



Finding Spirituality in May Swenson's Poetry



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Research Question

“It’s not for me-religion. It seems like redundancy for a poet” (Knudson, 34)

“Swenson described her sudden composition of a poem as ‘a kind of revelation’ and told Bishop, ‘now I know just how Joseph Smith felt when the angel showed him the golden plates.’” (Crumbly, 33)

How does May Swenson work through ideas of spiritual belief and religion through her poetry?



My Poems

My poems are prayers to a god
to come into being.

Some mornings I have seen his hair
flash on the horizon,

some nights I have seen his heel there
clear as the moon.

My poems pray to him to be
manifest like lightning—

in one pure instant abolish
and recreate the world.

- “My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its expression through thought and word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. ‘In the beginning was the word....’” (Grabher, 83)
- Begins with manifesting a god to either begin to exist, or calling on a being that may already exist
- 2 Nephi 32:9 “But behold, I say unto you that ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of they soul.”

Some mornings I have seen his hair
flash on the horizon,

some nights I have seen his heel there
clear as the moon.

- The speaker sees this god with human-like physical characteristics as well as in nature
 - The speaker has a relationship with this deity, they know where to look to see him
 - The god is seen, therefore he exists outside of the speaker
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My poems pray to him to be
manifest like lightning—

in one pure instant abolish
and recreate the world.



- Speaker defines how they want to see this god
- This deity has limitless power, and the speaker has faith in his power



Creation

It is a stern thing,
This bringing into being;
This taking of a clod that is cold
And veining it with sprouts of fire;
This wresting of a star from chaos,
And chiseling it upon the lathe of exactness;
This making of an indolent thing urgent;
This begetting of eagerness;
It is a hard and a fierce thing . . .
Did You find it so, God?

- “My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its expression through thought and word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. ‘In the beginning was the word....’” (Grabher, 83)
- The speaker is having a conversation with God about the process of creation
- The speaker is an artist, a creator
- Doctrine and Covenants 14:9 “Behold, I am Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who created the heavens and the earth, a light which cannot be hid in darkness”

This taking of a clod that is cold
And veining it with sprouts of fire;
This wresting of a star from chaos,
And chiseling it upon the lathe of exactness;



- The speaker is conversing with God about the intricacies of creation like they have experienced creating something themselves
- Speaker fuses ideas of the Big Bang theory as well as the theory the Creationism theory
 - Big Bang: An explosion occurred that created almost all the matter we have today
 - Creationism: The world was created by a higher power or celestial being

This making of an indolent thing urgent;
This begetting of eagerness;
It is a hard and a fierce thing . . .
Did You find it so, God?

- Indolent: Lazy, not wanting to put in effort
- Creation is complicated and difficult
- Casual yet close relationship with God, wants to know how God feels about the process of creation
- Doctrine and Covenants 14:9



Conclusion

- Swenson weaves spirituality and religion into her poetry but does not adhere to one religious practice
- Tries to answer questions of religion, such as the existence of God or gods and how the earth was created



Citations

The Book of Mormon. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2006.

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