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Redefining the Hero in "Ode to Fear"

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Throughout the history of literature, the definition of the "hero" has altered and yet its connotation of bravery and courage still remains the same. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the notion of the hero to antiquity as "A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; at a later time regarded as intermediate between gods and men, and immortal." However, little has changed in this definition as a later entry defines the hero as "A man distinguished by extraordinary valour and martial achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior." These definitions show how the idea of a hero as a person of extraordinary strength, who fights evil and defends ethical and moral goodness, dates back to the hero derived from Greek epics.

William Collins' "Ode to Fear" attempts to revise the typical hero as defined by Homer to show that a hero is shaped not by his strength and ability to defeat a tangible evil, but through battling the dangers that exist in the mind. Within "Ode to Fear," Collins creates a precursor to the Romantic or "Byronic" hero where one's power and strength exists in a more subtle and personal fashion. This new perspective of the hero lives in a realm where one's courage comes from defeating the self, which is one's own worst enemy. In "Ode to Fear," heroism is expressed through the experience of anxiety, defined as the emotional and physical manifestation of fear. Collins' poem reveals the overwhelming and all consuming power of anxiety in order to express how overcoming its control defines what it means to be a hero. In "Ode to Fear," anxiety is a way of reaching a heightened affect where the narrator is heroic, as he is able to harness this negative anxiety and transform it into the positive notion of hypersensitivity, or the ability to experience emotion. Therefore, he is able to defeat anxiety by accepting and then using it as creative energy for his craft of writing.

In order to comprehend the power of "Ode to Fear," it is important to first understand how anxiety works in relation to fear. According to cognitive studies, fear and anxiety are used interchangeably, where a person fears an upcoming event and anxiety is the emotional and physical response to that fear (Beck 7). In other words, anxiety is the connotation of fear where "Fear is the appraisal of danger; anxiety is the unpleasant feeling state evoked when fear is stimulated" (Beck 9). The ability to overcome anxiety is a heroic act due to its overwhelming power. Anxiety is such a strong evil because it affects every part of the body: physiologically through sweating, increased heart rate and dizziness, cognitively through pessimism, motivationally as it results in one avoiding the experiences that bring on anxiety, emotionally through terror and behaviorally through inhibited speaking or thinking (Beck 4). Within anxiety exists a paradox where a person brings on unwittingly what he fears or detests the most (Beck 3). The phenomenon of this paradox means that one's fear of an unpleasant event only enhances the probability of it actually happening. Therefore, an anxious person becomes his own worst enemy because he creates his own anxiety as well as what it is that he actually fears. The nature of anxiety shows how powerful the mind can be as well as the strength it takes to conquer one's own thoughts. Collins' "Ode to Fear" exposes the authenticity of anxiety where one who suffers

from it can never participate in social reality. They become prisoners in their minds, constantly battling themselves, and relying on emotional rather than physical experience.

The opening lines 1 through 4 of "Ode to Fear" seem to portray the existence of anxiety as a fear of the unknown. Through the imagery of "World unknown," "shadowy Shapes" and "unreal scene," Collins reveals how anxiety is not a tangible feeling. It is "unreal," "shadowy," and "unknown," which evokes an emotional response of unease and uncertainty, resulting in the inability to trust anything around you. The "thou" that he refers to is fear and its personification within these lines express the fact that it is so powerful it can even take on a humanlike form. This first stanza ends with "While Fancy lifts the Veil between" (line 4) and it poses as an attempt to foreshadow the speaker's later heroic act as he attempts to lift the veil and gain a greater perspective towards his emotions. However, this is immediately interrupted by "Ah Fear! Ah frantic Fear!" (line 5) and "like Thee disorder'd fly" (line 8). These images of "disorder" and "frantic" signify a confusion of emotions, which is characteristic of anxiety. Anxiety exists as a result of mixed and dueling emotions (Beck 239). "One's ability to reason with their thoughts is impaired" (Beck 32). Through his imagery of "frantic" and "disorder," Collins shows how one who suffers from anxiety becomes illogical and unreasonable, where one cannot evaluate oneself objectively. Furthermore, the strength of anxiety becomes even more apparent as the speaker begins to slowly identify and become synonymous with fear. The overwhelming power of anxiety reveals itself through the speaker's change from "I see" (line 6) to "I know" (line 7) and finally to "like Thee" (line 8). Anxiety has slowly consumed him to the point where he actually becomes fear itself, furthering the notion that he is his own worst enemy.

