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The Role of Voice in “Man and the Echo”

William Butler Yeats’ poem “Man and the Echo” employs an ironic dialogue between Man and his echo to argue that the impossibility of controlling the interpretation of one’s voice creates irresolvable internal conflicts between one’s body and spirit. Man, a guilt-ridden, elderly writer, goes to “the bottom of a pit” (3) to reflect on his life and mentally prepare for death, but is distracted by his echo. He interprets his echo’s repetition of “lie down and die” (19) as a command and defends his need to reflect and introspect without actually doing so. Echo is presented as an individual, separate voice rather than a possession or derivative of Man’s voice. Man’s inability to control Echo parallels his inability to control how readers interpret and react to his written works and emphasizes the disconnect between Man and his voice. Man desperately wants to unite his spirit and body in order to die peacefully, but his distraction with his echo prevents him from doing so. The poem ends abruptly when the cry of a “stricken rabbit” interrupts Man’s train of thought. Man has “lost the theme” and the poem cuts off leaving Man confused and disoriented. The impossibility of controlling one’s voice creates internal conflicts and prevents Man from connecting with his spirit while the irresolvable nature of these dualities makes efforts to mentally prepare oneself for death through the unification of body and spirit futile.

The dialogue structure of the poem presents a conflicting duality between Man and his voice and emphasizes Man’s lack of control over his voice. Man and Echo are presented as

separate, formally capitalized individual voices. Echo is an entity of its own as it seems to selectively repeat Man's words in a way that alters their meaning and tone. For example, in the first stanza Man says, "Could my spoken words have checked / That whereby a house lay wrecked? / And all seems evil until I / Sleepless would lie down and die" (6-18). Echo only repeats "lie down and die," taking Man's words out of context and changing them from an expression of the difficulty of answering questions before death to a brisk command to die immediately. This drastic alteration stresses the difficulty in controlling how one's own voice is interpreted and used; even repeating one's words changes them. Echo's ability to alter the meaning of Man's words by leaving out two key words, "sleepless would," hints at the potential ability of other people to change one's words and emphasizes the lack of control Man has in how others interpret his voice; if Man can not control his own echo, there is no hope in controlling other listeners.

Man is just as powerless in controlling the interpretation of his written voice as he is in controlling the interpretation of his spoken one. As an author, he worries about the effects of his written work on readers. He asks, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot? / Did words of mine put too great strain / On that woman's reeling brain? Could my spoken words have checked / That whereby a house lay wrecked?" (11-16). Man questions the effect of his written work on readers and is plagued with guilt for events his work potentially caused. He worries that his words caused negative action, such as inspiring men to go to war, and failed to cause positive action, such as stopping a house from being "wrecked." His unanswered questions, however, reflect the impossibility of knowing the actual affect of his words. While his work certainly *could* have motivated certain men to go to the "English shot," Man has no way of knowing that it actually did. In this case, are Man's feelings of responsibility

justified? Man does not have control over how readers interpret his words and he fears that his words “put too great strain” on people’s minds, failing to understand his intentions altogether. Regardless of how carefully Man writes his words down, a reader’s interpretation of these words can alter their intended meaning as easily as Echo alters his spoken voice. Even if Man writes with a good or specific goal in mind, there is no guarantee that readers will understand or act upon his intentions, and even if they do he has no way of knowing this. Perhaps, then, Man’s feelings of responsibility are *not* justified and this is what Echo is trying to tell him when he says “lie down and die” (19) and “into the night” (38); Man shouldn’t worry so much about his voice because he has no way of knowing to what extent he is responsible for anything. Instead, he should accept death peacefully.

Man fights Echo’s advice to accept death throughout the poem, reflecting the rift between his physical self and his voice and spirit created by the inability to control the interpretation of his voice. Both the dialogue format of the poem and the inherent qualities of an echo draw attention to this disconnect. For example, an echo has a uniquely different sound than the voice it came from. Whether faint and muffled or throaty and whispery, an echo is different than its parent voice, which may explain why Man responds to his “rocky voice” (39) as if it were another person instead of ignoring it as a reverberation of his own voice. Man derives meaning from Echo’s words and responds to them, and Echo influences the direction and topic of Man’s words. For example, after Echo says “Lie down and die” (19), Man says, “That were to shirk / The spiritual intellect’s great work” (20-21). He explains he cannot “lie down and die” yet because he needs to clean his dirty slate. Instead of ignoring the echo, Man feels a need to justify his actions and explain himself. Whereas in the first stanza the Man reflected upon his own life, the Echo’s advice to “lie down and die” launches Man into a defensive rant explaining

why men can not die until they have awakened their “spiritual intellect” and reflected upon their lives; Man’s thought-process broadens from his individual situation to mankind in general. For example, he says, “While man can still his body keep / Wine or love drug him to sleep, / Waking he thanks the Lord that he / Has body and its stupidity” (26-29). This change in course reflects the power of Echo’s words and demonstrates Man’s treatment of his echo as a separate, individual voice. It also highlights Man’s avoidance of the task at hand; he can’t stress enough the importance of reflection and introspection before death, but just talking about reflection is not the same as actually going through the process. The implication of Man’s failure to act upon what he advocates as so important is that he really does not want to undergo a reflection process and would rather, as his own voice tells him in the form of an echo “lie down and die.” This suggests that Echo is not separate from Man at all but rather represents his true, underlying desires.

