

**Towards a Humanitarian Race: A Study in Selected Poems by
Billy Collins**

MIFTEN I. AL-HUSSEINI

Finance.baghdad@gmail.com

ASST. PROF. HAITHAM K.

AL-ZUBBAIDI, PH.D.

haithamzubbaidi@gmail.com

haithamkamel@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

University of Baghdad - College of Arts

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this article is to analyze selected poetic works of Billy Collins (1941-), the most popular American poet in the present time, to show a clear line of moral humanitarian preaching that runs under the surface of his often humorous and entertaining poems. The topics discussed in this article include manners, respecting privacy, personal responsibility, self-acceptance, practical living advice, gratitude for life and finding meaning in death. The poems analyzed in this study address a wide range of human issues that are relatable in a global sense. The way Collins delivers these universal messages includes many postmodern devices such as humor, wit, sarcasm, satire and irony. Collins style of writing is freestyle and involves many settings and themes of the everyday and matters that the common person would encounter. The accessibility of his writing has gained him widespread public appeal and his lessons for humanity set him apart from the poetry that is only for entertainment value.

Keywords: Postmodern poetry, Billy Collins, preaching, Morality, American poetry.

Introduction:

In this paper, the selected poems discussed, that often take a form of indirect address, show how Billy Collins uses a series of moral humanitarian exhortations and manners to tackle universal issues that touch the life of mankind. It includes several personal experiences and situations the poet encounters in his daily life, and employ them in an attempt to attract the masses attention, to wake them up to and make them think about their life and the world around them. Along with Collins' concern about domestic home-centered issues, he exposes large interest in universal ethics and values. In this sense, his preaching and moralizing begins at home, but never stops there. He develops from the domestic sphere to a universal one, seeking to expose the shortcomings and ills of humanity at large, satirize and preach against them, while at the same time enhances and instills the shining moral values of people. Morals and human values are universal;

they are not culture-specific or time-bound. That is why they apply to all people at all times and places.

The poems discussed below are all concerned with universal themes, values and principles; they are thematically rather than chronologically oriented. Collins is using humor as a point of departure towards his moral point. Here, such concepts and themes of curiosity, gossiping and rumors, respecting other people's privacy, greed, gluttony and excessive consumption, professionalism and love of work, etc., are true and relevant to all communities.

Discussion:

The first poem to be tackled in this paper is "The Suggestion Box," from Collins poetry collection *Aimless Love* (2013), is the age old lesson to mind your own business. Unwanted advice seems to follow poets and creative people everywhere. Everyone wants to be helpful and contribute to the success of a writer by giving them good ideas for a subject. The problem lies with people not letting the writer write things that inspire them naturally.

Throughout the course of his day, Billy describes some of his encounters with people who have contributed to his suggestion box: the waitress who spilled coffee in his lap; the student with him during a campus fire drill; a woman he barely knew pointing out a dirigible in the sky ...

And if all that were not enough,
a friend turned to me as we walked past
a man whose face was covered with tattoos
and said, I see a poem coming!
Why is everyone being so helpful?

I wondered that evening by the shore of a lake. (Aimless, 197)

Ironically, in complaining about all this intrusive advice from friends and acquaintances, Collins ends up writing a poem to give examples of this unwanted advice. In this poem, Collins is highlighting the annoying nature of well meaning people who are not respectful of his privacy. He wants them to mind their own business and leave the writing to him. It is good advice to stay out of the affairs of others unless you are asked for your help.

In the same spirit of minding your own business, Collins poem from his book *Picnic, Lightning*, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," addresses the curiosity of Emily Dickinson's fans, who have often asked questions about her sexuality and even her virginity. Collins decided to lay those questions to rest with this controversial poem. He didn't want to join in on the speculation about her romantic inclinations or believed sexuality. Instead, Collins "undressed" Emily Dickinson in an extended metaphor as an homage to her in the hopes that people would explore her writings more closely and get past her often ambiguous style to the truth of her poetry.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is nothing to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,

catches, straps and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness. (*Picnic*, 74)

Collins made allusions to some of Dickinson's poems to put the spotlight back on her literary accomplishments. We may never know the real story of Emily Dickinson's love life, but Collins found an entertaining way to teach his readers not to dwell on the shallow rumors surrounding a person's personal life, but to look more closely at the results of their talent and their contributions to society through achievement.

