Time

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“Time,” (p. 1346) by George Herbert, is religious in tone. The poet’s aim is to try to get the reader to put time in perspective. There are two aspects of time—he time that is spent on earth and the time that is spent in heaven or hell for all eternity. The poet uses personification and irony to achieve this aim.

“Time” is a poem with five stanzas. There are six lines in each stanza. The first four lines in each stanza have eight syllables. The last two lines in each stanza have nine syllables. This draws attention to the last two lines. The last two lines in each stanza are also indented, which also makes them stand out. The rhyme scheme of the poem is ababcc, dedeff, ghghii, jkkll, mnmnoo. Having the last two lines of each stanza end in the same rhyme also draws attention to them and makes them more forceful. The poet uses simple language and most of the words are monosyllable. In this way, the poet reaches more people and the poem is easier to read. Finally, the last two lines of each stanza begin with a separate sentence or phrase. This forces the reader to pause, draw breath, and add even more emphasis to the last two lines of each stanza. Clearly, the poet wants the reader to realize the importance of the last two lines.

In the first stanza, the poet introduces the device of personification. This gives Time the ability to reflect and answer the speaker’s accusations. “Meeting with Time, ‘Slack thing,’ said I, Thy scythe is dull . . .” (11-2). The speaker feels that time passes too slowly. But Time realizes that if one man thinks time is too slow, “Twenty for one too sharp do find it.” (1 6). Time is relative and for some, it seems to drag while for others, it goes too fast.

The poet also uses the first person point of view in the poem. This makes the poem more personal for the reader. The reader can put himself in the speaker’s position.

In the second stanza, the speaker tells Time that although previously his “scythe” was a hatchet to those who love life, now it

. . . is but a pruning knife.

Christs’ coming hath made man thy debtor,

Since by thy cutting he grow better. (1 10-12)

Time has become a pruning knife since the arrival of Christ. Christ was the man who enabled other men to go to heaven. When Time cuts man’s life short on earth, Time is enabling man to go to heaven, thus improving man’s soul. The speaker reflects that men owe a debt to Time for helping them to receive their reward of heaven soon.

In the third stanza, the speaker tells Time that Christ’s coming to earth not only has given man a second chance but also has made Time an instrument of God.

And in his blessing thou art blessed,

For where thou only wert before

An executioner at best,

Thou art a gardener now, and more, (1 13-16)

The first four lines in the third stanza correspond to the last four lines of the second stanza. They both have the same theme. Where once, Time was a way to end life forever, now Time can be a vehicle towards heaven. The last two lines of the third stanza are strong and give a definition to Time’s job on earth—“An usher to convey our souls Beyond the utmost stars and poles.” (1 17-18). Time’s main purpose is not simply to end a person’s life on earth, but to be a pruner, a gardener, and an usher towards the promise of heaven.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker remarks on what makes life so long—“And it is this that makes life so long, While it detains us from our God.” (119-20). The time spent on earth could be spent with God if Time were not so “slack.”

The speaker states that although there may be many pleasures in a long life, they cannot compare to the pleasures of being in heaven with God. The pleasure and happiness attained on earth makes the happiness in heaven unimaginable—“Ev’n pleasures here increase the wrong, And length of days lengthens the rod.” (1 21-22)

Most people would love to live a long and productive life but the speaker considers a long life as punishment because it keeps him from heaven. He believes living on earth and wanting to be in heaven is a kind of hell—“Who wants the place where God doth dwell, Partakes already half of hell.” (1 23-24)

In the last stanza, the speaker finishes his speech and Time has a chance to reply. Concluding his speech, the speaker remarks on the length of time that must be spent on earth before he can go to heaven—“Of what strange length must that needs be, Which even eternity excludes!” (1 25-26) Everyone has o spend some time on earth even if it is only for a second, before they can go to heaven. The time spent on earth cannot be included in eternity.

By placing emphasis on the last two lines of each stanza throughout the poem, the poet set the reader up for the end of the poem. Here, he poet uses irony when Time says “What do I hear before his door? He doth not crave less time but more.” (29-30)

Throughout the entire poem, the speaker chides Time about the long life he has to live. The speaker wishes his time on earth would be shorter so that he can live eternally in God’s Kingdom. The reader may not realize that what the speaker actually wants is more time, that which is eternal, not less, until the end of the poem when Time says his ironical lines.

The poet achieves his aim of making the reader stop and think about the time we spend in this life. Although the time spent in life before death may keep the speaker from being in heaven, it is a short time compared to the blissful eternity he expects after death. The poetic devices the poet uses are helpful to the reader. They not only make the poem easier to read, but also make the reader stop and think.