

Barter by Sara Teasdale

'Barter' by Sara Teasdale describes the many lovely and splendid sights, sounds and experiences life has to sell to someone willing to invest in them.

'Barter' by Sara Teasdale is a three-stanza poem that is separated into sets of six lines, or sestet. Each of these sestets follows a rhyming pattern of abcbdd, altering as the poet saw from stanza to stanza.

A reader should also take note of Teasdale's vibrant use of imagery. In almost every line of this piece, there is a concise but impactful description of one part of life, nature, and the human experience. These wide-ranging elements were selected to be as universal and non-exclusionary as possible. Many, if not every reader, should be able to find something in this piece that relates to their own life.

Summary of Barter

'Barter' by Sara Teasdale describes the many lovely and splendid sights, sounds, and experiences life has to sell to someone willing to invest in them.

The poem begins with the speaker describing her first batch of life's experiences. She speaks of waves, fire, and the faces of children. These different parts of the human experience are equal in her mind. They all bring with them joy and beauty beyond measure. It is clear from the first stanza that the speaker places no importance on trivial matters of life. The grander emotions and activities are what she cares about most.

She lists off another set of emotional moments in the second stanza. Here she addresses love, spirituality, and music. The final stanza asks that a reader always invest everything they are in finding and acquiring as many of these experiences as possible. There is no cost too high for "ecstasy (an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement)."

Analysis of Barter

Stanza One

In the first stanza of this piece, the poet utilizes a line that will be repeated, with some alterations, in each of the following stanzas. Teasdale's speaker states that "Life" is so full of wonderful things that it has "loveliness to sell." It is overflowing with all manner of "beautiful and splendid things." These things she speaks of are not objects as one might assume. They are experiences, sights, sounds, and feelings. These embodied experiences are the true stock life has to offer and what one should strive to acquire.

The next line speaks on the variety of different things that life has to sell. The three elements she mentions in the first stanza are quite different from one another. First, there are the "Blue waves" which are turned white as they crash against a cliff. Then, the "soaring fire" that moves through the air, "sway[ing]" and "sing[ing]." While in some cases fire is something to be feared, she is presenting it as another beautiful aspect of life one should appreciate.

The final two lines describe another sublime moment, that of "children's faces looking up." The purity of this sight, as well as those mentioned previously, are points of "wonder" one can discover in everyday life.

Stanza Two

In the second stanza, the speaker repeats the initial opening line, "Life has loveliness to sell." She goes on to describe a number of other aspects of existence one should look for. These elements are not at all exclusionary. Any person could find these moments and add them to their life.

First, there is "Music." It is described as being "like a curve of gold." This physical embodiment of music is intriguing. It allows a reader to imagine it as something to be had and kept within one's life. It shines like gold and has a similar value.

There is also the "Scent of pine trees" particularly when it is raining. This is a very particular moment but one many readers could relate to. These images, depending on who is reading this piece, might stimulate one to recall moments in which they appreciated something similar.

The second half of the poem moves to a more emotional, personal experience. Life can give you "Eyes that love you, arms that hold." One is able to acquire these moments for their own hearts and minds. Just like the water and fire, love is another element "Life has...to sell."

Having addressed one's emotional needs, the speaker turns to the spiritual. She does not define what kind of spiritual life has to sell. This way the lines are not attached to a particular religion or set of beliefs. What she does do is describe an improvement of the spirit. This can happen when "Holy thoughts" enter one's mind. One should be "delight[ed]" and "thrilled by" them.

Stanza Three

In the final stanza, the opening line is slightly altered. She asks that her readers or listeners "Spend" all the time they have pursuing "loveliness." It is not something one should be frugal about. There should be no hesitation in one's heart that they should "Buy it." Once bought, one should also "never count the cost." There is no cost that is too high.

The last lines display the appreciation the speaker has for the elements of life she has mentioned previously. She sees life as having no purpose other than to collect these sights, smells, and sounds as they have great power. One moment of true happiness can erase many "a year of strife." The "loveliness" of life removes the "strife" of the everyday.

The entire poem is summarized into the last two lines in which she asks that her readers "Give all you have been, or could be" to experience one "breath of ecstasy." One should not hold back from something that could make bring happiness. Beauty, loveliness, and "splendid things" are the purpose of life.

BARTER
Question - Answers

Question 1: The first two stanzas have images that are associated with the senses. Can you find them?

Answer: Sight – sways and sings, eyes that love you, star the night.

Hearing – soaring fire

Smell – scent of pine trees

Touch – holding wonder, arms that hold

Question 2: Look at line 10. “Eyes that love you, arms that hold.” Who do eyes and arms refer to?

Answer: The eyes and arms are of the people who are in love with the readers of the poem.

Question 3: Look at the lines 11 and 12. What gives your mind and feelings ‘still delight’? Why are ‘thoughts’ described as ‘holy’?

Answer: Love, hope, happy thoughts and other positive feelings offer still delight. The thoughts are described as holy because they are pure thoughts, untainted by any negativities.

Question 4:star the night. (line12) The word ‘star’ is usually used as a noun. How is it used here?

Answer: Here the word ‘star’ has been used as a verb.

Question 5: Line 15 and 16 refer to two ideas that are opposite in meaning. What are they?

“For one white singing hour of peace
Count many a years of strife well lost.

Answer: The two ideas opposite in meaning are ‘an hour of peace’ and ‘a year of strife’. The peace contrasts against the strife and unrest. In fact, peace is so powerful that an hour of it is compared to a year of strife.

Question 6: Did you notice that in the third stanza the poet directly advises us to give all that we have in exchange for loveliness? She does this by using four verbs. Which one are they?

Answer: The four verbs are ‘spend’, ‘buy’, ‘never count’ and ‘give’.

Question 7: What do you think is the theme of the poem? Which line expresses the theme? Is this line repeated? If yes, why?

Answer: The theme of the poem is the notion of barter. The poet wants us to buy all the loveliness we can so that we can enjoy life all the better for it.

The line ‘Life has loveliness to sell’ makes the theme quite clear. Yes, this line is repeated. This is done to reinforce the message that the poet wants to send out.