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Studying Christian Hymns as Works of Literature: Recognizing Themes of Spiritual Illumination

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Methods of worship among Christian churches have involved the reciting or singing of poetic works for as long as the religion has existed. In the Old Testament book of Psalms in the Christian and Jewish scriptures, there are poems and songs recorded there and believed to have been written by biblical characters, including King David, that were intended to praise or address God. In centuries past, traditional Christian churches have used hymns to join congregations together in worship, to deliver meaningful sermons, and to serve educational purposes (Marini). As time has progressed and technological advancements improved, poetic preferences, and ways of reaching non-believers, have changed. The use of traditional hymns in worship has decreased among most Christian churches, especially those that do not adhere to more traditional practices. While the need for contemporary methods of worship is legitimate, hymns remain a part of Christian tradition as poetic works that often reveal intense, emotional words and messages. They contribute to the lasting historical, spiritual, and nostalgic magnitude of the Christian church. By studying traditional Christian hymns—including "Be Thou My Vision," "Amazing Grace," and "It Is Well with My Soul"—for their significant and relevant literary qualities in the schools of medieval, romantic, and formalist criticism that make them notable works of literature, a new appreciation for hymns may be fostered in such a way that an argument in favor of their importance and need for respect and remembrance may be possible.

In the Christian and Jewish Scriptures, there are approximately seventy-three psalms attributed to King David, a biblical figure who lived during the time of the ancient Israelites (Zondervan Academic). Psalm 33 is distinguished in its emphasis on the use of not only words, but also music, to praise God. While it is not the only psalm that uses auditory imagery to suggest that God deserves to be praised, it noticeably includes lines of text that specifically mention using song to address God. In the New International Version translation of the Christian Bible, Psalm 33: 1-5, written by David, reads:

> [1]Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous;
> it is fitting for the upright to praise Him.
> [2]Praise the Lord with the harp;
> make music to Him on the ten-stringed lyre.
> [3]Sing to Him a new song;
> play skillfully, and shout for joy.
> [4]For the word of the Lord is right and true;
> He is faithful in all He does.
> [5]The Lord loves righteousness and justice;
> the earth is full of His unfailing love. (*NIV Bible*)

David's heartfelt words of rejoicing in this psalm—this song of praise—are poetic in their meaning and in their written form. While it is true that these verses are merely translations of the

original words of the psalm penned by David, the intent of this poem seems to be obvious: it is the responsibility and the privilege of Christians to praise God for His mercy and grace, and they are called to do so by any means available, including by the use of poetry and song.

As the evidence in Psalm 33, in other psalms, and in other passages throughout the Bible would suggest, the people living during this time in history—those who were believed to be witness to the acts and movements of God Himself, and those who would become the first Christians—wrote their poetry with the intent to address God directly. Their words reflected their inner heartbreak, their fear, their senses of uncertainty, and their anger that was directed at God, at other people, or at their life situations. The psalms and other Biblical passages that may be studied now, even in modern translations of the Christian Scriptures, depict the suffering of those ancient believers in very much the same way that the hymns and contemporary Christian music of the following centuries would communicate. Composing poetry, literature, and music seems to be a means of bibliotherapy that Christians, for thousands of years, have used to connect with God on a personal level and to share their experiences of hope and peace with other people. M. Pauline Parker writes, "One of the advances in hymn writing…is the discovery that the personal cry of one may also be the voice of many" (21). So often, it seems as though contemporary Christian music—which often now comes in the form of lengthy, even repetitive worships songs that may be argued to lack literary creativity or style—is praised and favored for its communication by the author or singer of the pain, suffering, and redemptive love experienced during the progression of a relationship with God. While modern Christian music is certainly powerful, influential, and necessary, hymns—and even psalms—must be recognized as well for being written by people with very much the same mindsets and struggles as contemporary songwriters. This realization allows for a greater appreciation of the older, more traditional music that can date all the way back to the days of King David, who was a man believed to have been "after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22).