As Collins continues with his perception of fear, he attempts to give it a concrete shape as he writes, "For lo what Monsters in thy Train appear!" (line 9), which continues on to line 15. Through the personification of fear into an actual monster who has "limbs of Giant Mold" (line 10), "stalks his Round" in a "hideous Form" (line 12), and has the ability to act on his own as he is "howling" (line 13) and "throws" (line 14) himself, Collins renders fear more conceivable. In doing so, the speaker illustrates just how powerful fear truly is because it is so incredible and unimaginable that it must be given form. Now that it has a shape, the speaker can at least attempt to understand how he is affected by fear and anxiety. Furthermore, lines 10 through 15 embody the pessimism that is so often associated with anxiety through the negative imagery of "Midnight Storm" and "ridgy Steep" (lines 13-14). These images evoke the notion that one who suffers from anxiety "is hyper vigilant, constantly scanning the environment for signs of impending disaster or personal harm" (Beck 31). These lines demonstrate the constant state of emotional distress and turmoil that an anxious person lives with. Collins transforms aspects of nature into negative perceptions through the use of pathetic fallacy, where the weather becomes a "midnight storm" and a mountain is turned into a "ridgy steep." The use of pathetic fallacy epitomizes the very nature of anxiety in the way that it uses one's emotions as a way to project one's fears onto an object, creating a world of artifice. In this case, the false perception that Collins creates is a world of catastrophe that he cannot escape. By doing so, Collins exposes the dangerous nature of anxiety as it creates a self-destructive atmosphere where the speaker can see only the negative. Once again, the speaker becomes his own worst enemy.

The next stanza, which includes lines 16 through 25, reveals the power of the mind, showing how it can turn the self into the very thing that it fears. In this case, the thing in which the speaker fears seems to be fear and anxiety itself, resulting in him becoming fear. When he writes "Who prompt to Deeds accurs'd the Mind" (line 17), Collins shows how fear and anxiety are in actuality attacks on the mind, which is very dangerous. The impact of this assault on the

mind is exposed as so powerful that it has the ability to alter one's perception of reality. For example, fear causes "Nature's Wounds," as the air is filled with "Vengeance" and fate becomes consumed by "Blood of Sorrow." The world is no longer an objective space, but is consumed by his fear. Everything that he sees is now in relation to his anxiety, which has no separation from reality. Collins solidifies his personified false reality with "Who, Fear, this ghastly Train can see, And look not madly wild, like Thee?" (lines 24-25). Collins exposes the fact that he has become his fear or "like Thee", which shows just how powerful the mind can be. Not only has his mind made him the very thing that he fears, but it has replaced everything that surrounds him with that fear as well. As a result, he cannot separate himself from this negative atmosphere and is therefore a victim of his own mind and the cause of his own downfall.

The last half of this poem is separated into an "Epode" and an "Antistrophe," which are two literary terms that are common in ancient Greek Epics. Furthermore, Collins directly addresses these works when he says, "In earliest Greece to Thee with partial Choice" (line 26). By using these techniques, Collins brings to mind the epic heroes of Homer's works, asserting that this poem is in fact the story of a hero. While this is a new type of hero, he is a hero nonetheless, and through the use of Epode and Antistrophe Collins marks the turning point within the poem. The first stanza of the Epode is where Collins initially suggests that anxiety and fear can be used as inspiration. "The Grief-full Muse addrest her infant Tongue; The Maids and Matrons, on her awful Voice, Silent and pale in the wild Amazement hung" (lines 27-29). Here Collins links anxiety to a Muse's "infant Tongue" and "awful Voice" meaning that anxiety inspires the same way a Muse does. However, in ancient Greece it was unable to be harnessed by "Maids and Matrons" because they were amateurs, as evidenced by their "infant" tongue. The anxiety consequently over powered them, resulting in their "Silent and pale in wild Amazement" (line 29). These average people were less than worthy and instead became victimized by anxiety, which is clear with their portrayal as silent and pale. These descriptions are common symptoms of anxiety as it affects the body through sweating, increased heart rate, and dizziness (Beck 4).

