

ENG 232 - Dr. Fisher

The Interpretive Meaning of Christmas

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It is late November here in Hickory, North Carolina, and the beautiful sounds of the Christmas season are fast approaching, if they are not already arrived. Christmas is considered by many to be the most wonderful time of the year, whilst it ruins others' days, weeks, and lives due to the increasingly familiar "holiday-rush." Indeed, the meaning of Christmas has changed in many ways, becoming less and less about its namesake and instead becoming more and more about being the child with the most toys, the adult with the nicest piece of technology, or the family with the biggest, brightest, and most noticeable holiday decorations. In response to this consumeristic attitude, there have been numerous efforts to "bring back" the original meaning of Christmas, yet these have all met with failure. One could argue that this is due to the forces of greed, capitalism, and the want for material things, and that is in part true. However, I would suggest that it is *also* due to the issue of perception with regards to Christmas itself. Whether we, as a society, approve of it or not, the meaning of Christmas has never been static, nor will it ever be. It is that very lack of staticity that is so intriguing to me, however, as the art of story, whether in its original form or retold and reinterpreted, is one of the most important aspects of our collective human experience. Indeed, it is in the *act* of interpreting and retelling our society's stories, both in general and in regards to Christmas, that allows for a continued understanding of both the beauty *and* the meaning found within those stories. And since it is the act of telling and retelling the Christmas story that makes the narrative so powerful, it would be helpful to remind ourselves, as a twenty-first century society, how people of the past told that very same story so that we might rediscover how that same story is relevant to us today.

John Milton's nativity ode, officially titled *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, can help us better explore the Christmas story. Milton, commonly known for *Paradise Lost*, was a 17th century English poet and intellectual. While his epic telling of the fall of man and the following expulsion from Eden remains his most famous work, Milton wrote many other things before the 1667 publication of his magnum opus. Among these other poems is the nativity ode, written in 1629 (when Milton was twenty-one years old) and published in 1645 as part of the *Poems of Mr. John Milton*.

On the Morning of Christ's Nativity is a retelling of the story of Christ's birth from the point of a view of a heavily biased narrator. There are many, many arguments as to which way that bias points, but it is important to note two things about the poem: 1) that this is not *necessarily* a poem written from the Milton's point of view, and 2) that the narrator is *most likely* not Christian due to the ways in which the narrator not only uses Greek and Roman mythology – even comparing the Christ child to Pan, the Greek god of the wild – but also in the ways in which a reader could interpret the narrator's proclamation of Christ's coming as one full of fear, angst, and even hatred, not happiness or joy. There is one agreed upon fact in regards to the narrator, however. He, she, or they are most certainly musically inclined. Christina Fawcett, in her article *The Orphic Singer of Milton's Nativity Ode*, makes the argument that the poem might not be representative of hope or excitement for the coming of Christ, saying that the “central element is not... a welcoming of the Christ child, but rather an expression of anxiety about the rise of powers other than the poet's own voice and music” (Fawcett 105), and R. M. Fransson furthers Fawcett's argument by discussing Milton's transformation of Roman ritual and myth into Christian ideas in his short reflection on the nativity ode. Finally, Andrew Mattison, in the wonderful article *Sweet Imperfection: Milton and the Troubled Metaphor of Harmony*, claims

that Milton himself uses the pretext of a narrator to explore the social functions and concepts of music within poetry. While the arguments presented by Fawcett, Fransson, Mattison, and several others are both interesting and educational, it is the argument presented by J. Martin Evans that I would like us to focus on today.

In the first chapter of his book *The Miltonic Moment*, Evans argues that the nativity ode is “the most rigorously depersonalized of all Milton’s nondramatic work” (Evans 12), and that the narrator of the poem is not an individual of any kind, but a communal chorus. Having established the nature of the narrator, Evans goes on to claim that *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* has, at least for Milton, an intended companion piece in *The Passion* (an unfinished ode of Milton’s written around 1630 and focusing on Christ’s crucifixion). Evans’ argument fits here due to Milton’s comments on the music the angels played on the day of Christ’s birth. He passionately describes the angels singing, arguing in the tenth stanza that the voices of the angels alone could better the earth and even bring it closer to heaven, saying that “She knew such harmony alone/ Could hold all Heav’n and Earth in happier union” (Milton 107-8). Milton goes so far in the twelfth stanza as to suggest that such music had not been made since Creation itself, a beautiful image in support of the “rebirth” through Jesus Christ. If such music were to have continued, Milton says, the world would have been made perfect, “And leprous sin [would have melted] from earthly mould” (Milton 138) and it would have been heaven on earth.

