

## Part II: The Relationship between Conflict and Theme

Keeping in mind what I wrote about theme in Part I, I'll be using Part II to talk about theme in terms of conflict, and how one can use conflict as a means to uncover themes in a text. My plan is fairly straightforward: walk you through a text while describing my thought process as I make the decisions that lead to an actual reading of what it is trying to communicate, and the tool that I will use to do this will be conflict.

Consider this short untitled poem from Italian poet Patrizia Cavalli, found in her 1981 collection *The Sky (Il Cielo)* in translation by Judith Baumel:

But then if I really think about your death  
in whatever house, hotel or hospital bed,  
in whatever street, perhaps in air  
or in a tunnel; about your eyes that surrender  
to the invasion; about the ultimate terrible lie  
with which you will want to repulse the attack  
or the infiltration; about your blood pulsing hesitant  
and frantic in the final immense vision  
of a passing insect, of a fold in the sheet,  
of a stone or a wheel  
that will survive you  
well then, how can I let you go away?

or if you prefer the original Italian:

Ma se poi penso veramente alla tua morte  
in quale letto d'ospedale o casa o albergo,  
in quale strada, magari in aria  
o in una galleria; ai tuoi occhi che cedono  
sotto l'invasione, all'estrema terribile bugia  
con la quale vorrai respingere l'attacco  
o l'infiltrazione, al tuo sangue pulsare indeciso  
e forsennato nell'ultima immensa visione  
di un insetto di passaggio, di una piega di lenzuolo,  
di un sasso o di una ruota  
che ti sopravviveranno,  
allora come faccio a lasciarti andar via?

First, some preliminaries: there is a speaker obviously, but to whom is she addressing her words (though we don't have to imagine them actually vocalized; it could just as easily be an interior monologue)? Obviously a loved one, but is it a child, a family member, a friend, a lover? The poem doesn't say, though only a child or a lover would seem to inspire this level of obsessive fear, and a child would seem to be ruled out by some of the details in the poem (e.g.,

a child would be unlikely to die while travelling, alone and away from home in a hotel room). I'll cheat a bit and reveal the context: it's in the middle of a sequence of poems about a lover or lovers. We'll make the cognitive leap and assume this one is too, though if you were writing about this poem without this knowledge, it would be safer to refer to the addressee of the text as a loved one.

Second, what is the poem about? At its most basic level, it's dramatizing a moment when the speaker's lover is leaving or she imagines him leaving, and the speaker would prefer that he stay, envisioning his possible death if he were to go. Love? Fear? Possessiveness? Death? I would imagine I'm going to end up talking about all of these. Setting and time are obviously of little help here, since the text is so indeterminate on these points.

Third, is there evidence of irony? Here we're talking about tone, and to misread tone is to misread the text. It seems we have two real options here: either the speaker is absolutely serious about the anxiety she expresses, or else she recognizes that, on some level, it is absurd. I suppose there's a third possibility, a psychotic sort of impulse where she will actually try to prevent her loved one from going (perhaps similar to the point-of-view John Fowles describes in the character of Frederick Clegg in his novel *The Collector*), but this seems unlikely. First, the speaker emphasizes her fear, not her possessiveness. Second, the poet would almost certainly be less circumspect were she trying to describe mental deviance (to avoid possible misreading).

So which is it? When I look for irony of tone, I look for some tell-tale signs that are almost always present. **Understatement**: the laconic phrasing of the last line functions almost like a punch line, rather than a reasonable conclusion from what has come before. **Overstatement or exaggeration (hyperbole)**: her fears are outsized against the actual possibilities of them coming to pass, described in such a way as to make them seem faintly ridiculous. **Situational ironies or reversals**: not so much, though I suppose there is some tension between the idea of caring for someone so much that the only solution to one's anxieties would be to make them miserable, to deny them the freedom to live their lives and be (presumably) the person with whom one fell in love. Then there are the informal transitions in the first and last lines, the "but" and "well then," that seem to signal that this is not supposed to be taken absolutely seriously. All of this makes me lean toward an ironic reading, where the speaker realizes that her fears are slightly ridiculous.

