

## Skepticism in Walter Raleigh's Poetry

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### Abstract:

The present paper focuses on one major issue. It is the fear of doubtfulness which the poet suffers from. Walter Raleigh was a great poet of the sixteenth century who composed and produced poems that reveal the misery of life at that time. Because he was favourite man to Queen Elizabeth, no one dares to silence him. After the death of the queen, he was put in jail for the rest of his life. In jail, he composed some beautiful poems revealing his gloomy aspects of his desperate life inside the jail. So, this paper aims at investigating the concept of skepticism which is clearly discussed and highlighted in Raleigh's poetry.

**Keywords:** 16<sup>th</sup> century Poetry, Walter Raleigh, Doubtfulness, Suffering.

## Part One

Sir Walter Raleigh is mostly celebrated for his assertive and proactive demeanour. His cognitive and literary abilities enhance his overall qualities, aligning with the Renaissance concept of a well-rounded individual. Conversely, his extensive and varied positions as an English aristocrat, author, poet, soldier, sailor, intelligence agent, courtier, and adventurer seem to have bolstered his status as a literary figure. (Anna, 2005: 31)

Walter Raleigh, born in 1554, was the offspring of a nobleman hailing from Devonshire. He needed to develop his own independent presence in the world, with the backing of other relatives from the West Country who were also striving for success. In his youth, he actively engages with the Protestant faction in the French Wars of Religion and later participates in the Desmond Rebellion in Ireland. (Anna, 2005: 31). Raleigh, when not involved in warfare, sometimes stays at Oriel College, Oxford, and at the Inns of Court in London. Continuously, he directs his attention towards obtaining the approval of the court, the ultimate objective that every ambitious individual can strive to attain. By 1580, he had achieved this highly desired status. He is selected as the Queen's top preference. The vibrant vitality, charm, intelligence, and personal significance that are evident in his written work must have been considerably more potent when embodied by the man himself. Elizabeth is incapable of resisting it. (Daniel: 2009: 132)

Raleigh's family adheres to a predominantly Protestant religious belief system and has several close calls under the rule of Queen Mary I of England, who was a Catholic, from 1553 to 1558. (Anna, 2005: 36)

Raleigh thrives in the favour of the Queen. However, engaging in personal adventure is currently on hold as it requires full-time commitment. In 1592, his circumstances undergo a remarkable decline when it is revealed that he has clandestinely wedded one of the Queen's maids of honour, known as Bessy Throckmorton, without the Queen's consent. Consequently, the Queen imprisons him in the Tower of London. However, he is set free when one of his vessels returns with a substantial fortune after seizing a Spanish ship named "Madre De Dios". (Erhertel and Hühn, 2021: 221)

Huften and Olwen (1995, 112) state that after Raleigh's fall from favour, he can be openly abused and derided. When, in 1603, the old Queen dies and king James VI of Scotland, the son of Mary I, becomes king James I of England, Raleigh is marked down for destruction. His enemies want to finish him and James doesn't want to

start. The king is content to accept the popular estimate, enhanced by a deliberate whispering campaign in high circles. Raleigh is charged with complicity in a plot to dethrone the king, make peace with Spain and exact tolerance for Roman Catholics. The nature and extent of his complicity in these ill-organized projects has never been made clear. They don't seem such as will appeal to him, but there is sufficient evidence, largely supplied by the King's friend, Lord Cobham, to convict him. King James accords him a last minute reprieves and confines him for thirteen years in the Tower, While he makes peace overtures to Spain in his own good time. The new policy of appeasement isn't well liked. There are those who think that Elizabeth's long struggle with king Philip shall end in a knock-out blow rather in a negotiate peace.

In 1612, king James agrees to release Raleigh who promises to give him a fortune if he allows him to return to Guiana (lacy and Swanson, 2005: 13).

In 1616, Raleigh begins to lead an expedition to search for the El Dorado legend. But his travel ends in failure (Mandelson and Sara, 1998: 196). The English destroy a Spanish outpost which lay in their way, protesting that they haven't know it is there, though there is a reason why they shall have known and they probably do (Morrissey and Mary, 1999: 53).

