughout the poem and he asked questions throughout, prodding the reader to think deeper. Although his diction is casual, he uses loaded and artistic words in each stanza, illustrating and ratifying the title. These artistic words also give more meaning to the theme of life throughout the poem. Descriptive words in the poem mostly start with “S,” giving the illusion of a water or splash sound, related to drowning. He also chooses to use words that begin with “C” also giving the crashing, splash sounds of water. Collins is famous for his personification, and in this poem he uses it in order to describe panic with human characteristics, “as if panic, or the act of submergence, / could startle time into such compression, crushing / decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds” (3-5). Since Collins uses artistic language that isn’t used to describe death, clear evidence that the poem is about life appears.

The ends of both the first and second stanzas begin to convey the theme of life throughout the poem. Line 5 begins with the word “decades,” shrinking a whole lifetime of

memories into one word. Then, these memories become apparent as the reader is “turning the pages of an album of photographs- / you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat,” picturing their own life memories in the middle of reading a poem.

In line 19, Collins expresses “the Light before all the lights out” which leads the reader into thinking differently about the whole poem. Since “Light” is capitalized, Collins gives the reader a hint and shines light onto the real meaning. Before this point in the poem, the reader was unaware of the reason the struggle is happening. Yet now, at this point, the reason is understood with the reader as if a light switch went off. Line 20 continues to confirm the epiphany as it is “dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.” This allows for the ultimate question at the start of the poem to be answered for the reader, leading them make the correct changes in their life.

If the reader looks even closer at that stanza, they will realize the presence of God is in the poem. “Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance / here, some bolt of truth forking across the water, / an ultimate Light before all the lights go out,” (17-19) makes the reader believe that the Light is God. The way the Light is described, makes the reader believe it could be more than just a realization of one’s actions, words such as: believe, brilliance, truth and ultimate. “Dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage,” (20) then has more meaning than before because of this epiphany. According to Dictionary.com, “megalithic” is a large stone from ancient or prehistoric times, and “tonnage” is the capacity of a merchant vessel, expressed either in units of weight, as deadweight tons, or of volume, as gross tons. As the reader meets God in their place of struggle, they realize what was their own “megalithic tonnage” or extra baggage holding them down in the murky waters of their life.

As the poem ends and “as you sink toward weedy disarray of the bottom, / leaving behind what you have already forgotten, / the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds,” (26-28) the reader is once again stopped and forced to look closer at the text. At this point in the ending, during the first read of the poem, the reader realizes that it was only the surface in which they were skimming, but need to sink downward into a deeper meaning of the text. When these three lines are put with the realization of struggles in the stanza before, it shows that below the surface in everyone’s life, there is a mess. The way in which we deal with these troubles as humans, is to cover them up in a way for no one to know what is really going on in one’s life. Collins beautifies the title, descriptions, and ugly truths throughout the poem because it is exactly how we act and talk to each other. Line 28, “the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds,” especially shows everyday life and how we live in a rushed world, not truly caring about each other’s true feelings and problems at any given time.

With such an extravagant ending line to the poem, Collins leaves the reader to evaluate the way they treat others. Although we are all tied down to the weedy disarray of the bottom (26) by our megalithic tonnage (20), we meet each other at the surface, just to act like everything is perfect. In line 25, Collins expresses that “the tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all.” This line confirms that if we stay on the surface with everyone and ourselves, we will be swept away by the tide and always stay there. However, if we find ourselves within the lake, underneath the surface, we will be accepted and will accept others for the problems in their life. Chances are; we are all suffering in the same murky waters without knowing it.

At first glance, a reader would think that the poem they are about to read is about drowning and the fear of death. Only after reading and allowing the poem to guide them would they realize its true meaning: life. No matter which level of this poem the reader meets Collins

on while reading this poem; much will be understood and learned about their own self and life itself. Through the questions in the poem, questions arise in the reader's head about their life: where they are, where they've come from, and where they are going. "The Art of Drowning" is a poem set out to make the reader stop and evaluate his or her own life, in order for the world to become a place where everyone can be real.

Works Cited

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Appendix

The Art of Drowning
by Billy Collins

1. I wonder how it all got started, this business
2. about seeing your life flash before your eyes
3. while you drown, as if panic, or the act of submergence,
4. could startle time into such compression, crushing
5. decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

6. After falling off a steamship or being swept away
7. in a rush of floodwaters, wouldn't you hope
8. for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand
9. turning the pages of an album of photographs-
10. you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat.

11. How about a short animated film, a slide presentation?
12. Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model photograph?
13. Wouldn't any form be better than this sudden flash?
14. Your whole existence going off in your face
15. in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography-
16. nothing like the three large volumes you envisioned.

17. Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance
18. here, some bolt of truth forking across the water,
19. an ultimate Light before all the lights go out,
20. dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.
21. But if something does flash before your eyes
22. as you go under, it will probably be a fish,

23. a quick blur of curved silver darting away,
24. having nothing to do with your life or your death.
25. The tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all
26. as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom,
27. leaving behind what you have already forgotten,
28. the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.