

Abstract

This research project analyzes the literary devices, styles, and techniques that author Saint Teresa of Ávila utilizes in her poem “Vivo sin vivir en mí,” which can be translated to “I Live Not Within Myself.” As a 16th-century Catholic nun, Saint Teresa is known for her spiritual poems and writings that emphasize her deep longing for God. Beyond her literary works, Saint Teresa is recognized for her contributions to the Carmelite Reform within the Catholic church, as well as her Christian mysticism. “Vivo sin vivir en mí” is one of Saint Teresa’s most famous poems. In what is essentially a literary rendering of Paul’s, Philippians 1:21, “for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” the author expresses how her desires for God are so deep that she wants to ascend to Heaven. Saint Teresa’s work draws heavily from Biblical ideas as she explores the dichotomy between earthly life and perfect eternity with God. Additionally, this project analyzes how Saint Teresa employs stylistic choices in order to emphasize her deep passion for God and her ultimate desire to die. Saint Teresa of Ávila utilizes antithesis, rhyme, stanza structure, as well as popular Christian thought to communicate an imperfect, mystical longing for God, whereby she describes her devotion to God through the language of earthly captivity, looking towards the perfect freedom that will be found in Heaven. Ultimately, Saint Teresa’s use of literary devices and themes give voice to a struggle that believers all over the world experience.

Santa Teresa de Ávila

Santa Teresa de Ahumada (1515-1582) was born into a large family in medieval Ávila (Eire 4). Teresa grew up in a Christian household and credited her parents “with instilling in her a reverence for things divine at an early age” (Eire 6). At age 20, she joined the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila and became a nun, fully dedicating her life to God. Throughout her life, Teresa experienced poor physical and mental health (Eire 14). As Teresa began exploring her relationship with God, she leaned into mysticism, beginning to connect with the divine in a unique way. Historians report that she experienced “trances and visions, raptures, divine locutions, intense experiences of God’s presence, and supernatural physical phenomena such as levitations” (Eire 19). Additionally, Saint Teresa is accredited with reforming the Carmelite Convent, bringing back order and strictness (Friedman et al., 179). Additionally, she is famously known for working with and writing with Saint John of the Cross, a fellow Carmelite reformer. Most of all, Teresa is revered for her poems and narratives that communicate her immense love for God. She has written countless works that all communicate her deep, mystical passion for God.

Key Terms

Arte menor – “poetic verses with eight syllables or less” (Friedman et al., 439).

Glosa (gloss) – “a poem, at the end of which, or at the [end] (*sic*) of each of the stanzas, one or more predetermined poetic verses are introduced” (Friedman et al., 443).

Mysticism – “mysticism is generally defined as consciousness of being (spirit) that can only be reached by personal transformation” (Slavomír et al 593).

Pareado (couplet) – “a stanza of two lines” (Friedman et al. 445) or “two successive lines of poetry, usually rhymed (*aa*)” (Academy of American Poets).

Redondilla – “stanza of four verses *arte menor*, whose rhyming structure is abba” (Friedman et al. 446).

VIVO SIN VIVIR EN MÍ

Vivo sin vivir en mí,
y tan alta vida espero,
que muero porque no muero.

Vivo ya fuera de mí,
después que muero de amor;
porque vivo en el Señor,
que me quiso para sí:
cuando el corazón le di
puso en él este letreiro,
que muero porque no muero.

Redondilla

Esta divina prisión,
del amor en que yo vivo,
ha hecho a Dios mi cautivo,
y libre mi corazón;
y causa en mí tal pasión
ver a Dios mi prisionero,
que muero porque no muero.

Pareado 1

Pareado 2

Pareado 3

¡Ay, qué larga es esta vida!
¡Qué duros estos destierros,
esta cárcel, estos hierros
en que el alma está metida!
Sólo esperar la salida
me causa dolor tan fiero,
que muero porque no muero.

¡Ay, qué vida tan amarga
do no se goza el Señor!
Porque si es dulce el amor,
no lo es la esperanza larga;
quítame Dios esta carga,
más pesada que el acero,
que muero porque no muero.

Sólo con la confianza
vivo de que he de morir,
porque muriendo el vivir
me asegura mi esperanza;
muerte do el vivir se alcanza,
no te tardes, que te espero,
que muero porque no muero.