Another man also said to have been "after God's own heart" was Saint Dallán Forgaill, an Irish poet and Latin scholar, who lived in the medieval time period during the sixth century and is credited with writing a poem in Irish Gaelic that would, centuries later, become the widely known Christian hymn titled "Be Thou My Vision" (Ayers 2). The poem exhibits lines of strong yet softhearted words of praise, creating a warm, genuine address that reveals the poet's emotions of awe and thankfulness to God. In English, the first line of the poem reads, "Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart." Believed to have been blinded as a child or as a young man, Forgaill may have written these words to literally ask God to be his "vision" as he lives his life without the sensation of sight. The spiritual message of this poem, however, suggests the symbolism behind that cry for sight: the speaker is asking for God's presence in his life and is choosing to surrender his own physical, worldly life to God's plan, which is unknown to the speaker, but is something in which he greatly trusts. The profound emotion and enchanting words of gratefulness for the closeness of God illuminates the timelessness of this poem.

Translated in 1905 from Irish to English by Mary Elizabeth Byrne, a linguist and a graduate of the National University of Ireland and St. Mary's University College, the current

lyrics of "Bí Thusa 'mo Shúile" exist in rhymed, poetic form. Her translation (Appendix A), named "Be Thou My Vision" in English, was edited in 1912 by a fellow Irish scholar, Eleanor Hull. From a formalist perspective of literary criticism, it is notable that Hull put the verses into rhyme, and now, the hymn includes twenty lines—all ten syllables each—and is broken into five quatrains, each with an *aabb* rhyme scheme (Ayers 6). Set to the tune of "Slane," an old Irish folk tune, "Be Thou My Vision" is now a familiar hymn.

Particularly to those who have had experience with the traditional customs and rituals of the Christian church, and especially among Protestant denominations, this hymn is often recognized as one of the oldest songs used in worship services. Because of the work of the Irish scholars and musicians who had the determination to bring this fifteen-hundred-year-old poem to the ears of contemporary Christians, "Be Thou My Vision" communicates the age-old message of the believer's need for oneness with God and the truth of the illumination experienced by the believer who pursues that relationship.

From a perspective of medieval literary theory and criticism, it is crucial to note that the Christian Church and Christianity in general were central driving forces for much of the literature, art, and critical works produced during the Medieval Age. Therefore, the creation of poems such as "Be Thou My Vision" would have been of typical subject matter common to many authors and artists at the time. Augustine of Hippo, a medieval Christian theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, wrote on numerous subjects as they pertained to the Christian scriptures and to believers' relationships with God. His work, titled "On Christian Teaching," discussed the beginnings of semiotics and the ways in which certain words are associated with images or concepts in the minds of readers and listeners, specifically within biblical passages. The term for this idea, the "signifier," may be found in "Be Thou My Vision." Especially in the third stanza where the poet writes, "Be thou my battle shield, sword for my fight," images such as "battle shield" and "sword" are associated with concepts the poet may not have meant literally. While Forgaill is asking God to act as his "sword and shield," it is more likely that the image or idea meant to be associated with this statement—rather than a literal shield and sword—is supposed to be the strength, wisdom, and mental or physical ability to defeat the trials and temptations the poet knows he will face in his life, not limited to physical and spiritual blindness.

Examples of other medieval poetry works containing similar themes include "Dream of the Rood" and "Caedmon's Hymn," the author of the former being anonymous, and the latter being attributed to Caedmon (Kurian and Smith). As a work of literature, "Be Thou My Vision" displays themes of oneness with God; it is reasonable to suggest that this poem specifically exhibits the second and third stages of the medieval, primarily spiritual concept, the dark night of the soul. This concept is acknowledged for its three stages, including purgation, illumination, and union with God (Hall). The poet of "Be Thou My Vision," perhaps after having suffered from either physical or spiritual blindness and finally returning to God, may have written his poem as a way to express his gratefulness for having that epiphanic moment—an illumination—upon realizing God to have always been a constant presence of love and peace in his life. The "union

with God" stage is often characterized in literature by the sense of peace that accompanies it, which is certainly appropriate considering the serene, calmed nature of the poem and the hymn.

