“Dream of Rood” Literary Analysis

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The alliterative verse “Dream of Rood” is one of the oldest surviving works of Anglo-Saxon literature that presents a dream in which the speaker encounters the cross which is referred to as “rood” in the poem and on which Christ was crucified. In the work, the term “rood” itself speaks while recounting its journey from a tree to becoming the instrument as a cross for the crucifixion of Christ. The excerpt from the “Dream of Rood” delves into the significance of “rood” as translated as “*Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream/ what came to me in the middle of the night/ when speech-bearers slept in their rest/ It seemed that I saw a most wondrous tree/ raised on high, wound round with light/ the brightest of beams. All that beacon was/ covered in gold; gems stood/ fair at the earth’s corners, and there were five/ up on the cross-beam. All the angels of the Lord looked on;/ fair through all eternity; that was no felon’s gallows,/ but holy spirits beheld him there,/ men over the earth and all this glorious creation.*” (Foundation). This passage juxtaposes the journey from the heavenly “wondrous tree” to the earthly “cross-beam” that is adorned with gems and gold. The adornment signifies that even in and after the suffering the sacrifice of Christ is transcendent and glorious as His suffering has become the beacon of salvation and hope.

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The Rood as a Sacred Relic

The rood's adornment with precious materials also emphasizes the divine significance of the "rood" as the magnificent tree that is transformed into the cross. The rood's journey and adornment from a natural and earthly object to a sacred and heavenly relic signifies the transition from the mundane object and sheds light on the intersection of the human and divine realms to a sacred symbol of redemption reflecting the glorious sacrifice of Christ. The rood recounts the description of itself through the sweating blood on its right side, spear shafts, and nail wounds that foreshadow its active participation in the process of crucifixion and the agony of Christ. Furthermore, the struggle between the suffering of Christ and the radiant appearance beneath the gems and the gold allude to the dual nature of the event of the crucifixion. It refers to the sacrifice of Christ in both painful and triumphant ways.

Witness to Crucifixion and Salvation

The rood in the “Dream of Rood” becomes a witness to the central treatment by narrating its experience of the central and significant event of Christianity. This event of crucifixion and rood’s role in becoming a central instrument and a sacred symbol of salvation and redemption. The event reinforces the importance of the history of salvation as the rood bridges the gap between the earthly and divine. Moreover, the voice of the rood itself as the living narrator and vivid imagery portray the “cross” not only as an object for death but also as a sacred symbol of salvation while transitioning from a mundane object “tree” to the sacred symbol of the salvation of the Christ and the entire humankind as the “rood” or the cross. This portrayal of the “rood” emphasizes its sacrificial role in fulfilling the divine plan of God of the salvation of mankind through Christ’s crucifixion. The “Dream of Rood” invites us to contemplate the transformative history of the “rood”, the transformative power of faith, and the profound mystery of the sacrifice of Christ.

The Dream Vision and Obedient Suffering

The opening symbol in the poem relates the whole idea of the poem as the rood’s story unfolds and grasps the message of intense personal hope for the dreamer leaving him in awe and by extension reflecting the message for all readers. The midnight vision of the dreamer represents the violent and horrifying aspects of the death of Christ on the cross as the rood narrates its own story to the dreamer as a living story-teller while being alternately adorned with jewels and gold and drenched in blood describing it was compelled to participate in the crucifixion of the Christ. The “rood” describes its obedience to Christ while standing firm, bearing spear shafts, enduring nail wounds, suffering from fear, and desiring to defend Christ against His enemies.

The Rood as a Christlike Retainer

The “rood” sadly describes the pathos that His enemies were the ones who ripped it from the ground when it was a tree and transformed it into an instrument of death for Christ without rood’s will. The suffering of Christ honors the rood while blood is poured onto it and supplicates it with the ability to heal people who make a plea or a prayer to the “rood” or the cross. Moreover, the rood has the qualities of Christ with which Jesus is often depicted which include self-sacrifice and humility. Therefore, the cross or rood is referred to as the “victor-tree”, “wondrous wood”, and the “Savior’s Tree” in the work referring to its experience as the loyal retainer supporting its Lord, Christ and also exemplifies the promised consolation of redemption.

Suffering, Glory, and Redemption

In essence, the opening passage of the poem delves into the importance of the event of crucifixion on the cross which was once a tree that was compelled to become the very instrument of the death of Christ. The suffering and glory of the cross set the tone for the entire poem delivering the message that a gruesome cross becomes the beacon of salvation intertwining themes of suffering, sacrifice, personal faith, and redemption. The profound transformation of “rood” as a tree to the horrifying and blood-stained cross that had borne nail wounds and suffered with Christ delivers a message of intense personal hope and a resplendent sign of redemption for humankind.

Works Cited

Foundation, Poetry. “Dream of the Rood (Trans. by Roy Liuzza) by Unknown.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159129/dream-of-the-rood-translation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/.