Raleigh himself holds a position of authority, but he is held responsible for everything that occurs. During the voyage, he was close to death due to a tropical illness and remained in Trinidad while his lieutenant, Lawrence Ymis, led the prospectors inland. When Raleigh returns, he strongly criticises Ymis for not opening the mine. As a result, Ymis retreats to his cabin and takes his own life. Raleigh comes back empty-handed to an English society that is highly interested in the expedition and somewhat sympathetic. People eagerly read his defense of his actions. His letters home, describing the voyage's disasters, are copied and circulated, along with the verses he is rumoured to have written on the fly-leaf of his Bible the night before his execution." (Rudick and Michael: 2001: 199)

Raleigh is beheaded in the Old Palace Yard at the Palace of Westminster on 29 October 1618. He asks his executioner to dispatch so that his enemies don't think that he is shaken with fear. After he is allowed to see the axe that will behead him, he says that this axe is a sharp medicine for all diseases and miseries, then he tells him to behead him and his life ends with these words.) Raleigh's death takes on the air of a martyrdom, or at any rate of a tragedy, in which he plays his central part to admiration. (Suarez et al., 2009: 231)

Shortly after Raleigh's execution and in his cell, there is a small tobacco box, the box is engraved in a Latin inscription which means that this box is his only companion in his miserable times. Raleigh's head is embalmed and presented to his wife. His body is buried in the local church in Boddington, Surrey, the home of Lady Raleigh, 29 years later, after his wife's death, Raleigh's head is returned to his tomb where he finally lays at rest in St. Margaret's church (Vaughan and Alden, 2002: 13)

The execution of Raleigh is witnessed by numerous individuals, who perceive it as needless and unfair. Consequently, in 1742, several locations are named Raleigh in tribute to Sir Walter Raleigh. These include educational institutions, the state capital of North Carolina, and its second largest city. Within the city, a bronze statue is erected in honour of its namesake, which has been relocated multiple times. (Morrissey and Mary, 1999: 56).

Also city of Raleigh in North Carolina is one of the eleven boarding houses at the Royal Hospital. Raleigh's county in West Virginia, is also named Raleigh in his honour (Vaughan and Alden, 2002: 49).

Raleigh doesn't publish his poetry, but he circulates them in manuscripts. As a result, only a few of his poems have come to the present day! What survives is no more than fifty poems, some of which reflect his changing life, his rise to power and his downfall. Raleigh has no individual style, he borrows heavily from his reading. In his lyrics, he tends to be terse, pointed and epigrammatic, and his verse is irregular in form and rhythm (Suarez et al., 2009: 151).

Some of his most famous poems include "Cynthia", a lengthy poem dedicated to the Queen that is highly acclaimed by Spenser, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd", a response to Christopher Marlow's "Passionate Shepherd", "The Lie", "What is Our Life", "The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage", and the sonnet that starts with "Me thought I Saw the Grave Where Laura Lay"; which is placed at the beginning of Spenser's Faerie Queen. (Suarez et al., 2009: 14)

## Part Two

Raleigh's poetry is composed in the plain style, which is characterized by its straightforward and unadorned manner. C.S. Lewis regards Raleigh as one of the "Silver Poets" of the era, a collective of poets who oppose the influence of the Italian Renaissance, characterized by intricate classical allusions and ornate lyrical techniques. Raleigh's poetry reflects the events of his life, which diverge from the prevailing tone and temperament of his time. His poetry exhibits a contemplative and self-analytical nature, and even his love poems possess a distant quality infused with sadness, doubt, and hopelessness. The poetry he writes exposes both his physical and spiritual bravery (Vaughan and Alden, 2002: 52).

Raleigh's poetry has only been preserved in fragments, extracted from the anthologies and commonplace books of the era, with subscriptions of questionable worth. The Lady he admires is the most exceptional lady in the country. A significant portion of poetry is directed at the Queen in her official capacity. Raleigh directly and confidentially speaks to her in the role of a Platonic mistress (Vaughan and Alden, 2002: 54).

