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An interpretation of Parsifal

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AN INTERPRETATION OF PARSIFAL.

The problem of the world's woe has commanded the world's masters. Art and literature abound in the presentation of the heroic and the non-heroic in life's drama. Elliot, Shakespeare and Hugo remain unsurpassed in their portrayal of character — its rise and fall. But none of these have given us a complete solution. These masters have presented character in the individual. They have left humanity as a race untouched. Richard Wagner was stirred by the sin and suffering of the race. He recognized its solidarity and has given us a gospel of social and moral salvation. "There is a book into which some of us are happily led to look, and to look again, and never tire of looking. It is the Book of Man." Wagner's Parsifal is a commentary on this "Book of Man". Parsifal is the drama of Humanity in which sin is a disease, an open sore, infesting the noble race of men. The drama is the play of "Humanity", upon the stage of life. The one actor appears in the different rolls of Amfortas, Kundry, and Parsifal. All other characters mentioned are but the poetical background for this most artistic play. Wagner is an artist working upon a great wall or ceiling painting. The work must be seen as it was intended. The right approach is necessary for proper perspective.

This drama is an allegory of which Prometheus Bound and Pilgrim's Progress are classic examples. Parsifal

is more practical than the former, and contains less dogma and detail than the latter. Wagner gives us his conception of humanity and tells us how its poverty may be alleviated; its open sore, healed; its chains of galling slavery, broken; and the noble race, set free. With his great heart, human sympathies and rich genius, Mr. Wagner comprehends the rise and fall of the individual, and looks beyond the individual to the race, beyond man to men. It is in this that he makes his departure from the masters. He gives the picture in the larger aspect. He looks farther and beholds humanity as one man, grievously afflicted with the deep and foul sore of the world's sin. This suffering commands his sympathy. His heart yearns for his humanity. Like Buddha, he goes out into the night and wails, "My world! My world! My lost world."

He beholds,

"The sovereign of a strong and noble race
 Now in the very flower and prime of life,
 Brought low and made a bounden slave
 Unto a shameful and a stubborn sickness."

Amfortas here represents humanity, the strong and noble sovereign brought low in the very flower and prime of life. This "shameful and stubborn sickness" is sin inflicted by humanity upon itself. Humanity is sick, depraved and defeated, yet noble in its sufferings. Wagner sees in this low and mortal sufferer marks of his true nobility and royal lineage. As Amfortas is resting for a moment before his bath, he says,

"How sweet this morning and these fragrant woods
 To one who tossed the weary night in pain.
 And this pure lake with all its freshening waves
 Will lighten pain and brighten my dark woe."

The suffering brings appreciation of the good and God. Nowhere in man's universe is he far from God, for made in His image, communion may be enjoyed at any time. Wagner paints humanity in close relation to the divine. Amfortas, although bearing the deep, red wound of sin, serves the Holy Grail, and is sustained by it. Humanity is sinful even while it serves, as Kundry well illustrates. The choice fruit of God's universe shows signs of decay. A cure has been promised. Humanity seems to know what this cure is. "Yea it is useless, hoping thus to ease the pain

Unless we use the one sure cure."

"Only one healer and one healing thing
 Can staunch the gaping wound and save the King."

Yet humanity ever turns from the "one sure cure" and tries every "balsam brought from far Araby." Amfortas seems to understand his own case when he speaks of a knight who has gone forth in search of some "healing herb".

"Alas that he should go on useless quests
 And seem to do despite unto the Grail!
 For it is ordered by divine command
 That I should suffer for my grievous sin,
 And naught can help me but one single thing.
 X X X X X X X X X
 I pray you, sir, venture no more for me,-
 It only breaks my peace, and grieves my heart.
 Naught will avail. I only wait for Him,-
 'By pity' lightened! Was not this the word?"

But the delay of promised relief is grievously borne and the King is seized with despair and moans,

"'The guileless one.' Methinks I know him now!
His name is Death, for only Death can free me."

Humanity ever struggles with the mystery of life and feels for the hand that upholds and directs behind the dumb immovable mask of things. Unable to find all to his satisfaction, man gives up in despair and sinks crying,

"This wound it is that ne'er will close again."
"It is ordered by divine command that
I should suffer for my grievous sin.-
.....only Death can free me."