In neighborhoods everywhere, people encounter pet owners who are less than considerate to others. Collins poem "Another Reason I Don't Have a Gun in the House," from his 1988 collection *The Apple that Astonished Paris*, is told from the perspective of a person who is finding himself frustrated by his neighbor's barking dog. Yet, contrary to the title of the poem, the reason for the poem has nothing to do with gun control or the right to bear arms controversy.

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast.
But I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking. (*The Apple*, 50)

The speaker of the poem is trying to mind his own business by not complaining. Collins lesson from this poem is to practice being a good neighbor. If you own pets, control them within reason and let people in your neighborhood live in peace.

Without gravity we would not have life as we know it. It is a thing we often forget to be thankful for or even aware of. Being grounded to earth is about being certain of the realities of life. It is what gives us comfort that each step we take will land on firm ground. At first glance the title of the poem, "Earthling," from *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (1988), may bring to mind a space craft and little green men. But, in fact, it actually talks about the important issue of body image and of accepting who we are on this planet.

The poem begins with the speaker of the poem observing his fellow earthlings at his local planetarium. Some of the popular attractions are the planetary scales that weigh a person and calculate their weight on other planets. The speaker scoffs at the heavy set visitors who stand in line at the Mars scale and the thin visitors that line up to stand on the Neptune scale. The speaker prefers to stay grounded in reality.

How much better to step onto
the simple bathroom scale,
a happy earthling feeling
the familiar ropes of gravity (*The Apple*, 37)

He knows that the planetary scales can't really change a person's weight and fails to see why other people want to fool themselves for fun. He is perfectly content to live simply and not over complicate his life in the pursuit of the materialistic illusion of outer beauty.

Collins uses the scales as a metaphor for the physical standards and expectations the world puts on people. Trying to live up to those standards causes dissatisfaction and may lead to obsessive behaviors and unhealthy habits to reach or maintain the ideal weight. Collins uses the speaker to point out how some people have a narrow view about those who are different than themselves and don't see their struggles. By showing acceptance for each other's differences, less pressure is placed on people to conform to unattainable standards. In the next poem, strict social expectations are placed on single people as well.

Billy Collins pokes fun at the stereotypes associated with a person who eats by themselves in a restaurant. The single man in Collins poem "Dining Alone," from *Aimless Love* (2013), is a good example of how to dine alone gracefully. The stigma of dining alone without a companion is often met with pity, therefore, the so-called singles experts, according to Collins poem, have rules for solo diners that will help them keep their dignity and the curious stares of strangers to a minimum. The experts advise single diners never sit at the bar because it is designated for lonely, depressed individuals.

... so here I am seated alone
at a table with a white tablecloth ...
ideal conditions for dining alone,
according to the connoisseurs of this minor talent. (*Aimless*, 239)

Once seated at the table, no reading materials are permitted that may keep them from becoming bored; and absolutely no looking around expectantly as if to search for an imaginary date who must be running late.

The man noticed that there were some definite benefits of dining alone and appearing cool and calm under the silent scrutiny of the other diners. He enjoyed the unhurried pace of eating and sipped his wine as slowly as he wished. Perhaps the most ironic finding, was the sight of an old married couple who stared at each other in silence and an unhappy man on a blind date who looked like he wanted to be rescued. Those people were supposed to be happier because they had dinner companions. Yet when they saw the man sitting alone at his table, they envied his freedom from attachment. Being part of a couple is not worth the label if it is not a happy connection. Collins lesson is that it is possible to be alone and perfectly content with your singlehood and that having a relationship isn't the only way to find personal tranquility.

In the next two poems, Collins gives his readers advice on how to prioritize tasks and declutter their lives. In his 2005 poem, "Fool Me Good," from *The Trouble with Poetry*, Collins presents a common sense strategy for life that requires undivided attention. As the speaker of the poem relaxed, he listened to Blues singer Precious Bryant singing her song "Fool Me Good;" at the same time, he tried to pet the dog and write down the words of the poem. He says by doing these three things simultaneously, he would be going against the advice of Buddha, who advised doing only one thing at a time.