The lovely thing about irony of tone, however, is that the other reading-- the straight reading-- still exists, and the complex texture of the writing lies in the tension between the gap in the two readings. To put it another way, the speaker is expressing a real anxiety that anyone who has been in love has felt at some time (*What if something happens to my loved one? Wouldn't that be terrible?*), while at the same time, realizing that such a sentiment is almost always irrational, highlighting this in the poem with the mock-serious query at the end (only mock-serious because it is so patently not a reasonable solution to the problem). To put it into even simpler terms, she's both serious and not serious; it's a real problem with a pseudo-solution. I'll cheat

again and reveal that Cavalli's poetry often treats her anxieties and preoccupations in exactly this sort of lightly ironic manner, so this one seems of a piece with much of her writing.

Now that I've answered the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, it's time to move on to *how* and *why*, and I'll be using conflict (my *how* in this case) to generate theme statements (the *why*). External conflicts are usually easier to identify, so I'll start here.

There is an obvious implied conflict between the two characters (speaker and lover: person against person). Presumably her lover would prefer to be free to live his life like anyone else, but the speaker's impulse is to shield him from possible harm by keeping him near. The conflict is developed in the slightly hyperbolic catalog of possible deaths he could face, and the way the poet describes these hypothetical outcomes is to conceptualize them as an "invasion" (5) and "infiltration" (7), as if his vital self were a citadel that is vulnerable to attack or a healthy body vulnerable to disease. The resolution, like the conflict, is merely implied, as we do not know whether she plans on actually keeping him from possible harm, though since I've already decided on an ironic reading of the last line, I'm guessing that it is not resolved, that the speaker realizes that her solution is a non-solution, that there is no way to anticipate, much less prevent, catastrophe, as catastrophe, by its very nature, is largely unpredictable and unpreventable. In the logic of the poem, this is clearly an undesirable outcome, as it means we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control, that love is not an all-powerful ward against disaster. From this I can infer a theme statement: despite our impulse to control the world around us, it defies our attempts to do so; desirable states of being cannot last forever, and no matter how much we may wish to hold onto what we love, we are always at the mercy of forces that are larger than us. Notice I'm attempting to capture some of the complexity of the poem instead of boiling it down to some glib slogan (*Love doesn't conquer all*, or something similar).

There is also a conflict with nature, as the speaker expresses fears about her lover's death. One could obviously conceptualize this as a literal concern with personal extinction, or it could just as easily be abstracted as a fear of change, in that the speaker wants things to remain as they are at that moment (presumably it's an agreeable state) and hypothesizes a worst case scenario as a sort of metonym (yeah, I know-- we'll get to metonyms in class in a couple of months) for the termination of that desirable state of being. More simply, when you're having fun with someone (and we don't necessarily have to intuit a sexual context here, though that's certainly a possibility), you do not want them to end. If this reading is correct, then there's even more evidence for irony, as the speaker's concerns become even more outsized when compared to the gravity of her actual concern. I don't necessarily believe this reading is the correct one or capable of *definitive* support from the text (though one could certainly use text to infer it); I'm merely pointing out possibilities and the consequences of taking those possibilities seriously. Reading a poem (reading in general, really) is always an act of interpretation, a constant weighing of what is intended versus the meaning you are constructing as a reader. Close your mind to alternatives and you seal off avenues of possible exploration in your thinking and writing.

Let us assume, however, that the speaker is attempting to express some actual anxieties about death, focused on the person of her lover. I've already noted that the poem conceives of death (or the possibility of death) as an external force at war with the more "natural" state of life and good health. I put the word "natural" in ironic scare quotes because the poem implies that, in fact, death may have the upper hand here-- that just because good health is a more desirable state does not mean it is the default setting in the life/death continuum. I intuit this point of view from two pieces of evidence: one, the quantity of worst case scenarios in the poem is much larger than the quantity of best case scenarios, and two, Cavalli describes a repulsion (there's that military diction again) from death's attack via an "ultimate terrible lie" (5). These three words are slightly obscure in context (almost certainly intentionally so), but one obvious reading is that one's health, one's vital energies, one's good luck (in remaining healthy and alive) is, in fact, not quite as sturdy a defense as we normally take for granted-- that, on some level, disaster lurks around the periphery of every waking moment, even as we tell ourselves that it is unlikely to happen to us. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: to take seriously the constant (if somewhat remote) possibility of catastrophe and death is, for most people, a frankly terrifying proposition, and we'd prefer to set these fears aside and pretend that the natural state of being is life and good health.