However, and this is where Evans’ argument comes to fruition, heaven on earth would have been unattainable had Jesus not died for our sins, Milton notes on stanza sixteen. No indeed, only *after* death could Jesus claim his throne. Here, Milton truly differs from other tellings of the Christmas story, especially those told today. Milton’s self-aware belief of the true meaning of Christmas, that our sins would be forgiven, forces the reader to do more than simply

focus on the beauty of the landscape, the beauty of the presents given by the wise men, or even the beauty of Christ's birth inasmuch as the fact that he was birthed. Instead, Milton notes the true beauty of Christ's birth is that we, mere mortals undeserving of grace, love, or forgiveness, will be saved not by our own actions, but by the actions of He whom is our savior.

So, why does a 17th century poet's thoughts on the Christmas story matter to us? Perhaps it does not. If you do not find any utility in past interpretations or retellings of the Christmas story, that is perfectly understandable. However, as I said at the very beginning, the act of telling stories is as important as the stories themselves. Allow me to go one step further, though. Perhaps it is the different ways in which we tell the exact same story time and again that allows and encourages us, as both readers and hearers of the tale, to come up with ever more beautiful and, indeed, meaningful interpretations of that very same story. To conclude, then, I have a question. How do you do it, as a reader, hearer, *and* teller of tales? How do you tell *your* Christmas story?

Works Cited

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- Fransson, R. M. "Milton's 'On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity'." *Explicator* 48.4 (1990): 249-251. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 31 Oct. 2014.
- Mattison, Andrew. "Sweet Imperfection: Milton And The Troubled Metaphor Of Harmony." *Modern Philology* 106.4 (2009): 617-647. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 31 Oct. 2014.
- Milton, John. "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." *Poems of Mr. John Milton*. 1645.

ENG232, Marc Foley WEEK6-1, 12/02/13 naked lunch Quiz #5 1) Dr. Benway, William Lee, Ali 2) Obscenity acts, in the novel, as a means of alienating or repulsing readers. Readers belonging to mainstream society instinctually avoid the grotesque, the obscene, the vulgar and violent and dirty. This repulsion propels readers away from the nuances and details of the text. In this way, Burroughs is forcing readers to step away from the specifics of the narrative, saying that the details aren't what matter, and encouraging an examination of the sentiment of the piece, the overall message. 3) There isn't much distinction between queers and junkies in Naked Lunch. Burroughs very much portrays members of both groups as depraved addicts, violent, sadist, and obscene. Wiki Targeted (Entertainment). Do you like this video? Play Sound. What is the True Meaning of Christmas ? A common , yet ambiguous theme in Christmas Specials (episodes, films, stories, etc.), usually answered with An Aesop . In fiction the "True Meaning of Christmas" is often (though not always) " better to give than to receive ." That is the most common Aesop, especially in kid's shows, but also sitcoms, etc. We've Seen It a Million Times and it's often lampshaded with those exact words when Mr... On the surface Dr. Fischer of Geneva is a disarmingly simple book. In straightforward first-person narrative it tells the story of Alfred Jones's love for Anna-Luise Fischer, daughter of the mysterious and powerful doctor, his marriage to her, his attendance at two of the doctor's bizarre parties, and the eventual demise of his wife by accident and of Dr. Fischer by suicide. Yet, anyone familiar with Graham Greene's fiction will not be startled by the complexity of theme and characterization that evolves from the simple plot. This is a novella in which minor details of setting and language have imposing significance. For example, the final supper between Dr. Fischer and his guests "one is tempted to call it the Last Supper" is patently demonic in its symbolism. interpretive definition: 1. related to explaining or understanding the meaning of something: 2. related to explaining or understanding. Learn more. Books are not objects desired in and of themselves, but for the interpretive opportunities they present, and because of the pleasure inherent in those moments. From the Cambridge English Corpus. Items on the right in pairings are interpretive of items on the left, and vice versa. From the Cambridge English Corpus. For the same kind of reasoning, interpretive optimization is global as well. From the Cambridge English Corpus. There is an important sense in which they provide interpretive categories through which religious feelings (at the level of the antithesis) are understood. It may be a low-cost means of providing info; it may diminish monopoly power. Negative Advertising. It may convey little or no info about price or quality; it may help achieve/maintain monopoly power; it may be self-cancelling. Microeconomics 232 Dr. Fisher Test 2. 52 terms. ptjames24.