Just pour the tea,
just look into the eye of the flower,
just sing the song-
one thing at a time
and you will achieve serenity. (*Trouble*, 79)

He wanted to give his whole heart to fully enjoy the music. He wanted to give his dog some affection and he wanted to write an interesting poem. But he realized that to do any of those tasks justice he must complete them one at a time. Collins suggests that everything we do, we do with our whole hearts in our daily life and we will be less stressed because focus leads to fulfillment and better results in accomplishing what we set out to do. Likewise, in the following poem, he states that having a clean and organized atmosphere is essential to do things properly.

Billy Collins, the college professor-emeritus, does not forget to help his students in the poem “Advice to Writers” from his collection *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (2001). “Advice to Writers,” is the ultimate prescription for writer’s block. Billy’s advice is of course presented in an absurd and humorous guise, but the practical message for a writer, can actually serve as good counsel for every reader.

Speaking directly to his readers, Collins humorously suggests that before writers even put their pen to paper, they should work into the night, to “wash down the walls and scrub the floor of your study” as if the Pope himself were coming for a visit. Becoming more ridiculous, Collins says the writer should even “take to the open fields” and forests to dust the top branches of trees and polish the undersides of rocks. When all the cleaning was done, the writer would find his way home, and there catch a glimpse of his immaculate desk in the bright light of dawn. Then with renewed inspiration, he would take up his pencil and the words would effortlessly line up like tiny ants on the page; in a tribute to cleanliness, their simple muse.

Collins is suggesting that when a writer hits a brick wall, so to speak, in the exercise of writing, it helps clear the mind to get the body moving and do productive things. Bringing order and cleanliness into our immediate surroundings is not only an act of removing physical clutter but also mental clutter, therefore, making space in our minds for new ideas. While it isn’t a guarantee for writing success it is a positive outlook which promotes deliberate action that may be beneficial to the human psyche. Not only is this sound advice for writers, but it applies to life in general. Therefore, as the result of less distraction in our lives, this renewed attitude of order and harmony can be extended outward to benefit society. The final series of poems presented, are less about how human words and actions affect the world, as discussed in earlier poems, and more about how individuals process the idea of death and thereafter.

It begins with Collins celebration for the dead through an exercise in penmanship, and evolves into a big thank you to everyone, in Collins poem

“Thank you Notes,” from *Horoscopes for the Dead* (2011). As a child, his mother had assigned him the task of writing thank-you notes to his relatives. Writing thank-you notes has become a lost art in the present time. They have always been considered to be good etiquette and a formal acknowledgment of gratitude for a gift you are given. As he grew older, he continued to write the thank-you notes without the prompting of his mother. He was carried away with gratitude for the many people who had touched his life even in the simplest ways; to anyone who ever gave him directions, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, cut his hair or fixed his car. He also expressed gratitude for those who had died and given balance to the universe.

And while I’m at it,
thanks to everyone who happened to die
on the same day that I was born.
Thank you for stepping aside to make room for me,
for giving up your seat ...
One day, I will follow your example
and step politely out of the path
of an oncoming infant, but not right now ... (*Horoscopes*, 80-81)

The lesson of this poem is to receive gifts with gratitude, and to give thanks wholeheartedly by returning our favors in kind. Collins goes deeper into how death is dealt with by the imagination in the following poem.

Until we die we can only imagine what manner of death will befall us. Billy Collins adds a bit of postmodern paranoia to this question of unexpected death in his poem, “Picnic, Lightning,” from his poetry collection of the same name, *Picnic, Lightning*. While he shovels compost, the speaker of the poem, contemplates the many different ways death may befall him.