In this context, the slightly ridiculous catalog of possible deaths and conceptualizations of the speaker's lover's final moments becomes more comprehensible, as does the sentiments expressed in the final line of the poem. We really do live on the knife's edge of existence, under constant attack from a million different things that could go wrong at any moment, and, more importantly, it is a war that everyone will eventually lose (insofar as we all will eventually die). To take this idea seriously, then, is to realize how vulnerable and insignificant we really are. I'm not going to do a diction and imagery analysis here, but think about how Cavalli develops this idea of our ultimate vulnerability and insignificance through the connotation of insects and folds and stones and wheels. The point is that, in the context of the poem, death is omnipresent, and to recognize this fact and take it seriously is a prescription for panic and paralysis ("how can I let you go away?").

I could go further than this, but what I've already written is pretty close to an articulated theme-- extrapolated almost exclusively through thinking through a conflict and considering whether the resolution/ non-resolution represents a desirable state of affairs (from the point of view of the text, of course). Notice how closely it agrees with what I inferred from the earlier conflict; if your interpretive choices converge, you're probably on the right track.

Internal conflict is always a bit trickier, since it usually involves more inferences and choices in order to write about it. I'm only going to sketch out one possible reading of how this manifests in the poem, namely the fear of losing what one loves while simultaneously recognizing that one cannot hold onto things forever. I've obviously covered some of this ground already, but that shouldn't be surprising, since the internal and external conflicts are nearly always interrelated. The fear, for example, can be inferred from the catalog of possible deaths and the fixation on the (hypothetical) final terrible moments of her lover's life. That this is a real anxiety can be inferred from the detail in which these scenarios unfold, as nothing else would explain the

vividness in which they are described. The response, then, is to want to hold onto that moment forever, to stave off time and the eventual possibility of death. This is clearly impossible, however, and the speaker seems to realize this, evidenced through the mock-serious tone of the last line, as it both presents her “solution” as the only reasonable response (when it is obviously, demonstrably not reasonable) and introduces the idea through a tonally dissonant shift in formality (the chatty “well then”). This has largely been explained above in my discussion of irony.

What it implies in terms of the internal conflict is twofold: first, on some level the conflict is unresolvable, as the anxiety cannot be realistically assuaged, and two, given this, the only solution is to recognize this fact and learn to live with it. That she *has* recognized this helps explain the end, since she is cognizant enough to satirize her own fears. While this may seem like cold comfort (essentially she realizes she has to suck it up and live with anxiety), it is, in the logic of the poem, the only rational response to a universe in which the threat of disaster looms constantly over the potential for human happiness. One has to, in other words, make one’s peace with the fact that contentment is transitory and that one cannot hold onto moments in time forever. The possibility (and inevitability) of death, in this view, is woven into the fabric of living, and, consequently, to live is to take one’s chances with dying. Worrying about it is as inevitable as it is counterproductive, for nothing can change these inexorable facts of life.

These are merely some of the ways of thinking about this poem, and I certainly do not wish to imply that I have exhausted its possibilities for analysis. The take-away idea, however, should be what a potent tool conflict analysis is when you want to figure out exactly what point-of-view a text is expressing, so much so that I was able to generate pages of analysis from what is, after all, a very short poem (a mere twelve lines)-- and that’s without incorporating the textual evidence I would have used if I were turning these ideas into an essay. No other analytical tool we look at this year will be nearly as useful in inferring themes as conflict, and you would do well to keep reminding yourself of this fact (even though we will quickly move on to other ideas).