

Autotelic Personality And The Evolution Of Social Deviance: Exploring Institutional Ratification, Taboos, And Discourse Through ‘Canonization’ By John Donne

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Abstract

This paper examines John Donne’s poem “Canonization” to explore the theme of unconventional love and its defiance of societal norms. The analysis focuses on the speaker’s determination to prioritize intrinsic value over external validation, exemplifying an autotelic personality. The paper also delves into the concept of May-December relationships as a form of societal deviance, reflecting the tension between personal autonomy and social expectations. Through close reading and contextual analysis, the study highlights how the speaker employs discourse to seek institutional ratification for their love, showcasing the evolving nature of societal norms. Overall, this paper illuminates the complex interplay between love, individuality, and societal conventions within Donne’s poetic exploration.

Keywords: Autotelic Personality, Social Deviance, Institutional Ratification, Taboos, Discourse, Unconventional Love, Societal Norms, May-December Relationships.

Introduction

Throughout history, literature has served as a potent catalyst for societal transformation and a means of articulating suppressed sentiments. Across epochs, it has functioned as a formidable instrument of advocacy, particularly championing rights that have been traditionally marginalized due to deeply ingrained societal prejudices. Moreover, literature’s capacity to transcend temporal barriers grants it the power to advocate for rights that were once condemned by society. In essence, literature’s enduring role as a medium for transformation and expression renders it an invaluable tool for advocating reasonable rights. Its ability to penetrate the walls of prejudice and initiate discourse stands as a testament to its timeless significance in reshaping societal perceptions and dismantling the taboos that have constrained progress for centuries. Similarly, in John Donne’s “Canonization,” the speaker’s autotelic personality is unveiled as they prioritize the intrinsic value of love over societal norms. Through a May-December relationship, the poem delves into the realm of societal deviance, dissecting the tension between personal autonomy and collective expectations. By employing rhetorical questions and bold language, Donne challenges traditional boundaries, aligning the work with the transgressive literary genre. The pursuit of institutional ratification for the speaker’s love underscores the evolving nature of societal norms.

Autotelic Love: Defying Societal Norms in “Canonization”

In John Donne’s poem “Canonization,” the speaker is depicted as an elderly individual. It is clear

that the speaker is not the poet himself, as the poem was composed in the 1590s when Donne was in his middle-aged years. Therefore, we must discount the possibility of the poet being the actual speaker within the context of this poem. By conducting a close reading of the poem “Canonization,” one could infer that the speaker within the poem displays characteristics indicative of an autotelic personality. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi provided a precise definition of the autotelic personality :

“‘Autotelic’ is a word composed of two Greek roots: auto (self), and telos (goal). An autotelic activity is one we do for its own sake because to experience it is the main goal. [...] Applied to personality, autotelic denotes an individual who generally does things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some later external goal” (117).

The concept of an “autotelic personality,” where individuals engage in activities intrinsically for

their own sake, finds resonance within various literary works. The line “For God’s Sake, Hold Your Tongue” presents an intriguing study, offering insight into how a speaker’s attitude towards

love mirrors the autotelic personality’s fundamental traits. This paper delves into the poem’s exploration of self-contained love and the defiance of societal expectations, shedding light on how the speaker embodies the autotelic ethos.

The speaker’s unequivocal focus on the act of loving itself demonstrates an intrinsic motivation that aligns with the autotelic personality trait. The speaker dismisses societal pressures, prioritizing the experience of love above external validation or approval. This unapologetic commitment to love solely for its intrinsic rewards exemplifies the autotelic principle of pursuing activities for their inherent value. The speaker’s bold rejection of societal judgment reveals a strong adherence to the autotelic trait of pursuing activities for personal satisfaction rather than seeking approval. The willingness to embrace love regardless of potential criticism highlights the speaker’s resilience in staying true to their intrinsic motivations, a characteristic often associated with the autotelic personality. The speaker’s unconventional perspective on love challenges societal norms and categories, reflecting the autotelic ethos of engaging in activities with a self-contained focus. By portraying love as transcendent and beyond the confines of societal expectations, the speaker’s attitude reinforces the autotelic principle of valuing activities for their inherent worth.