Is Echo really a separate, individual voice or is Echo a part of Man? Man’s strange interaction with Echo makes it seem like Echo is a separate entity, but both the setting in a stony cave and the fact that Echo only repeats Man says suggest that Echo is nothing more than an echo. If Echo is just a reverberation of Man’s words, then the only meaning behind Echo’s words is the meaning that Man superimposes upon them. Man thinks that Echo is commanding him to “lie down and die” only because he inserts this meaning into Echo’s words. Without this interpretation, Echo’s words are hollow and meaningless, as are Man’s words; one’s voice is worthless unless someone hears and interprets it. As an author, Man is aware, however, of the tendency of an audience’s interpretation to charge one’s voice with a meaning quite different than what the author intended. Once words have left a person’s body they are at the whim of the

listener. Thus, a person can only be in control of his voice when he is alone and no one can hear him, a fact which Man seems to be aware of based on the remote setting of the poem.

The poem's setting in an isolated cave reflects Man's effort to control the consequences of his voice. Each opening line brings Man farther and farther away from people who could hear his words and change their intended meaning. Not only is Man "in a cleft," but he is "under broken stone" and "at the bottom of a pit that broad noon has never lit" (2-4). Man has taken great lengths to be alone and avoid the risk of having his words heard and manipulated. His retreat into a deep, dark, isolated cave reflects his desire to introspect and connect with his spirit, but he cannot escape the implications of his voice. Man is overwhelmed with guilt and confusion over the effect his voice has had on others and just wants to be by himself, but his voice haunts him. He confesses his secrets to the stone that cannot change his words, but Man's own echo betrays him. Or does it? Perhaps Echo is just trying to help Man out by offering some good advice. And if Echo is really just an echo, perhaps Man's selective hearing of echo's words represent a repressed desire to give in to death without dealing with all the reflection his guilt-ridden mind thinks is necessary.

Regardless of Echo's role in the poem, the juxtaposition between Echo's short, simple lines with Man's lengthy stanzas draws attention to Echo's words. On a visual level, the reader's eye is immediately drawn to Echo's short lines because they stand out against Man's large chunks of dialogue. Echo's terse, simple lines are the most memorable of the entire poem because of their placement; they interrupt the rhythm and rhyme of the Man's thoughts. For example, the first stanza follows a regular aabb rhyme scheme and Echo's line is an additional "a" line where a "b" is expected. The regular rhythm and rhyme of the first stanza lends to a sing-songy feel that is abruptly interrupted by Echo's line. This interruption highlights the lack

of control Man has over how his voice is used and interpreted. Each of Man's lines is carefully structured and he does not rush or trip over his words, but he cannot do anything about his voice reverberating off the walls. Thus, Echo interrupts him twice, both times encouraging him to give in to death immediately. The reader is tempted to trust Echo more than Man, as Echo's short, simple lines are the only answers to Man's dilemma presented in the whole poem. Man's nervous questions and rambling make him seem insecure while Echo's simple replies make him seem sure and comfortable. While Man harps on the importance of making sure "that all's arranged in one clear view" (32) and judging one's soul, he never presents the reader with a way of doing this and he himself never does this. On the other hand, Echo's advice to "lie down and die" and go "into the night" is simple and straightforward and does not require further instruction. In lieu of Man's unanswered questions and unresolved conflicts, Echo's advice makes a lot of sense.

The rabbit cry at the end of the poem symbolizes the hopelessness of Man's efforts to either control his voice or to connect his body and spirit. Just before Man is interrupted by the rabbit, he asks, "O rocky voice / Shall we in that great night rejoice? / What do we know but that we face / One another in this place?" (39-42). Man finally realizes and confronts the rift between his body and his voice and practically begs to feel some connection with it, but Echo does not reply with a comforting reassurance of their connection and Man forgets what he has been talking about when the rabbit cries out. This pathetic cry is the uninspiring answer to Man's queries. The helpless rabbit being attacked by a bird of prey is a symbol of Man's hopeless situation; just as it is impossible for the rabbit to escape the hawk, Man will never be able to "rejoice" with his voice and will forever view the world in sets of dualities.

The irony of Man's dialogue and the impossibility of ever resolving the mind-body dilemma suggest that death is mystery that cannot be mentally prepared for. Rather, one must submit to death naturally. Man's inability to find a way to reflect and introspect as well as Echo's straightforward advice to simply give in to death support this idea. Man's inner conflicts and the disconnect between his body and spirit are the results of the impossibility of controlling the interpretation of his voice. It is impossible to control how other people interpret and apply meaning to one's words and therefore, once words leave a speaker's body they are no longer in his control but are dependent on the listener's interpretation. Unfortunately, the only way to possibly maintain complete control over one's voice would be to remain in isolation and never talk to anyone, which we see Man try to do unsuccessfully. Perhaps this is Yeats' way of encouraging his readers to not be afraid of using their voices. Certainly his use of the name "Man" suggests a global audience as well as Man's discussion of mankind. Is this poem Yeats's call to humanity to forget their unjustified guilt and use their voices freely?