

2/13/97

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam presents an interesting challenge to any reader trying to sort through its heavy symbolism and not-so-obvious theme. Not only does the poem provide us with a compelling surface story, but a second look at the text can reveal a rich collection of separate meanings hidden in the poem's objective descriptions and sprawling narrative-which in the space of a few pages includes such disparate characters as the Moon, God, the Snake (and his traditional Christian neighborhood, Paradise), the "Balm of Life", not to mention nearly every animal and sexual symbol the human mind can come up with.

Obviously, on one level, the poem can present itself in a fairly straightforward manner in the vein of CARPE DIEM. In the third stanza, the author writes, "'Open then the Door!/ You know how little while we have to stay,/ And, once departed, may return no more." There's several refrains to this throughout the poem, first in the seventh stanza: "Come, fill the cup. . . / The Bird of Time has but a little way/ To flutter-and the bird is on the Wing." The entire ninth stanza describes the summer month "that brings the Rose" taking "Jamshyd and Kaikobad away", and so forth and so on ad nauseum. Again, in the fifty-third stanza: "You gaze To-Day, while You are You-how then/ Tomorrow, You when shall be You no more?" The poet seems to be in an incredible hurry to get this life going before some cosmic deadline comes due, and more than willing to encourage any of the laity he encounters in the course of the poem to do the same.

Another recurring motif throughout the poem is the time-honored act of downing a few drinks. It appears that either "Wine", the "Cup" or "Bowl", and the "Grape" touch every stanza in the poem; the narrator seems to be an alcoholic. In the fifty-sixth stanza he dismisses everything so he can get drunk, having divorced Reason and married the Daughter of the Vine in the previous stanza: "Of all that one should care to fathom, I/ Was never deep in anything but-Wine." Later the narrator compares the Grape to an angel. It's clear this person has something of an obsession.

But all of these seemingly transparent references to drinking beg for a deeper analysis. Writing a really great poem about blowing off the next day to get trashed does not get you into the literary canon. Of particular interest is the symbol of the "Cup" or "Bowl" (or even "Pot" at one point in the poem), and the "Wine" that the narrator seems to be drawing out of it on every occasion.

The "Cup", in Western society, is nearly always synonymous with some sort of prize or contest. Besides the Cup being semi-obviously equated with the vagina and therefore a kind of sexual conquest in our society's male-driven history, there is also the legend of the Holy Grail-The Cup of Life, which grants eternal life to anybody lucky enough to find it. There is a parable in the Bible about a woman who, having been married several times out of either lust or financial necessity, goes to the well for water and finds Jesus there, dispensing wisdom in his usual manner. As she gets water, Jesus tells her, "Whosoever drinks from that well will thirst again." Whether or not this convinces the woman to renounce worldly pleasures and become a Christian is never made clear.

So what then is this "Cup" that the poet makes twenty-five references to throughout the poem (including "Vessel", "Urn", "Bowl", and "Glass")? It's fairly easy to argue that the cup is a symbol for life and the act of living. It's also a curse-no cup is bottomless, so it follows that:

- a) you can't enjoy the wine unless you drink it, but
- b) the more you drink, the quicker it ends.

Now a different theme arises from the symbols the author is using. Is it really time to "Seize the Day" and drink it up while we have the chance? The

sixty-third stanza uses another symbol to explain it: "One thing is certain and the rest is Lies/ The Flower that once has blown for ever dies." Throughout the poem death is seen as being an empty cup (Stanza 72): "And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,/ Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die," and in the fortieth stanza: "Do you devoutly do the like, till Heav'n/ To Earth invert you- like an empty Cup." In the twenty-second stanza, "some we loved. . . Have drunk their Cup a Round or two. . . And one by one crept silently to rest." The author seems to recognize that once the drinking's over, so is life.

Later the author converses with several pots of different sizes (Stanzas 82-90). This highly metaphorical description of the philosophical "pots" giving their opinion on their "potter" (i.e. people talking about God) further emphasizes the idea that human souls are finite vessels that, once emptied, have served their use. In Stanza 89, a pot says, "My Clay with long Oblivion is gone dry:/ But fill me with the old familiar Juice,/ Methinks I might recover by and by."

Which brings us to the question of that "Juice". One could say that the "wine" that the poet praises for a hundred stanzas is kind of like Twinkies or chocolate eclair: a tasty treat for all occasions that should be downed whenever possible. But the poet has darker motivations in mind: (Stanza 43) "So when that Angel of the darker Drink/ At last shall find you by the river-brink,/ And, offering his Cup, invite your Soul/ Forth to your Lips to quaff-you shall not shrink."

Is the "Wine" really temptation and hedonism? Or an escape of sorts? In the forty-fifth stanza, an ominous Sultan addresses "the realm of Death" and prepares his tent "for another Guest." In the fifty-eighth stanza, an "Angel Shape" (whether or not it's from the right side of the tracks we're never told) brings the poet the Grape. And all the drinking in the poem occurs because (the seventy-fourth stanza says it best): "Drink! For you know not whence you came, nor why;/ Drink! For you know not why you go, nor where."

It can't just be coincidence that the "Wine" is always coupled with a more or less veiled religious reference throughout the poem. The sixth stanza: "David's lips are lockt: but in divine/ High-piping Pehlevi, with 'Wine! Wine! Wine!'" The twelfth: "A Book of Verses underneath the Bough, A Jug of Wine. . . and Thou,/ Beside me singing in the Wilderness-/ Oh, Wilderness were Paradise now!" The poet could be seen as attacking people who put their faith in an abstract and invisible "God" as people who are merely drinking because they don't know the answers and don't want to worry about it. Comparing religion to wine or an "opiate of the masses" was pretty popular at the time, even though Marx had probably not yet achieved the popularity he would in the next century. "So, of course," the poet says, "drink up!". In the sixty-first stanza he mocks them: "Why, be this Juice the growth of God, who dare/ Blaspheme the twisted tendril as a Snare?/ A Blessing, we should use it, should we not?/ And, if a curse-why, then, Who set it there?" And it follows logically, then, why the poet had to divorce "Reason from my Bed," in order to take "the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse." in stanza 55.

So, then, we have a finite vessel; people who have divorced Reason fill it with a substance dispensed by Angels and Sultans that, once consumed, offers no other benefit and ends your life. By using basic and easily decipherable (but not obvious) symbolism, the poet has intentionally presented two interpretations of the same idea: life's finite and ends soon. So we can seize the day and get drunk, but this drunkenness obscures the greater truth and ultimately provides only consolation and not answers. But then again, is that such a bad thing? If you want to be preached to, this poem will deliver a cynical sermon condemning those who seek out wine (religion?) for their answers. But if you just want to enjoy life, the poem delivers the easy-to-swallow message of forgetting about tomorrow and living for today. In a way, this poem is like one of those drawings that, when you turn it upside down, becomes something entirely different than what it was right side up. And the poet never really gives instructions on which way to hold it.