The theme of illumination following a period of either literal or spiritual blindness appears also in the popular hymn, written in 1779, titled "Amazing Grace." However, this hymn, arguably the most familiar, the most often performed, and among the most beloved hymns ever written, has a story of origin not often known to the average Christian audience or performer. A study of the history of this hymn, but also of its qualities which align with the romantic and formalist schools of literary criticism, provides a greater understanding of the hymn's meaning and significance as a work of spiritual literature.

John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," was an ordained English Anglican minister; in his past, however, he was a notorious troublemaker who made a career for himself in the African slave trade during the eighteenth century. He was a "wild and angry young man who rebelled against authority at every opportunity," and he admitted himself that he was "exceedingly vile" (Aitken 17). From a young adult age, he worked for a slave trader in Sierra Leone, serving "on a slave ship during the darkest and cruelest days of trans-Atlantic slavery" (Sapoznik 5). It wasn't until a horrible storm at sea threatened a ship he was on during one of his voyages that some historians believe he was converted to Christianity; after hours of struggling to help the crew keep the vessel afloat amid the treacherous winds and waves, Newton is believed to have cried out, "Lord have mercy on us!" Once the ship was safely guided to shore hours later, Newton recognized the miracle of his and the ship's survival as an act of grace from God. Newton realized that he, a "wretch," according to the lyrics of his own hymn that he would later write, had been saved (Sapoznik 6). However, despite this revelation, Newton continued his involvement with the slave trade as a slave-ship captain for years—completing four voyages to Africa between 1748 and 1754—to earn his living (Sapoznik 7).

Figuratively, Newton suffered from "blindness" that prevented him, for years, from realizing how his involvement with the slave trade should have conflicted with his beliefs as a Christian. He acknowledges this "blindness" in the last two lines of the first stanza of "Amazing Grace," which read, "I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind, but now I see." The antitheses of "lost" and "found," as well as "blind" and "see," may also be traced to stories from the gospels in the Christian Scriptures (Sapoznik 4). In the Gospel of John, specifically, there is a story in which Jesus healed a blind man, who, when questioned later by the Pharisees, exclaimed in John 9:25, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (*NIV*).

It is believed that this figurative "blindness" dissipated from Newton's eyes once he finally left the slave trade for health reasons in 1754. After leaving the trade, he began to recognize the errors in his career choices, and he began to regret his previous role in the slave trade. He would eventually, although perhaps indirectly, influence William Wilberforce, a British abolitionist, who would lead the movement that eventually succeeded to abolish the British slave trade in February 1807 (Sapoznik 15). Believed to have been near literal blindness as his health continued to fail, Newton passed away in December of 1807 after having witnessed the eradication of slavery in Britain (The Abolition Project).

"Amazing Grace" (Appendix B), as a work of literature, may be studied appropriately through the lens of both the Romantic and Formalist literary theories of criticism. Occurring primarily in the eighteenth century in both Europe and in the newly established America, works of literature from the movement of Romanticism are characterized by their attention to emotion, individualism, self-expression, psychology, nature, the supernatural, and ideas involving emotive or sublime expression. Romantic writers and critics were also often proponents for political and social change, and they usually opposed materialism and rationalism. In the duration of a study of "Amazing Grace" as a romantic work of literature, and especially when considering the history of the hymn and its author, it may certainly be suggested that political and social connotations involving slavery and Protestantism may be derived from this work. Especially in the lyrics involving Newton referring to himself as a "wretch" who was "blind" but now has sight, the implication may be that those who continue to sin without repenting are living in blindness; being involved in the African slave trade—an entity to which having opposition would have been very controversial during Newton's lifetime—contributed to the "blindness" that had once consumed Newton himself during his career as a slave-ship captain.