Mira que el amor es fuerte;
vida, no me seas molesta,
mira que sólo me resta,
para ganarte perderte.
Venga ya la dulce muerte,
el morir venga ligero
que muero porque no muero.

Aquella vida de arriba,
que es la vida verdadera,
hasta que esta vida muera,
no se goza estando viva;
muerte, no me seas esquiva;
viva muriendo primero,
que muero porque no muero.

Vida, ¿qué puedo yo darle
a mi Dios que vive en mí,
si no es el perderte a ti,
para merecer ganarle?
Quiero muriendo alcanzarle,
pues tanto a mi Amado quiero,
que muero porque no muero.

José de Ribera, *Santa Teresa de Jesús*

Themes (Methods of Analysis)

Rhyme – abbaacc

The rhyming structure abbaacc is implemented throughout the entirety of the poem. Since the final line of each stanza includes the glossed line “que muero porque no muero,” the “c” rhyme is repetitively used. The monotony of ending each stanza with the same line and rhyme directly reflects the theme of the never-ending struggle of daily life.

Structure - The first four lines of each stanza are a *redondilla* structure, which begins and ends with the same rhyme, creating a feeling of enclosure or captivity. Additionally, lines 2-7 of each stanza are three sets of *pareados*, or poetic couplets. This is one of the most basic rhyming structures found in Spanish poetry. This contributes even more to the weighty feeling of monotony.

Antithesis – Antithesis is utilized throughout the entirety of the poem. The contradictory language adds to the dichotomous pull between earthly life and life with God in Heaven.

Examples:

“que muero porque no muero” – “I’m dying because I’m not dead” (*glosa*, line 3)

“porque muriendo el vivir” – “because in death, life” (line 33)

“muerte do el vivir se alcanza” – “death is where life is found” (line 36)

Popular Christian Thought – Many references to Scripture and popular Christian ideas are made throughout the poem. Three Bible verses that emulate the tone of “Vivo sin vivir en mí” are Galatians 2:20, Romans 6:4, and Philippians 1:21. These books are all accredited to Paul and communicate a consistent theme of death. Paul explains that dying to self and allowing Christ to live in your place is a part of the Christian life. Saint Teresa proposes similar ideas in her poem as she constantly describes her desire to die in order to be with God. As a Catholic nun, Teresa was undoubtedly familiar with the works of Paul, and he directly influenced her poetry

Galatians 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (New International Version)

Romans 6:4 – “We are therefore buried with him through baptism into death...” (New International Version)

Philippians 1:21 – “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (New International Version)

Conclusion

The rhyme pattern, stanza structure, use of antithesis, and employment of popular Christian thought within “Vivo sin vivir en mí” all help to communicate an imperfect, mystical longing for God. There is a stark dichotomy between earthly life and life in Heaven. Saint Teresa articulates the desire to die so as to experience the perfection of God through eternal life.

- The rhyme structure is simply and monotonous, demonstrating the repetitiveness and struggle of everyday life on earth.
- Each stanza contains a *redondilla* structure as well as *pareados*. This accentuates the feelings of captivity and allows the reader to understand how Saint Teresa feels like she is in an enclosure.
- Antithesis is a prominent feature within this poem and greatly contributes to the overall tone. Saint Teresa is obviously communicating the vast differences between earthly life and her desired life with God and Heaven. The use of contrasting language amplifies the
- Additionally, this poem is best understood through the context of Scripture and popular Christian thought. Many of Teresa’s ideas can be directly traced back to Paul’s letters in the New Testament. The apostle communicates the concept that “to die is gain” (New International Version, Phil. 1:21) and this poem emulates similar thoughts.

Future Work

This research project analyzes the use of literary devices and styles in order to communicate a specific message. Many of these techniques are used in other works by Saint Teresa of Ávila and other authors from the 16th century. Further studies could be employed to analyze the other works of Saint Teresa, and other Christian mystic literature. Additionally, multiple poems and literary works could be utilized in one study to compare themes and literary styles between similar and differing periods. Saint Teresa’s poetry provides valuable insight and commentary on the Christian life. Further studying her work, and similar pieces of literature, will provide an even greater understanding of Christian mysticism and Spanish poetry as a whole.

References

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