Disrupting Norms: societal Deviance in “Canonization”

At times, individuals with an autotelic personality exhibit a deviation from conventional societal norms. This is often driven by their inclination to prioritize their inherent enjoyment over conforming to the expectations of society. In literature, the term “Deviance” refers to characters or actions that go against the usual societal norms. These actions might not necessarily be harmful, but they stand out because they don’t align with what’s generally accepted. Within literature, the concept of deviance is often used to explore ideas of rebellion, nonconformity, and the conflict between personal expression and societal expectations. In this poem, we catch a glimpse of a May-December relationship between the poet and their beloved, which stands out as a departure from the usual societal norms. To convey this clearly, I’ve mentioned the potential age of the speaker at the outset of this paper.

In modern society, marriages with an age difference, often referred to as “May-December” marriages which are viewed as socially unacceptable by a significant portion of the population. Despite this prevailing attitude, there exists a notable contingent of individuals who staunchly support and defend such unions. The term “May-December” signifies a substantial age gap between the partners, with one being considerably younger (May) and the other significantly older (December). This age disparity can lead to scepticism and criticism from various quarters, primarily due to concerns about differing life stages, potential power imbalances, and questions about the motivations behind such unions. However, amidst the prevailing societal scepticism, a subset of people stands as advocates for May-December marriages. Their arguments often revolve around the notions of personal autonomy, love transcending age, and the idea that consenting adults should have the freedom to choose their partners without judgment. These supporters emphasize that genuine emotional connections and shared values can bridge the age gap, making such relationships as valid and meaningful as any other. Ultimately, the debate over May-December marriages underscores the tension between traditional societal norms and evolving notions of love, companionship, and individual agency. While critics uphold the notion of social norms and potential challenges, proponents emphasize the importance of empathy and respect for individuals’ choices in matters of the heart.

In the opening stanza of John Donne’s poem “Canonization,” the speaker’s portrayal of grappling with old age and desiring unimpeded love serves as a subtle indication that the concept of May-December marriages, characterized by significant age gaps between partners, was a topic of societal discourse even during the Elizabethan era. The speaker’s plea to “hold your tongue, and let me love” reflects an earnest desire to love freely, unrestricted by societal norms or judgments. By alluding to his own age-related challenges, such as “palsy” and “gout,” the speaker implies that his age should not hinder his capacity to experience affection and companionship. The phrase “let me love” encapsulates the speaker’s yearning for autonomy and agency in matters of the heart, echoing the sentiments of proponents of May-December marriages who argue for personal freedom to choose partners based on genuine emotional connection rather than conforming to rigid social standards. The fact that these themes were being explored in the Elizabethan era underscores that the discourse surrounding May-December marriage or love is not a contemporary phenomenon but rather one that has persisted throughout history. This stanza highlights the tension between societal expectations and individual desires, shedding light on the persistent dialogue about love, companionship, and

autonomy in the face of societal judgment. Thus, the analysis of this stanza in “Canonization” provides valuable insight into the historical and cross-cultural considerations of May-December relationships and their relevance within different social contexts.

When exploring ‘deviance,’ a solid grasp of Hagan’s pyramid becomes crucial, as it vividly showcases how communities react to criminal activities. This model offers a clear framework for understanding actions perceived as criminal by society. In my research paper, I specifically delved into the phase of social deviation within Hagan’s pyramid. This model illustrates how different crimes impact communities and garner responses. At the pyramid’s base lie social diversions, followed by social deviations, which I scrutinized. Ascending, the pyramid encompasses conflict crimes, subject to societal disagreement, and culminates at its apex with consensus crimes like murder.

“Social deviations” refer to actions that certain individuals perceive as detrimental to society, despite not being legally classified as crimes. These behaviours might not violate regulations, yet they are often regarded as morally questionable or disruptive to societal norms. May-December relationships with significant age gaps are one example of a social deviation, as they challenge traditional notions of what a “proper” relationship should be. The speaker of the poem has entered into a May-December relationship, which has evoked the criticism of the society. The speaker is forced to justify their action and want to achieve institutional ratification in order to legitimize their relationship. The poem explores the tension between individual freedom and social norms.