Raleigh's poems "What is Our Life" and "The Lie" exhibit a disdainful attitude that is representative of the Middle Ages and the emerging era of humanistic Optimism. (Rudick and Michael: 2001: 211)

In "What is our Life?", the poet clearly explores the profound significance of our being in this world, as shown by the opening line "What is Our Life?". In his work "A play of passion," Raleigh asserts that human existence can be likened to a theatrical performance characterized by intense emotions. This metaphor draws a parallel between "Life" and a "play." The term "Life" in this context is abstract, hazy, ethereal, or foreign, while the term "a play" is concrete, definite, and familiar (Mandelson and Sara, 1998: 196).

The purpose of the metaphor is to highlight the distinct and contrasting nature of the intangible principal term, thereby making it more tangible and easily discussable. By emphasising the qualities that the two terms share, despite their inherent dissimilarity, the poet draws attention to the brevity and insignificance of stage plays and applies these characteristics to life itself, as exemplified by the phrase "where we are dressed for this short comedy" (Mandelson and Sara, 1998: 15).

Raleigh employs an extended metaphor by attributing many of the play's characteristics to life. For instance, he compares the womb to a dressing room, as both are spaces for preparation. He also likens Heaven to a discerning spectator who serves as a judge. Additionally, Raleigh compares graves to drawn curtains that signify the end of the play. Concluding the poem are two captivating lines of sagacity: "Thus march we, playing, to our latest rest / only we die in earnest, that's no jest." The author asserts that death is the one genuine undertaking in our existence (Suarez et al., 2009: 32).

Ultimately, Raleigh's "play of passion" is transformed into "a brief comedy" in order to imply a sense of melancholy and to challenge the notion that our existence is as grave as we could perceive it to be. The poem employs a metaphor that persists till the conclusion of the poem. The term "mirth" is likened to the phrase "music of division," while "Our mother's wombs" is compared to a room where garments are regularly changed. Life commences with the birth of each new generation. They are inherently destined to perform their brief comedic play. The term "Heaven" is metaphorically equated to a "Spectator" in this context. The spectator of this comedy refers to God. From his celestial abode, God observes the actions of humanity on the terrestrial plane. (ibid: 38)

The poet skillfully demonstrates his talent in blending contrasting elements by likening "The graves that conceal us from the penetrating sun" to "drawn curtains at the conclusion of a play". The pronoun "us" is a first-person plural pronoun that includes both men and women. Men are sometimes likened to performers in the theatrical production of life. In this poem, Raleigh utilises the literary device known as antithesis, wherein death is portrayed as the sole significant occurrence within the drama of life (Mandelson and Sara, 1998: 76).

In line eight, "Are like drawn" curtains when the play is done", "like" is a reference to a simile. In brief, the poem expresses a great sense of doubt about the fruitlessness of our life.

"The Lie" by Raleigh demonstrates his skepticism. The poem consists of thirteen stanzas. Raleigh starts with a strong resolve to reveal the truth, particularly among the upper class, despite being aware that his actions will not be well-received. The poem serves as a political and social critique, expressed through the imperative mood. (Rudick and Michael: 2001: 124)



Raleigh aims to challenge conventional thinking and make a compelling argument. He achieves this by employing various literary elements, with the tone and persona being particularly prominent. Through the use of sarcastic and provocative language, Raleigh effectively conveys his message, urging readers to question the status quo and challenge unjust ideologies. By the end of the poem, the central idea of not blindly trusting prevailing beliefs and critically examining them becomes clear (Mandelson and Sara, 1998: 121).

"The Lie" is distinguished by its abrupt and scornful rhythms, in which Raleigh harshly exposes the corruptions of society repeatedly. In this poem, Raleigh expresses and contemplates his doubts about the world and existence. Being a skeptical individual, he discusses life in a detached manner. It is worth noting that Raleigh wrote this poem during a period when he faced his own mortality. By composing this poem, Raleigh likely aimed to provoke critical thinking and raise profound doubts about the futility of life (Rudick and Michael: 2001: 211).