Newton's attention to his own actions is reflective of the romantic notions of self-expression and individuality. His use of the pronouns "I" and "me" are examples of formalist characteristics which suggest the emphasis put on the speaker's own experience. "Amazing Grace" is also a very emotional poem, telling the story of the speaker's journey from faithlessness—blindness—to finding faith by witnessing the saving grace of God. From a formalist perspective, the poem is comprised of twenty-four lines that are broken into six quatrains, each which exhibit an *aabb* rhyme scheme. Each line contains alternating numbers of syllables; oddly numbered lines contain eight syllables, while the evenly numbered lines contain six. Considering this poem was intended to be a hymn when Newton wrote it, the number of syllables included in each line is appropriate and was likely a strategic way to ensure that the lyrics would align with the melody.

"Amazing Grace" is an example of a hymn—sung and popularized by both Christian and non-Christian groups—that provides an insight into not only the life of its author and its speaker, but also into the Protestant, literary, political, and even economic culture of eighteenth-century England (Sapoznik 15). Its message is reflective of the mission of the Christian church in the sense that it reveals the grace and peace experienced by a believer who comes into relationship with God, recognizing and freely repenting from all past sins. "Amazing Grace" notably exhibits Christian-based morals which have become embedded in modern society: virtues of forgiveness, thankfulness, and grace.

Relevant once again to the period of Romanticism, but more importantly to the struggle of average Christians to withstand the trials of a faithful life, is the solemn, yet celebrated hymn "It Is Well with My Soul." What started as a poem written in 1873 by American lawyer Horatio Spafford became a beloved hymn distinguished for its words of everlasting faith (Kennedy 20). This hymn, with the tragic background of its author in mind, remains admirable in its ability to illuminatingly call upon God for peace with complete faith.

In late 1873, Spafford and his wife, Anna, had planned to travel to Europe with their four young daughters, all under the age of twelve. As the time for their departure drew near, unexpected business circumstances forced Spafford to remain at home. However, not wanting to disappoint his family, he sent the five of them off to Europe without him, promising them that he would follow and meet them in Europe shortly after he had taken care of his business affairs (Kennedy 20). Tragically, during the voyage, the ship carrying Spafford's wife and four daughters—the SS *Ville de Havre*—collided with another ship off the coast of Newfoundland, critically damaging the vessel and causing it to sink in a matter of twenty minutes. The four girls were swept away from their mother, who became the only survivor of the shipwreck from her family. Ten days after being rescued and taken to Wales, Anna Spafford wired her husband a message which read, "Saved alone." He sailed to England immediately to be reunited with her, and the couple began to grieve the loss of their children (Kennedy 20).

After returning home to Chicago, Spafford returned to his law practice and to his role at his local Presbyterian church. When he received condolences from friends and family for the loss of his children, he would often reply, "It is well. The will of God be done." It wasn't until several years later that these words would inspire him to write a poem which would eventually be paired with a melody and be made into a hymn by Philip P. Bliss (Kennedy 20). Spafford's words of faith and his story of endurance continue to be inspiring to contemporary Christians; numerous adaptations of "It Is Well" by modern songwriters have renewed this celebrated hymn in the decades since its creation, continuously reminding listeners of the power of Christian faith.

"It Is Well with My Soul" (Appendix C) contains characteristics of romantic literary theory and criticism, but it is also notable that realism—while not a school of criticism—remains influential to this poem as well. Unique from "Be Thou My Vision" and "Amazing Grace," "It Is Well with My Soul" was written by an American during a period of rapid industrial development. The societal and political circumstances surrounding the creation of this literary work are vastly different from those of the former two hymns; the recent American Civil War, which ended only eight years prior to the composition of this poem, was a critical influencer to many authors at this time in American history. The words of "It Is Well with My Soul" are further suggestive of the need for a sense of faith and peace within the believer that is strong enough to withstand the distractions of the technologically developing modern America during the later nineteenth century.