So struggling, sinful humanity strives and despairs and strives again seeking a cure for its sickness. Hopes against despair for "hope springs eternal" in our humanity. Amfortas is this humanity with all its boasted culture still bearing the dark-bleeding, unhealed wound of sin. Not wilful malicious sin, but sins of overmastering passion, of uncultivated conscience, and of unmitigated environment; sins that have overtaken the nobly good and have caused those to fall who "think they stand". Here are found those who fall and fail in the midst of their effort to accomplish good. Who fall and are confused by their falling until they cannot find their way back from whence they fell, and carry with the woe of their wound the feeling of the unexplained mystery of it all. Humanity stifled by the mystery of life, clearly conscious that there is but one relief, still tests the theories and philosophies of every pretender who professes to heal the soul. Amfortas has sinned but has not been made wise unto salvation. He is repentant but without hope but death

to relieve his suffering. Experience has not taught him the great lesson of sympathy. Amfortas is not only sinful and despairing humanity but also intolerant and unsympathetic humanity. He may be the virgin pure but intolerant who have reached Alpine heights of virtue from which the weak and fallen are looked down upon with scorn. Of whom the Christ said, "The publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you." This is the sore of humanity overgrown with "proud-flesh" which must be removed before the sore can heal. Again, Amfortas may be the humanity that has fallen and yet lack sympathy for others in their weakness. Amfortas is enlightened humanity, but humanity not enlightened by love. The wound of humanity is sore and the sufferer groans in continuous pain.

But why does humanity suffer so? How did it receive its mortal wound? Wagner finds the cause in the nature of humanity itself. Humanity is a veritable Jekyll and Hyde. The cause of sin lies in the sinner. Humanity is its own captor, when humanity is led captive by Klingsor, who is the giant passions. The greatest foe to the human race is its members, when they are enthralled by passion, whether lust of gold or lust of flesh. This humanity is

"Kundry, wretched Kundry, mad old Kundry."

"O Kundry!

Sinful and yet desiring to be helped,
 Enthralled by sin, yet seeking after God!
 Thou art our human nature after all,-
 Strange contradiction, mingled love and hate,
 Half demon and half angel in thy moods."

Here is Tennyson's devil and angel in man. Nowhere in literature do we find this strange contradiction in humanity so vividly portrayed as we find it in Wagner's Kundry. "A foul and snarling thing on holy ground." Yet, "Oft she serves in the kindest ways."

"Sinful, yet desiring to be helped,
Enthralled by sin, yet seeking after God."

She lured the brave Amfortas to his shame, yet serves the knights of the Grail well and faithfully. She cries out against herself and longs for death that she may be free from her serfdom, yet with all her devilish art, with "tempting lips", "smiling eye", "fair arms", "white throat", and "pleading voice", she seeks to ensnare Parsifal, the purest knight of the Grail. Strange contradiction indeed, but ^{our} human nature after all. For has not man become so enthralled, the slave of some passion, that to satisfy its demands he would stifle the lives of his loved ones and grind to powder the hopes of the soul? How many millions of souls are ground up yearly to satisfy the mills of lust and greed! Bad to the core, yet not entirely void of good, but with the bad a mingling of the good. A snare of evil set in a tangle of good. The most harmful evil in creed, in heart, in body has this double face and is thus made doubly dangerous. Sin clothed in virtue's garment's the Kundry of humanity, is the ever present cause of the world's sore wound.

Amfortas and Kundry are but the statement of the

problem in humanity. There remains the solution. This Wagner found in humanity itself when inspired and obedient to divine wisdom. Parsifal is the name of this humanity. Parsifal is unlike the others, Amfortas and Kundry, only in this, that he obeyed the call of the Grail, and served it from a spirit of love. Wagner was keenly sensible to a presence which inspires men to their best. This power lies with the Holy Grail and Spear which are but symbols of that mystic and yet powerful spirit of the Christ. Yet this Spirit seems powerless to help men until brought to men by men. "True men and women are all physicians to make us well." Humanity can best find God through men. In his Saul, Browning has well expressed the place and spirit of Wagner's Parsifal.

" 'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh
that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it, O Saul it shall be
A face like my face that receives thee; a man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by forever; a Hand like this
hand
Shall thro' open the gates of life to thee! See the
Christ stand."

And again,

"Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to
enrich,
To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would."

Such a spirit can only be possessed by the reincarnation of Christ into humanity. Christianity is the highest perfection of humanity. Wagner recognized the widespread influence of the Grail. It speaks in all tongues, whispers in all hearts, is the mystic chain of union for all mankind. No race is so lost in savagery as not to be lifted into its radiance. Yet

the fragrance of the Grail and its illuminating vision can only be apprehended in all its beneficence by the awakened and obedient soul. Amfortas and all the knights failed to see, for they failed to follow and obey. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

"No one sees the glory of the Grail
Save those to whom it shall reveal itself."