Institutional Ratification: Shaping Taboos and Social Acceptance

Institutional ratification is an important process because it helps to legitimize social deviations and make them more acceptable to society. It can also help to protect the rights of those who engage in these deviations. Moreover, it is the process by which a social or political institution gives its approval to something that was previously considered to be outside the norm. This can be done through legislation, judicial decisions, or other forms of institutional recognition. Actions lacking institutional approval are often deemed taboo. When society labels an action as taboo, it usually imposes a moral prohibition on it. Consequently, individuals performing such actions might experience isolation and exclusion from the broader community.

Foucault examines how institutional ratification acts as a constraint on the dissemination of discourse. Conversely, in the poem “Canonization,” the speaker utilizes discourse to secure institutional ratification. In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker is questioning the impact of their love on others and whether it has caused harm. They wonder if their heartfelt emotions are as powerful as merchant ships, capable of affecting others. The speaker also questions if their tears have caused any damage, and if their passionate feelings have disrupted the natural order of things. They contrast their situation with soldiers who create conflicts and lawyers who create disputes, suggesting that even though they love someone, they’re not causing harm like those who generate conflicts. This can be related to seeking institutional ratification by showing that their love isn’t causing discord but is genuine, much like how they believe their love is harmless unlike conflicts created by others.

Institutional ratification involves presenting reasoned arguments over time. Advocates of unconventional ideas must persuasively justify their beliefs with solid reasoning and evidence, exhibiting patience for societal perspectives to evolve. The speaker of the poem is arguing that their love is so strong and pure that it will be remembered and celebrated for centuries to come. They say that even if their love is not accepted by society in their lifetime, it will eventually be canonized for love. The speaker's words suggest that the future will give institutional ratification to things that have social acceptance in the contemporary. In other words, things that are considered taboo or unacceptable in the present may eventually be accepted and even celebrated in the future. This is because societies change over time, and what is considered taboo or unacceptable can change as well. For example, same-sex marriage was once considered taboo in many societies, but it is now legal and widely accepted in many parts of the world.

The poem "Canonization" by John Donne can be classified as transgressive literature due to its exploration of societal boundaries and unconventional way of living. The speaker's May-December relationship challenges traditional norms of love and relationships. The poem delves into the tension between personal autonomy and societal expectations, mirroring the themes often found in transgressive literature. The speaker's assertion that their love should be remembered and celebrated, even if not accepted during their lifetime, exemplifies the defiance against societal constraints. Through rhetorical questions and comparisons, the poem argues for the legitimacy of their love, akin to transgressive works that challenge norms through reasoning and discourse. Donne's use of paradoxes and bold language further accentuates the transgressive nature of the poem. Overall, "Canonization" challenges societal conventions, embraces individuality, and debates the legitimacy of love, marking it as a piece of transgressive literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, John Donne's poem "Canonization" provides a window into the clash between personal desires and societal norms. It demonstrates that love can defy traditional boundaries and challenge prevailing norms. The poem's relevance to transgressive literature lies in its ability to question established beliefs and push the boundaries of accepted ideas. By showcasing the speaker's unwavering commitment to their love, despite societal resistance, the poem echoes the spirit of transgressive works that dare to challenge conventions.

The poem's exploration of unconventional relationships, the pursuit of institutional validation, and the evolving nature of societal norms underscores its thematic connection to transgressive literature. The speaker's insistence on love's legitimacy, regardless of societal opinions, serves as a powerful reminder of literature's capacity to challenge, inspire, and transform. Through vivid language and thought-provoking questions, Donne's poem not only challenges societal conventions but also encourages readers to reflect on the delicate balance between societal conformity and individual authenticity.

"Canonization" invites us to reconsider the essence of love, autonomy, and societal norms. It captures the essence of transgressive literature by venturing beyond the ordinary and prompting

critical reflection on established norms. Ultimately, the poem exemplifies the timeless power of literature to ignite discourse, foster change, and celebrate the resilience of the human spirit in the face of societal constraints.

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