This is what I think about
when I shovel compost into
a wheelbarrow ...
the instant hand of death
always ready to burst forth
from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak. (*Picnic*, 25)

He supposes it is possible that an airplane or meteor could fall down on him from the sky. Or he may one day be flattened on the sidewalk by a safe falling from a rooftop. All these scenarios are as likely to happen as summer lightning is to strike on a family picnic. Just as fear started to creep in, the man was returned to the present moment by the sights and sounds of his garden. Collins wants us to remember that we can't control how we die but we can control how we live. Being open to seeing the beauty of creation is a good way to live life without the fear of imminent death.

The idea of death can be surrounded by trepidation and fear of the unknown. It is a fact that death itself does not discriminate according to race or religious beliefs. But the truth that we will die someday is

something that all humanity has in common. This commonality is discussed in the next poem about eternal destinations.

Billy Collins, in his poem, “The Afterlife,” from *Questions About Angels* (1991), poses the theory that perhaps everyone was right about their varied interpretations of the afterlife. Collins pokes fun at multiple religions and the stories of what their afterlife would be like.

While you are preparing for sleep... the dead
of the day are setting out on their journey. They're
moving off in all imaginable directions,
each according to his own private belief ... (*Questions*, 33)

Collins enumerates these private beliefs. One group of people think the afterlife will be like being shot through a funnel into white light and others believe they will be joining the angels singing in a celestial choir. Some see themselves standing naked before an all-powerful authority who sits in judgement of their worthiness. Yet, Collins says others imagine an afterlife in which they will return to earth as plants and animals to take their turn at a simpler existence. Still, other groups picture themselves as little units of light that float away into a gentle ambiguity. The less evolved beings hope for an eternity filled with basic human pleasures: air conditioning, endless food and beautiful women.

This almost exhaustive list of the many versions of the afterlife is simplified with one last version at the end of the poem. Instead of the dead, each setting off on journeys in a variety of destinations, Collins suspected they are actually resting in their graves wishing they were still alive. They would give anything to do the simple things the living take for granted like standing in front of a window looking out on a snowy day or brushing their teeth before bed.

In irreverent postmodern style, Collins is describing a whole world of philosophies in a single poem. This denial of absolute truth and the display of multiple truths, is an example of Collins’ use of fragmentation in his poetry. What happens after we die is the question we all ask ourselves at some point in our lives. Some believe in an afterlife while others remain skeptical. What we take away from this “afterlife parade” from Billy Collins is that every belief should be respected even if we do not agree. Some are hard to accept with a logical mind, and others seem like fantasy; but there are some good aspects in every religion. For some the afterlife is a reward or punishment for the life you lived; for others it is nondiscriminatory - it is what it is. Yet the idea of an afterlife brings comfort to many because it means that our souls will continue to journey.

The truth is, none of us can be certain until we are dead what is waiting for us at the end of our human life. So we choose what to believe based on what makes sense to us and we show our humanity by letting others do the same. Regardless of the different understandings people have about death, all people wish to have their names remembered and honored after death. Human beings who make great sacrifices for others especially

deserve to be honored in death, examples of these humans are mentioned in the last poem.

On the morning of September 11th 2001, almost 3,000 human lives were taken in terror attacks in America. Soon after the attacks, people were in shock and grief-stricken over the loss of their family and friends. Billy Collins as the newly appointed U.S. Poet Laureate decided to write an elegy to the dead titled, “The Names,” as a comfort to the people and to preserve an event in his country’s history of unimaginable destruction of property, loss of life and breach of national security. He used the alphabet to order “The Names” throughout the poem, surrounding them with sentiment, imagery and metaphor. Collins chose not to use the victim’s actual names in the poem; the real names would later be inscribed into bronze parapets surrounding the two tribute pools at Ground Zero.

Collins described a scene in which he himself was lying awake at night with a quiet rain falling outside his window. The list began with Ackerman, Baxter and Calabro. He saw their names on everyday things.

Names printed on the ceiling of the night.
 Names slipping around a watery bend.
 Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.
 And each had a name --
 Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal
 Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.
 Names written in the air (*Aimless*, 254- 255)

Names were stitched on clothing, drawn into a tattoo and seen on storefront windows or hanging from awnings, names appeared around every corner. He saw names in the woods, in the boughs of a maple tree; names written in the sky or written on gravestones. At the end were Young and Ziminsky “the final jolt of Z”, and X would stand for all the victims who were never found and laid to rest. So many names of sons and daughters, mothers, fathers and neighbors to be stored in our memories; it was almost too much mourning for one heart to bear.

