

Brandon Evans

Doctor González

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Examining *Repentance* by Natasha Trethewey

Repentance by Natasha Trethewey is an incredibly rich piece of poetry. The entirety of the piece is captivating, eye-catching, and moving. The interpretation of *Repentance* as discussed hereafter, is that Trethewey wrote the piece as a commentary on the idea and action of repentance, and she accomplishes this end by helping the reader understand the air of emotion during the piece, what penitence means, removing key grammar elements, and shifting the tone of the piece.

The word Repentance has traditionally been religiously connotated, usually meaning something akin to “to turn away from sin, and towards God.” Trethewey intends the word repentance to be more of the newer, less biblical definition, perhaps as defined by vocabulary.com as “to feel sorry for something you've done. When you repent, you acknowledge what you did and vow to change your ways.” Trethewey implies this notion with the very first line, “to make it right”, informing the reader that something is not right, that someone feels sorry for something they’ve done, and they’re going to change “to make it right”. The uneasiness of something being wrong is reinforced later in the poem where Trethewey states that “In paint / a story can change / mistakes be undone”, and again with another line, simply, “there’s still time.” Trethewey creates the emotional environment to bring the reader into focus with her feeling of being in the wrong, so that she can explain a way to make things right.

It's important to examine one of the most important words in the entire document: 'pentimento'. Pentimento, in its original form as an Italian word literally meant repentance, but has evolved and changed to denote "a visible trace of earlier painting beneath a layer or layers of paint on a canvas." ("Pentimento: Definition of Pentimento by Lexico"). Trethewey writes, "Pentimento the word / for a painter's change / of heart / revision on canvas / means the same / as remorse / after sin". When a painter makes a mistake on canvas, there is no "undo", or "erase". In order to rectify or repent and erase mistakes on painted canvas, the only thing that can be done is to paint over them. These instances of "pentimento" or painters' revisions, can be found in our modern day with forensic technologies (List "What's Hiding Underneath The Paint? Why + How to Hire a Forensic Art Analysis Firm" 2016), which is how we came to know about the things that Vermeer "erased". Understanding pentimento also gives a great insight about the idea of repentance: while the artist can always "repent" and paint over their errors, making them effectively invisible to the naked eye, the mistake will always still be there on the canvas. The mistakes "erased" in some way help that painting in its beginning process become what it is. With real, human repentance, people can always change and become better people. Mistakes are the building blocks to life. Trethewey shows this concept through a few occurrences denoting Vermeer's painting. "Perhaps / to exchange / loyalty / for betrayal / Vermeer erased / the dog / and made / of the man / a mirror / framed / by the open door". While not positive, Trethewey explains Vermeer's pentimentos of erasing a dog, and changing a man to a mirror plant the seeds of thought that an artist can change anything about a scene, and through the erasing process, these pentimentos become a building block to the painting, much like how humans grow from their mistakes.

By way of physical appearance, *Repentance* stands out from among the crowd by removing all conventional means of grammar excluding the apostrophe, and in their stead, left mighty blank spaces. It hearkens to the concept of repenting, or “erasing” that Trethewey discusses during the poem. Additionally, the grammar exclusion is absolutely effective in creating a specific method of annunciation whenever read aloud. The absence of grammar is jarring, violent, captivating even, conveying a sense that the words are being choked out, in an emotionally charged situation, again bringing us back to the idea of repentance. Trethewey, in an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, speaks on her decision regarding grammar choice in a few quotes, the most relevant being “It would be much easier to read if it were punctuated, but I try to read it as it appears and it feels jarring to me when I do that. It reflects the violence of the erasure itself.” By using an unconventional method of spacing words out, Trethewey understands she can control the readers in a very specific, very poignant way, helping them grasp at the emotional charge that repentance requires, and that the poem reflects.

Midway through the poem, we have a tonal shift from Trethewey describing Vermeer and her painting, and she begins describing a moment from her life, the moment that she wishes she could change and repent of. The moment itself is a fight between Trethewey and her father. She goes into great emotional detail, describing how she feels about the event, with the last six lines in particular having a powerful emotional energy to them. They convey that there is an experience she’s had which is particularly difficult for her, giving the readers glimpses of her hopelessness as she states “In paint a story can change / mistakes be / undone”. It seems as though she’s trying to say that *only* paintings can change, and have their pentimento moments. Trethewey continues, expounding more upon the moment she wishes she could change,

“Imagine Still-Life with Father and Daughter a moment so far back there’s still time to take the glass from your hand or mine”. Still-life, is a type of painting that’s typically done on a group of inanimate objects. Trethewey is inferring here that the falling out that happened between her and her father were emotionally devastating enough to remove humanity out of “that which was painted in the moment.” She’s also inferring that if that moment were indeed a painting, her and her father would have the ability to “erase” the glasses or alcohol from the situation, which was the catalyst to their falling out in the first place. If she had the ability to do such a thing, the moment of pain she shares with her father would cease to exist, and be erased, even as a pentimento.

To conclude, *Repentance* is a truly fascinating, deep piece, and through Trethewey’s perspective, and commentary of her interactions with pentimentos and desiring to make changes, it helps us better understand the human concept of changing or turning away from mistakes, and especially so before it’s too late. The idea that Trethewey is commenting on repentance is reinforced as we come to understand the air of emotion during the piece, what pentimento means, the significance of removing key grammar elements, and taking notice of the shift in tone in the piece.

Sources:

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