Parsifal could have been a Kundry or an Amfortas but he heeded the vision. If humanity is ever to receive the "one sure cure" for its malady, it must be brought by humanity that has been inspired and transformed by the Spirit of the Grail. This humanity that brings the healing to Amfortas and the freedom to Kundry, is Wagner's Parsifal. This humanity is not merely perfection or purity but humanity with a heart. While the freest from the taint of sin he passes his judgment over into compassion with those who wallow in sin. This drama is an exposition of Christian love rooted in sympathy and expressed in action. Compassion is the keynote to Parsifal. The heart that resists evil passion and is touched by pity for the world's woe is the heart that reincarnates the passionate purity of the Christ and can reveal again the Holy Grail of God.

Parsifal is not merely pitying humanity, but enlightened humanity. Humanity enlightened by love. Mere knowledge may work as much woe as weal. Intelligence or training misdirected is always dangerous. Parsifal is humanity trained for a purpose, and inspired by the highest motives. Not always perfect, not always pure, but striving, serving humanity.

"It was better youth
Should strive through acts uncouth,
Toward making, than repose on aught found made."

Parsifal speaks of his own development:

"Through error and through suffering I come,
Through many failures and through countless woes.
Thus was the guileless one at last enlightened,
And taught the depths of pity and of love."

Parsifal is the ever rising humanity, the knight of the Grail, whose spirit is among us. The world hears the call, sees the vision, and heeds the message of Parsifal as never before, knowing for the first time what it means when love enters life.

Parsifal returns enlightened by love and breaks Klingsor's evil power over Kundry and sets her free.

"Parsifal took water from the spring,
And came to Kundry kneeling at his feet,
And sprinkled her with solemn mystic rite,
And said, 'This be the first work of my trust.
Kundry, in Christ's dear name I sprinkle thee.
Be thou redeemed and holy evermore.'"

.....
"Then Kundry, with tears still in her eyes,
Looked up at Parsifal, and soft he spake,
'I saw the hearts that mocked us fade away,
But love shall bloom eternal in God's grace.
Blest tears that speak the blessing in thy heart.
But weep no more. God's grace is full of joy,-
Smile with all thy Nature, joyously redeemed!'
And down he bent, and on her pure brow
Printed the kiss of God's redeeming love."

Thus humanity enlightened by that love which comes from the reincarnation of the Christ, breaks the fetters of its own degrading slavery.

Parsifal, after healing the king, disenthrones him, and in his place enthrones a sound and saved humanity. Humanity endowed by power divine is to be its own healer.

"Then Parsifal drew near the King and slowly spake,
 'Only one weapon serves to kill that pain.
 The one that struck can staunch thy wound again.'
 And with the sacred spear he touched the King.
 And lo! a miracle of healing power! -
 The wound was staunched and a deep thrill of love
 Changed agony to rapture all divine.
 And Parsifal spake on, 'Thou art forgiven.
 Body and soul are cleansed by God's free grace.
 Thy life forevermore shall happy be
 Within the service of the Holy Grail.
 But nevermore as King, for I have come
 To take thy place as God hath so decreed.
 Thy sorrows shall be blessings unto thee,
 For thus by pity was the guileless lightened,
 And God's shown Son was perfect made by pain.'"

Humanity has been redeemed. The foul sore of sin has been
 healed. The slavery of passions has been everthrown. New or-
 der and new life appears in our humanity.

"The Saviour's work hath wrought a miracle,
 And now the grateful tears of penitence
 Are holy dew that falls upon the world,
 And makes it bloom in fair and lustrous beauty;
 And all creation knows God's saving work,
 And praises Him for His redeeming grace.
 No more the agony of that grim Cross,
 But now the joy of man redeemed and saved,
 Freed from the load of sin by conquering faith,
 And purified by Love's great sacrifice.
 Each sprouting blade and meadow flower doth see
 Something of God's grace in the heart of man;
 For as the Lord was tender unto man,
 So man, in turn will love God's flowering earth.
 The whole creation, therefore, doth rejoice,
 And every bird and flower is full of praise,
 And Nature everywhere is full of God,
 And sweet has dawned this day of innocence."

(Please return MSS.)