The use of the "I" and "me" pronouns, as also found in "Amazing Grace," are suggestive of the romantic notions of individuality and self-expression. The emotion in "It Is Well with My Soul" is also undeniable; the speaker's determination to remain faithful regardless of his difficult life circumstances is revealed in his exclamations of joy at the knowledge of God's goodness: "Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!" Also, from a formalist perspective, the six quatrains of this poem—not including the two-line refrain—each present an interesting rhyme scheme. Although the first and third lines of each quatrain do not rhyme—with the exception of the first stanza—the second and fourth lines do, and the fourth line always ends with the word "soul." Despite the unique content of each stanza, Spafford intentionally relates each circumstance he

mentions in every quatrain to the effect it has on a faithful soul; and in the end, he affirms, "Even so, it is well with my soul."

The nature and water imagery used in the poem is quite significant as well. Not only is the use of nouns that are associated with nature reflective of romantic literature, but referring to "peace like a river," "sea billows," and the "Jordan" which "above me shall roll"—likely referring to the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3)—reflects the theme of cleansing, life, and freedom that is often associated with water in literature. Using water imagery is an ironic word choice, considering that water is what caused the greatest tragedy of Spafford's life: the death of his four daughters. However, the presence of that irony only further intensifies Spafford's message that no tragedy or fear of death can ever separate a true, faithful believer from God.

Spafford's poem declares that, regardless of the circumstances, the speaker will remain faithful; his soul will remain "well," acting in the knowledge that God is all-knowing and will provide peace and rest to those who believe in Him. Whether it is peace that will "attendeth" his life, or sorrows that "billow" like the waves of the ocean, the speaker affirms: "Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, / It is well, it is well with my soul." The speaker continues the poem by remembering the sacrifice made for him by Jesus Christ: "That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, / And hath shed His own blood for my soul." The stanzas of the poem continue as the speaker renounces all pain, fear, and even death that he knows he will eventually experience; nothing can ever separate him from his faith in God, who has allowed for his soul to be "well" throughout the trials he has already faced during his lifetime.

Hundreds of other hymns may be studied for their literary merit as well. "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," "The Old Rugged Cross," "Great is Thy Faithfulness," "Because He Lives," "In the Garden," "How Great Thou Art," "Morning Has Broken," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and numerous others are among the hymns familiar and treasured by Christians, especially by those who have been accustomed to traditional practices which involve hymn singing during worship services. It may be argued that these songs are individual, unique, and didactic works of poetry, which distinguishes them from the more contemporary forms of Christian worship music. Some of these hymns have survived hundreds of years, and many of them are derived from the quiet moments of a thoughtful soul who has longed to communicate more freely and artistically with God in a way that would glorify and celebrate His greatness. While there is certainly a place and a need in modern churches for the songs of famous worship bands including Hillsong Worship, Bethel Music, Elevation Worship, and other contemporary bands, the old, traditional hymns must be remembered for their literary and spiritual contributions to the Christian church. Modern believers can sing these hymns nostalgically with admiration for the generations of Christians who have come before and have worshipped the very same God.

Hymns are a critical part of the identity of the single, united Christian church worldwide; they unite people with their stories, their messages, and their words of worship, joy, and encouragement. Their place in the church must not only be as a part of history, but as an

evolving force which exemplifies the power of literature and melody, both individually and when paired together in song. When they are studied from the perspectives of numerous schools of literary criticism, including the medieval, romantic, and formalist theories, the qualities they possess which characterize them as unique and timeless become undeniable. Hymns are historical, nostalgic works of literature, but their themes of illumination, oneness with God, and faithfulness—as exemplified in "Be Thou My Vision," "Amazing Grace," and "It Is Well with My Soul"—remain powerfully timeless.

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Appendix A

"Be Thou My Vision"
St. Dallán Forgaill
Translation by Mary Elizabeth Byrne, M.A.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art--
thou my best thought by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou my great Father, I thy true son;
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my battle shield, sword for my fight;
be thou my dignity, thou my delight,
thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tow'r:
raise thou me heav'n-ward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always:
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heav'n's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Appendix B

"Amazing Grace"
John Newton

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
We have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

Appendix C

"It Is Well with My Soul"
Horatio Spafford

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:
It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious tho't—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

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