

A Call to the Joy of living, (*Joie de vivre*)



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Abstract

The objective of this write-up is to explore from Literature the secret to the joy of living. In the words of Mathew Arnold, the study of Literature, more so English literature has the universality of its appeal to man as man and offers consolation and stay in life. Poems, stories, dramas and fiction help us work through the challenges we face from every day irritations to loneliness, heartache and death. Literature is as vital to our lives as food and shelter. It is a call to make our life happy and to drink it to its lees. The real, perpetual, undying and eternal joy is assured for all the just only in the life after life, although one can already have the taste of it in this mundane life itself. This is the tenacious conviction of a few thinkers and poets and it is imperative for us to unpack and unfold their thoughts and feelings so that we can also live a life of joy (la joie de vivre).

Keywords: *joie de vivre – the joy of living; carpe diem – Seize the day or pluck the day; parousiac joy – the supreme spiritual or eternal or perennial joy in life after life.*

Introduction: The topic sentence is an invitation to man as a man to a life of joy. Immediately the question arises to what kind of joy we are called? Is it a physical or sensual joy? Or Is it an intellectual joy? Or is it a spiritual joy, the supreme bliss, the undying eternal joy beyond the temporal? These are the questions that come uppermost to our minds. Let us approach this string of questions in a literary perspective, for the simple reason that great poets enjoy more sensibility than most of us and they manifest the truth remarkably of what they have felt profoundly in their head and heart. For an example, you and I have seen very often the rainbow. And it does not sensitize us as it does with men of sensibility. When Wordsworth saw it, he shouted out of joy:

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began,

So is it now I am a man,

So be it when I grow old.

Or let me die!

The child is the father of the man

And I could wish my days

Bound each to each by natural piety

John Keats expressed his joy while seeing beauty embedded in all we behold and believe:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.

G.M. Hopkins was a Jesuit priest and poet. When he saw a falcon, soaring in the sky in the morning, he bursts out: My heart in hiding stirred for a bird. He calls it the windhover. "I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon in his riding, the achieve of, the mastery of, the mystery of the thing, brute beauty and valour and act, pride and plume: O my chevalier! He then slips into a deep meditation of the beauty of Christ's passion and death on the cross, which is more beautiful, a billion times told lovelier and more dangerous because of the gash gold-vermillion of his precious blood." Most of us have read or heard several times the first miracle of Christ at the wedding party in Cana in Galilee. But it does not stir us. When young Lord Byron in his class was asked by the teacher to write a composition on the first miracle of Jesus, he did not write pages after pages as expected by the teacher. He just wrote a single line: 'The water saw its master and blushed' to the great intellectual joy of the teacher.

The joy of 'Carpe Diem':The Roman poet Horace in 65 B.C with his Epicurean background declared: "while we're talking, envious time is fleeing: "Seize the day", put no trust in the future".¹ His famous saying 'Carpe diem', "Seize the day", "Pluck the Day" has its repercussions and reverberations in the life of priests, religious and the lay persons even to this day. People repeat the words: Enjoy yourself while you have the chance. Enjoy the pleasures of the moment without any concern for the future. In his poem, "Mignonne, allonsvoirsi la rose", Pierre Ronsard (1524-1585) advises a young girl that her age is like a beautiful rose that has bloomed in the morning. Before it gets withered by the cruel sun, she

should pluck and enjoy it; otherwise, old age will soon dull and dim, sully, tarnish and ruin her beauty. Similarly in his poem ‘To the Virgins, to Make Much Time’, Robert Herrick advises us to gather the moments like the flowers:

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.*

Andrew Marvell in his poem “To his Coy Mistress” says

But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

This ‘**carpe diem**’ philosophy continues to haunt the present generation because we tend to seek our joy in **www** (wealth, wine and women). **Firstly** most people are mad after money, wealth, pelf and power. As Ben Jonson puts in his play ‘Volpone’, we seek joy in the accumulation and possession of the shrine of gold and money which is nothing but the bane of bliss. That is why D.H. Lawrence said: ‘Money is our madness, our vast and collective madness’. You will all agree with me that the dirty money and wealth can never give us a permanent joy of life. With money, one can procure a cart load of books, big libraries and bookstalls. But can one get knowledge with money? With money one can buy tons of tablets. But can one buy good health? One can buy and possess the whole world, but one cannot buy heaven.

Secondly most people these days find real joy and happiness in drinking wine and alcohol. Even the ancients believed that when the wine is in, the wit is out. And to corroborate this statement, the reputed French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) rightly said: “You have to be always drunk. That’s all there is to it.., it’s the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks you to earth, you have to be continually drunk. But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk!” **2**

I am reminded of the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson who wants us to enjoy by drinking in a different way. In “Ulysses” he makes the speaker state bluntly and baldly: “I cannot rest from travel. I will drink life to the lees.”³ He intends to drain the whole wine glass of life, bottoms up, and swallow even the grainy dregs and sediments. Similarly in the play, “The Admirable Crichton”, James Barrie makes one of the characters say: “Life is like a cup of tea; the more heartily we drink, the sooner we reach the dregs”. Life must be enjoyed to its last drop, to the maximum possible extent with its implications and ramifications.

Thirdly we are baffled at the sad situation of the pursuit of man on the carnal and sexual joy, libidinal and erotic pleasure as stipulated by Sigmund Freud. He says that people who are behaviourally abnormal are always sexually abnormal, but many people who are normal behaviourally are otherwise sexually abnormal. T. S. Eliot also blames sex, or rather its commercialization, as both the cause and the symptom of the decay of Western civilization in his famous poem ‘*The Waste Land*’ (1922). He says that modern man seeking after sex and wealth and neglecting his faith in God is a hollow man stuffed with straw. There is in the present world a total pell-mell, a spiritual sterility and vacuum, loss of faith and moral values, commercialization of life, and the paranoia of sexual perversion and abnormality as postulated by Sigmund Freud.

