 Resource 12 – Understanding The Vesper Song of the Reverend

Use the Rubric to Respond to the Questions

1. What human experiences are explored within the poem?
2. Are these experiences individual or collective?
3. Find evidence to support your observations of one of the human experiences explored in this poem.
4. What impact do these human experiences have on the individual (the imagined victim within the poem)? On the audience?
5. How does the imagery within this poem affect you on a personal level? Provide evidence.
6. Highlight all the violent images. What is the impact of this word choice?
7. Write a paragraph commenting on the title of the poem, what this says about the Reverend Samuel Marsden and Slessor’s purpose in writing this poem.

Analysis

Written in the late 1930s against the backdrop of the Depression and inevitable war. The poem is a first person narrative, dominated by both religious and violent images.

The poem is written in a AA, BB, CC rhyming pattern giving the poem a sing-song rhythm, much like a child’s nursery rhyme. This positions the audience to see that the persona enjoys the metering out of punishment, the crueller the better. The rhythm of the poem is juxtaposed with the violent imagery embedded throughout.

Stanza 1

* The poem begins in a condescending tone with the persona demanding that his boots are ‘lick’ed and that the voiceless victim must ‘learn’ from him. The ‘victim’ is accused of being sinful.
* The persona is directly addressing his victim.
* We are introduced to violent images from the beginning which continues throughout the poem.
* The tone implies a persona that sees himself as morally above those around him.
* Alliteration in the first two lines, with the harsh ‘c’ and ‘l’ sound immediately introduce us to a cruel persona.
* The ‘tainted highways’, again, implies that the persona is beyond reprimand and that all of his surroundings are flawed and corrupt – both the environment and the people. Slessor uses an ironic tone to position the audience to connect very quickly with the cruelty of this historical figure.
* An accusatory tone in ‘O, ye that wear the boots of Hell,’ continue the theme of all those surrounding the Reverend needing to be reformed and that he is the only one capable of doing this.
* The religious references in ‘God’s leather’ and ‘sacramental knout’ enable the persona to distance himself from the violence he is about to inflict, suggesting that it is merely the will of God, rather than Marsden’s thirst for power and dominance.

Stanza 2

* The persona shifts his focus from the victim to speaking directly to God. This demonstrates Marsden’s arrogance.
* The persona’s language is attempting to ingratiate himself to God and, again, distancing himself from the gratuitous violence – he is merely a disciple of God.
* The grotesque imagery is confronting in an attempt to position the audience to be as horrified by Marsden’s punishments as Slessor was.
* ‘Jewelled blood’ demonstrates the beauty that the persona sees in his cruelty.
* Repetition of Hell from Stanza 1 indicates both the hellish environment that Marsden has created, as well as the use of religion as a weapon or tool to keep power and create fear. ‘Hell’ in Stanza 2 also refers to Marsden’s tenacity and dogma – even in hell he intends on inflicting pain and suffering.

Stanza 3

* The single line changes tone and abruptly cuts us off the violence throughout the poem. The persona uses false humility in ‘Your humble wretch’ in an insincere attempt to atone for the cruelty and violence he inflicted upon others.