Collins did not follow in the steps of Alfred Lord Tennyson (1802-1892) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) who were more concerned with decrying the number of casualties than giving the names of dead when they wrote “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” and “The Last of the Light Brigade” respectively. Though both of them were England’s most famous poet laureates, they used their poetry platform to further their political stances rather than comforting humanity.

When Billy Collins wrote “The Names,” about the victims of September 11, 2001, he concentrated on acknowledging the grief and pain felt by the families and friends of the victims. He sees the names of the dead on ordinary objects and written in nature; humble memorials all around him as signs the dead are not forgotten. This reminds us that our passed on loved ones don’t need a fancy memorial to honor them. The way to honor them is through positive change and actions that will benefit and bring comfort to those still living.

Conclusion:

The poems in this article each share distinct universal themes which Collins uses to give moral instruction to his readers in amusing and thoughtful ways. “Suggestion Box” and “Taking off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes” both address the issue of giving others privacy in their personal and creative lives, respectively. “Another Reason I Don’t Have a Gun in the House” suggests people be mindful of their responsibilities as pet owners and be considerate of the lives of their neighbors. “Earthling” and “Dining Alone,” deal with the standards the world places on people to conform to what is accepted in society; the latter showing why a person’s relationship status isn’t a reflection of their success or failure in life. Whereas, “Earthling” is about accepting yourself and not judging other people’s outward appearance. In the poem “Fool Me Good,” Collins illustrates the common sense of prioritizing tasks to value quality over quantity in our daily actions. “Advice to Writers,” is Collins inspiring suggestion to clear away the cobwebs of the mind through cleanliness and intentionality. “Thank You Notes” demonstrates the importance of gratitude towards others. In Collins poem titled, “The Names,” he leads by example by using his talent to comfort the grieving and give hope to the masses in the midst of tragedy. “Picnic, Lightning” reminds people not to dwell too much on death, but instead, appreciate the living beauty that is in the present moment. “The Afterlife” delivers an ironic dose of reality that no person can prove what lies beyond death; yet allows everyone the right to hold his own beliefs. Through the study of these selected poems by Billy Collins, we see the need for more awareness that our words and actions can have an impact on our close environments and also the world.

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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء و تتبع القيم و المبادئ الانسانية المقدمة بصورة غير مباشرة في شعر بيلي كولنز (١٩٤١ -)، الشاعر الأبرز و الأشهر في أمريكا في العصر الحالي ، ومدى اهميتها في اىصال بني البشر إلى النزعة الانسانية، من خلال تناوله لمواضيع تهتم بالسلوكيات و العادات المجتمعية و فن التعامل الراقى مع الآخرين، كاحترام الخصوصية ، تقبل الآخر، قبول الذات، التحلي بالقصدية، تنظيم الأمور، احترام و تقدير العمل اليدوي، ادراك الموت و الامتتان الى الحياة، و غيرها العديد من المثل التي تمس الحياة اليومية للفرد حتى امسى شعره أكثر شهرةً و تأثيراً لدى الجميع. لقد وظف كولنز أسلوب الدعابة والسخرية بمختلف صنوفها في شعره لهدف أسمى، ليظهر من خلالها جدية عالية و حكمة عميقة مغطاة بحلاوة الطرفة و المزاح، مختطاً لنفسه منهجاً رسالياً يخاطب العقول لا الحواس، ويركز على المنطق العقلي لا على إثارة المشاعر ليبين مدى تأثير و فاعلية الشعر الكوميدي في عصر الانترنت فهو بذلك يخالف نظرة ما بعد الحداثة للشعر بوجه خاص، و الأدب بوجه عام، على أنه مادة للتسلية أو للأدب فقط (الأدب للأدب نفسه).

الكلمات المفتاحية: شعر ما بعد الحداثة، بيلي كولنز، الوعظ، الأخلاق، الشعر الأمريكي