At one time sex was considered sacramental, a consummation of conjugal love and means of human development. But unfortunately in modern time, sex has become an animal urge with no moral or social commitment. It is perverted and is utilized for carnal pleasure and monetary benefits. It has therefore, become a source of degeneration and disease. It has also led to the erosion of moral values and has turned to be a hurdle in man’s spiritual joy and progress. Easy sexual relationship is found among all sections of society high or low, lay or religious. Sex is the same as any other commodity. It could be bought and enjoyed without any sense of morality. The poet, Eliot calls London, unreal city just like Baudelaire called Paris unreal, because unbelievable things happen in such cities. Rape, lust, molestation and cheating and corruption prevail without any hindrance.

In ‘*Sailing to Byzantium*,’ W. B. Yeats affirms that in the land of sexually charged youth in Ireland, it is not suitable for old people to live there. “That is no country for old man. An aged man is a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick,”⁴ because the young in one another’s arms are caught in that sensual music and neglect the monuments of unaging intellect. Life over there is all physical and sensual. He longs to sail to Byzantium and live in a place of

wisdom, devoid of sex, where he may once again feel at ease and devote his mind to things of beauty which is a joy for ever in Byzantium.

A number of modernist poets and writers have expressed their social alienation and the necessity to a life of joy in different terms. Therefore, ‘**acall to joy**’ means for them not **wealth, wine and women**. To E. Forster, it means “**aneternal moment**”; James Joyce calls it “**epiphany**”; Virginia Wolf terms it “**a moment of being**” and T. S. Eliot feels it as “**a moment in and out of time**” as a possible means of salvation in the face of the meaninglessness of a spiritually and emotionally arid, modern existence. These modern writers and poets are almost reflecting what the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan visualized in the 17th century in his famous poem ‘The World’. He expressed the real joy of life by saying so beautifully: “I saw **eternity** the other night like a great ring of pure and endless light, all calm, as it was bright” 6. Similarly in the poem ‘The Retreat’, he declares: “Happy are those early days when I shined in my angel infancy....Oh! how I long to travel back and tread that ancient track.... But ah, my soul with too much stay is drunk and staggers in the way.” He seeks nothing but eternal joy. It is what the theologians call ‘Parousia’ the effulgent light. It is undoubtedly the joy of accepting God and his teachings as revealed in the sacred scriptures. Happy is the man who has placed his trust in the Lord. The poet firmly believes that all men and women are liberated from the slavery of sin and Satan by Christ’s death on the cross and the joy of resurrection and the assurance of eternal life by Christ. The paradise lost has been regained and restored to man by the suffering and death of Christ on the cross which has turned out to be the power and wisdom for the believers.

What is this perpetual, eternal life of joy promised to us and to which all of us are called? I am really fascinated by the Victorian poet Robert Browning who says: “Life is probation and the earth no goal, but a starting point of man”5. After the death of his wife, Elizabeth in 1861, the poet is not dismayed and frustrated but has the hope and optimism of meeting her in the life after life. He puts the appropriate Latin title to his poem “Prospice” (Look forward). Taking death as a challenge, he makes a naked declaration: Fear death! To feel the fog in my throat! the press of the storm, the power of the night, the post of the foe, the black minute! Let death come in any form. He will confront it fully with indomitable courage, taste the whole of it, endure its pain and misery and fight to the finish the full fury of death, not like a dastard but heroes of the past. Like a true Christian, he has the optimism to fight gallantly the black minute of death, because it is only a gate way to that illuminated peaceful world where

he will meet the 'soul of his soul', his wife and experience a profound joy and peace. This is the ultimate joy and promise to which all of us are called, with no discrimination.

It may be difficult for us to comprehend the eternal and parousiac joy. It is an indwelling in the triune God. It is something like a plunge in the immensity of God's life and love which is infinite and inexhaustible. God's inexhaustible riches will never be comprehensibly seen, enjoyed and loved by man. If you drop a stone on the surface of the ocean, the stone will slowly sink down but eventually its downward trend will cease, once the bottom is reached. But God being a bottomless abyss of Trinitarian life and love, man will sink ever deeper into it without ever reaching the end of the process. Man will drink in life, God's own life, and he will never be entirely satiated, for as he drinks, his capacity of reception will further expand and this newly expanded capacity will be the receptacle and repertoire of a further outpouring of divine life. Eternity is not a concept an abstraction. It is a person. It is an immersion into the ever present Now of God's own love and life⁷ (Bermejos). Past and future tenses are incompatible with God who is simply is in the present. "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Nor eternity is a frozen immobility, for God is essential Life replete with love. He is the eternal present in whom we live and love mutually in a state of immortal and immense joy (Mine).

Shakespeare has put it in short and succinct expression the secret of the joy of living in three important phrases: firstly '**Perfection is all.**' Be ye perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. Secondly '**Ripeness is all**' ⁹. In King Lear, Edgar says to his Father "What! In ill thoughts again, men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: ripeness is all" (King Lear V, ii) and thirdly, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be not now, yet it will come. "**The readiness is all**" ¹⁰.

Finally it all depends upon our attitude to make life either blissful like heaven or horrible like hell. As Milton says: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven"¹¹. Hamlet thought of the World as a prison with different cells, wards and dungeons and Denmark as one of the worst dungeons. But there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. One must think well and work well, be righteous and upright, honest, just, candid, sincere and outspoken, because 'perfection is all', 'ripeness is all' and 'readiness is all'.

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