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Final Project Presentation Text
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Task

Prepare a five-to-seven-minute presentation on stanzas 86 to 89 of the Fifth Edition of Edward FitzGerald's translation of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

Presentation Text

What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you see clay pots? Chances are, it isn't the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

But stanzas 82 through 90 of that poem by Edward FitzGerald are all part of an extended metaphor involving pottery. The “potter” represents God, and the clay “pots” are God’s creations. These symbols obviously operate upon the idea that God shapes and molds human beings according to His own plans. But they also play off of a secondary meaning of the word “clay”: the mortal human flesh as distinguished from an immortal spirit or soul, a body that is considered to serve the purposes of a divine creator.

Stanza 86 makes use of this metaphor by introducing an “ungainly” vessel that leans “awry”—in other words, a clumsy pot that is twisted to one side. It wonders if the “Hand [...] of the Potter” was shaking when it was made, meaning that God accidentally deformed one of His creations. The pot in stanza 88 seems to go further with this idea, relating rumors that God will send to hell “The luckless Pots he marr’d

in making.” However, this pot soon dismisses the idea, on the basis that God is a “Good Fellow” who would never do such a thing. This reassurance may follow from the conclusion in stanza 85 that God would never “destroy” a person that he spent so much time creating.

This discussion of God and His creations is irritating to the pot in stanza 87, which asks, “Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?” This question may make more sense upon closer examination of the pot that proposed it, which the poem describes as a “Sufi pipkin.” A “pipkin” is a small, earthen pot; a “Sufi” is a member of an ascetic Muslim mystical sect. The word “Sufism” (SOO fizm) comes from the Arab word *suf*, meaning “wool,” the material the early Muslim mystics used for their clothing. The movement emerged out of a desire to maintain a personal relationship with Allah (ALL uh), and its ultimate goal is to reach *fana* (fih NUH), an ecstatic state of union with God. This is achieved through the extirpation of one’s own desires in favor of the divine will. (*Now, I’ll illustrate this with a symbolic demonstration. The water in this glass represents God; each granule of brown sugar represents a Sufi on the path of unity with his or her creator. When the sugar crystals are stirred with this spoon, they are excited into a state of ecstasy that leads them to “dissolve” into the greater divine being.*) In addition to stressing mysticism, Sufism holds that all people and all aspects of nature are direct reflections of their heavenly creator. Based on these beliefs, then, when the pipkin asked who is God and who are His creations, it may

have been suggesting that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other, for both are part of the same, unified whole.

This idea of losing one's individuality during moments of ecstasy is an important part of those qualities attributed to Dionysus. Sufism is Dionysian in other ways, as well: it emphasizes emotion and intuition and the guidance of inner light, and it rejects adherence to the dictates of tradition or reason. Omar Khayyam himself was a devout Sufi, and his Dionysian tendencies are evident throughout the poem. For example, in stanza 55 Omar Khayyam declares that he "Divorced old barren Reason from my Bed, / And took the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse." In other words, he gave up the rational restraint of Apollo and embraced Dionysus—who was, after all, the god of wine.

The pot in stanza 89 expresses similar Dionysian desires. It explains how its age and impending death have drained it of energy and strength but also how it "might recover by and by" if it were filled "with the old familiar Juice." Here, the word "Juice" takes on two meanings. First, it implies "essence" and "vitality," as in "the juice of life." Second, it refers to alcohol. Thus, the pot in stanza 89 wishes to drink in its final days of existence in the same way that Omar Khayyam requests in stanza 91 that someone "with the Grape my fading life provide."

All four of these pots made some kind of statement about the nature of the "potter." The "ungainly" vessel from stanza 86 showed that not all of God's creations are perfect. The pot from stanza 88

reassured itself with the idea that God was a merciful being who would not destroy his mistakes. The pipkin from stanza 87 rejected distinctions between God and the world He created. The pot from stanza 89 made no direct reference to its creator, but its age and weariness might suggest that God does not want people to have eternal youth and vitality. The issues that the pots raise are not trifling details; to the contrary, these very questions have been debated by theologians from every religion throughout history.