Daniel Landau: Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays": A Child's Memory

Oftentimes we look back at a certain point in our lives with regret. We feel that if only we had known then what we know now, things would have been different. As we grow older, our view of the world is altered through experience and maturity. In Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," the speaker is a man reflecting on his past and his apathy toward his father when the speaker was a child. As an adult the speaker has come to understand what regretfully had escaped him as a boy. Now he has learned to appreciate the form his father's love had taken. The speaker now understands how difficult and lonely the duties of parental love can be and how they are borne out of selflessness and without expectation of reciprocity. The various elements of the poem work to support this theme and contribute to the poem's emotional appeal.

The poem is in open form with no rhyme scheme. It consists of four sentences broken up into three stanzas. In all its simplicity it could almost be mistaken for prose. Each stanza contributes to evoking different emotions and builds to support the underlying theme.

The title of the poem is appropriate in several ways. First, it suggests that the poem is a memory in that it contains the word "Those." The word indicates that there were many Sundays like this one and that the memory is not of a single event but of a typical Sunday during the speaker's childhood. Secondly, Hayden writes of "Winter Sundays" as opposed to warm, sunny summer ones. Winter, a time when everything normally fresh, beautiful and alive is dead and covered with snow, connotes both coldness and gloominess. These connotations reflect the boy's distant relationship with his father and his coldness toward him.

The final word in the title is "Sundays." In the poem, Sunday is significant for its religious implications. In the first line the speaker tells us that "Sundays too my father got up early" (1). And in the book of Genesis, Chapter 2, Verses 2 and 3, it is written that "He rested on the seventh day, and sanctified it. Throughout Judeo-Christian history, Sunday has been regarded as a day of rest, but the speaker's father, trapped in his role as father, is not able to observe this convention. Another religious association with Sunday is how Christ died on the cross to save the souls of mankind. This was his obligation, his duty in life for the benefit of his "children." The "children," not understanding Christ, crucified him. Like Christ, the father in Hayden's poem has his own cross to bear in holding down a job and tending to an indifferent, uncaring child. Each man performed his harsh service in the name of love. As Christ died on the cross for his children, the father labored and suffered to care for his child, and in neither of these instances did the children recognize the sacrifice until it was too late.

In the opening stanza the speaker introduces his father. From the first line his devotion to the child is implied by the fact that even on Sundays he worked on behalf of his son: "Sundays too my father got up early" (1). Significantly, Hayden uses the word "father" instead of Papa, Daddy or Dad, father being a more formal, less affectionate term than those. This word choice reflects the coldness of their relationship.

In the next four lines, Hayden uses alliteration and the dissonance of cacophony to intimate
the father's pain and the difficulty of his life:

and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

then with cracked hands that ached

from labor in the weekday weather made

banked fires blaze. (2-5)

In lines two and three, Hayden uses harsh consonant sounds in the words "cold," "cracked," and "ached" to evoke the harshness of the speaker's father's life. The father's pain is felt through the powerful imagery of "cracked hands that ached." The reader also gets a sense of the lowly economic status of the household from words like "blueblack," "labor" and "weekday weather." One can infer that the father has a low-paying blue-collar job and that he works with his hands doing manual labor outside in the biting cold. The father's strength is established in the fourth line when he takes "banked fires" and makes them "blaze" to create a comfortable environment for his son.

The first stanza ends with the precise and meaningful "No one ever thanked him" (5). This sentence, placed at the end of the stanza and the end of Line 5, stands out as if it were alone, a separate thought, an afterthought. Hayden places it here to draw our attention to it, to emphasize the loneliness of the father. From this line the reader can surmise the extent of the ungratefulness coming from the child and perhaps the regret of the now adult speaker.

The second stanza is dedicated to the speaker's feelings and his view of his life at that time. Hayden creates a sense of apprehension and fear that the boy felt toward his father and his home:

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

When the rooms were warm, he'd call,

and slowly I would rise and dress,

fearing the chronic angers of that house, (6-9)

The act of going out in the "blueblack cold" and then conquering it and calling his boy when it was "warm" is symbolic of their lives in the real world. The father goes out to work in the harsh "weekday weather" to create a safe, warm environment for his child and to put a roof over his head.

The speaker tells us of his fear in the eighth and ninth lines. He conveys the chilling, sullen aura of their home. In Line 9 Hayden uses metonymy by using "the house" to represent the people in it. Interestingly, Hayden does not explain the "chronic angers of that house." But one can speculate that the father is burdened by his low socioeconomic status. Also, the boy could interpret his father's distress and fatigue to be anger toward him. Finally, as critic Floyd Irmscher points out, nowhere does the poem mention a mother or a wife. If the child's mother and father's wife had died or had left, a deep rooted sense of anger and shame could hang in the air of their tiny home (Ogilvy 91).

In the last stanza, the reader senses the deep regret the speaker now feels over his treatment
of his father. He recalls

    Speaking indifferently to him,
    who had driven out the cold
    and polished my good shoes as well.
    What did I know, what did I know
    of love’s austere and lonely offices? (10-14)

The speaker confesses that as a child he was apathetic and cold toward his father in spite of all the latter’s hard work and devotion. Along with literally warming the house, the father was a servant who performed such mundane tasks as polishing his son’s shoes. This small image underscores the love the father must have had for the child.

Hayden repeats the question "What did I know?" in Line 13. In doing so, he allows the reader to acknowledge the terrible sense of sadness and regret the speaker now feels. The poem’s final line completes the question: “what did I know/of love’s austere and lonely offices?” The child was unable to know the difficulty and sacrifice of parental love. The word "offices" denotes a service done for another. It implies that the father’s life revolved around serving his son. It also signifies a religious rite or ceremony (“office”). This ties in with the religious elements of the poem in that the father was participating in the parental ritual of sacrificing one’s own happiness for that of one’s child.

The tone of Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” is one of sadness and regret. It is simple in form but its elements work to support a theme that many can sympathize with and appreciate. How unfortunate it is that as children we are so often unable to comprehend "love’s austere and lonely offices."

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