Lines 30 through 40 introduce the beginning of the creation of the hero as he attempts to defeat anxiety and fear. This stanza becomes key in his revelation of how to gather strength from his inhibiting emotions which he accomplishes by transforming a negative into a positive. According to cognitive research, acceptance of one's anxiety is the only way to cure the self (Beck 232). By trying to fight or avoid the symptoms of anxiety, it will ultimately defeat you or render you "pale and silent." The paradox exists in the sense that by giving up the idea of control, one can ultimately control their anxiety. The way the speaker attempts to accept his anxiety in the poem is when he realizes that "the Bard who first invok'd thy Name" (line 30) was able to nurse "the Poet's flame" (line 32) because fear gave him the "Pow'r to feel". The very basis of anxiety is that it is so powerful because it causes a problem of mixed and confusing emotions (Beck 239). These emotions overtake a person with anxiety, but by naming and honing the conflicting emotions, one has the ability control them. The speaker is aware that the Bard became a Poet because anxiety gave him the power to feel. Furthermore, by being a poet he was able to name his emotions and then control them in the same way as a knight who "reach'd from Virtue's Hand the Patriot's Steel" (line 33). Therefore, the writer's pen becomes his sword and weapon, giving him the power to control his mind.

Lines 34 through 41 trace the personified presence of fear as "He" and in addition its connectedness as well as inspiration towards landmark characters and events in literary history. For example, anxiety and fear wrapped "th'Incestuous Queen" in its "cloudy Veil" (line 38). These lines further the notion that literature exists for those who suffer from anxiety as a way to

name and distinguish their conflicting emotions. This higher affect that correlates with anxiety results in the emotional sensitivity that is necessary for writing creative fiction. Literature is a tool used to expose what it truly means to suffer through anxiety, therefore giving it a name and ultimately the ability to overpower its strength. The speaker asserts his heroic act of controlling his anxiety, as he says "O Fear, I know Thee by my throbbing Heart, Thy with'ring Pow'r inspir'd each mournful Line, Tho' gentle Pity claim her mingled Part, Yet all the Thunders of the Scene are thine!" (lines 42-45). Through these words, the speaker asserts that anxiety no longer overpowers him because he is able to harness these negative emotions and transform them into a positive attribute. He has proven to himself that although Fear attempted to take over his mind, his courage and ability to "know Thee by my throbbing Heart" and accept its power he could use it to "inspire each mournful Line." Therefore, being able to outwit the mind is what creates a hero.

Collins' *Antistrophe* works to solidify his hero's journey and to summarize the theme of anxiety. Lines 46 through 52 illustrate the idea that fear is always lurking and waiting to arise as it is "shroud in haunted cell," "where gloomy rape and murder dwell," or "in some hollowed seat." Collins also shows that fear is universal as it exists even in "drowning Sea-men's Cries." However, the Speaker invokes the feeling of anxiety as he asks it to "Be mine, to read the Visions old, which thy awak'ning Bards have told" (Lines 55-56). He then associates fear with the creation of great literary writers such as Shakespeare when he says, "O Thou whose Spirit most possest The sacred Seat of Shakespeare's Breast" (lines 64-65). He feels that it was anxiety's ability to evoke "Divine Emotions" that gave Shakespeare his creative power. The speaker then begs fear to "Teach me but once like Him to Feel" (Line 69) suggesting that he too wants to harness the ability to become attuned to his emotions, as it is quintessential in the creation of literature. To have anxiety means to have the power to feel and have a heightened affect. Therefore, the hero pleads for fear when he exclaims " And I, O Fear, will dwell with Thee" (line 71), because he has discovered that by accepting his fear he can access his emotions through writing.

In "Ode to Fear", Collins is able to rework the Hero's journey as seen in epic works by Homer where instead of a battle versus evil, the battle takes place in the mind. "Ode to Fear" shows how the mind is a very powerful entity that can completely overwhelm a person. In doing so, he shows that it takes the heroics of a poet to harness the negative emotions attributed to anxiety and transform them into the positive assets necessary for creating a work of art. Therefore, Collins reveals that a person is indeed his or her own worst enemy and it takes courage to face one's emotions.

Works Cited

Beck, Aaron T. *Anxiety Disorders and Phobia: A Cognitive Perspective*. USA: Basic Books, 1985.