The speaker commands his departing soul to go about the world and engage a number of potentates and others of "high condition" for stations of endeavor by alerting them to their fabrications.

In the first stanza:

Go, soul, the body's guest,  
Upon a thankless errand:  
Fear not to touch the best;  
The truth shall be thy warrant:  
Go, since I needs must die,  
And give the world the lie.  
(L.L. 1-6)

The speaker fearlessly instructs his soul to undertake a thankless task of revealing the truth about "the best" individuals. The term "the best" is used ironically, as the speaker intends for his soul to expose the falsehoods of these arrogant individuals. The speaker acknowledges his impending death and urges his soul, which resides within his physical body as a guest, to embark on this crucial mission of debunking the world's deceptions:

Say to the court,  
it glows And shines like rotten wood;  
Say to the church, it shows  
What's good, and doth no good:  
If church and court reply, Then give them both the lie.  
(L.L. 7-12)

In the second stanza, the soul is required to make its first stop at the court and the church. The court is described as "glowing" and "shining" but is actually corrupt, like decaying wood. The reader imagines a courtroom with wood panelling, where honourable and principled officials should be found. However, the speaker has discovered that these court officials are dishonest. Similarly, the church is described as not practicing what it preaches, doing things that are not good despite claiming to be good. Therefore, the speaker instructs his soul to challenge the court and the church, to expose their falsehood by telling them that they are lying:

Tell potentates, they live  
Acting by others' action;  
Not loved unless they give,  
Not strong, but by a faction:  
If potentates reply,  
Give potentates the lie.  
(L.L. 8-13)

The third stanza "Tell potentates, they live", the poet declares accusing the court of being arrogant and yet holly rotten, the church is being inactive and pathic, despite its teaching, and accusing those in government of favouritism and greed, respecting only those in large numbers:

Tell age it daily wasteth;  
Tell honour how it alters;  
Tell beauty how she blasteth;  
Tell favour how it falters:  
And as they shall reply,  
Give everyone the lie.  
(L.L. 19-24)

In the seventh stanza the general tenor of the criticism mixes truths about mortality with satirical criticism of courtly abuses. It may follow the tradition of verse satires such as Wyatt's "Mine Own John points" "Why Come Ye Not to Court?", and ultimately reaching as far back as the Latin verse satires of Horace, Juvenal, and Persius.

The poem in general imagines a courtier telling his servant "the soul" to visit allegorical figures and actual members to tell them uncomfortable truths about themselves and if they objects "he must give them the lie" or accuses them publically of being untruthful and dishonest persons (Rudick and Michael: 2001: 116).



**III**

To sum up, it has been clear that the poet has concentrated on the concept of doubtfulness in the poems chosen i.e. What is our life and the Lie. The idea of doubtfulness is vividly reflected in his poetry through the way the king and his followers have treated him badly, rudely and ruthlessly. The poet was put in jail for the rest of his life. In jail, he tried to visualize his life the death of the queen. During this period, he expressed his feelings as he was treated unjustly. This situation led him to write these two prominent poems. At the end of his changeable life, he has to pay a heavy price for his glory and favour.

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### الشك في شعر والتر رالي

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الملخص

يركز هذا البحث على قضية رئيسية واحدة، وهي الخوف من الخيانة الذي يعاني منه الشاعر. كان والتر رالي في القرن السادس عشر قام بتأليف وإنتاج قصائد شاعراً عظيماً تكشف بؤس الحياة في ذلك الوقت. لأنه كان المفضل لديه رجل إلى الملكة إليزابيث، ال أحد يجرؤ على إسكاته. بعد وفاة الملكة، تم وضعه في السجن لبقية حياته. في السجن، قام بتأليف بعض القصائد الجميلة التي تكشف الجوانب القاتمة من حياته اليائسة داخل السجن. ولذا يهدف البحث الحالي الى يستكشف فكرة الشك في شعر الشاعر والتر رالي حيث انعكست هذه الفكرة بصورة واضحة في شعره.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** شعر القرن السادس عشر، والتر رالي، الشك، المعاناة