

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: CRAFTING VIRTUAL FREEDOM THROUGH POETRY

TEACHER TOOL 6: DISCUSSING "FOR THE FAIR MISS M. M. MCL[EAN]"

The following is an acrostic poem written by George Moses Horton for Mr. Torrance. Horton wrote the poem between 1853-1855 at the request of Mr. Torrance, who wished to give the poem to the woman he loved, Miss M. M. McLean. Read this poem aloud to your class and lead a discussion using the questions and notes that follow.

"For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]"

<p>May this inspired acrostic prove A perfect token of my love Return thy torch allmost expired Yet find by whom thou art admired</p> <p>My soul of love would fly to thee Constrained thy winning form to see</p> <p>Like pan whose destiny was grief Exploring nature for relief And sure when thee my love has found Nought els[e] in life can heal the wound</p> <p>When on the constelations i cast my eyes afar Then i can tell My bonny belle The queen of every star</p> <p>When I look from the mountain Or nature's lofty tower Then i can tell My bonny belle The queen of every flower</p> <p>When gazing from the window On blooms both low and tall Then i can tell My charming belle The fairest one of all</p>	<p>pan: Greek god of shepherds and flocks; rural music; and the only god to die</p> <p>nought: nothing</p> <p>bonny belle: a beautiful woman</p>
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The following are questions about “For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]” and notes to help you lead a discussion about the poem.

1. WHO is the speaker in the poem?

In this acrostic poem, Horton adopts the persona of the young suitor, Mr. Torrance, who hired him to write this love poem. We can tell this because the speaker calls this poem “A perfect token of my love.”

2. WHY do you think he is writing this poem?

Horton writes the poem for the money that Mr. Torrance will pay him. Horton’s acrostic poems were his first entrepreneurial efforts. He wrote love poems for the male students at the University of North Carolina, which they would write down and give to their sweethearts. The first three stanzas are the acrostic, where the initial letters of each line spell out the woman’s name (Mary McLean in this poem). These poems were designed to impress the young women for whom they were intended, and they are filled with compliments and vows of love. This poem is unusual in that it does not stop with lines for each of the letters of Miss McLean’s name but goes on for three more stanzas. We can speculate that perhaps he wrote more in this case for the extra money he could charge for a more elaborate poem.

3. WHAT do you think the poem is saying?

In this poem, the speaker of the poem (Mr. Torrance) is a lovesick suitor, “Exploring nature for relief,” which means that he is seeking some kind of comfort in nature—the stars in the skies and the landscape around him. Horton mentions Pan from Greek mythology, which was a common strategy in poetry of the era. The speaker is pining over his love for Miss McLean and hoping that she will recognize and return his love once she reads this passionate poem. He sees Miss McLean as “The queen of every star” and “every flower.” Finally, Horton describes her as “The fairest one of all.” Like a contemporary greeting card or valentine, someone else (in this case, George Moses Horton) has written the sentiment that a customer has paid for and gives to another as an expression of his/her most personal feelings.

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