Overview: "Huswifery"

**Introduction**

The Puritan poet and minister Edward Taylor wrote "Huswifery" sometime in the late seventeenth century, probably in the mid-1680s, when he had begun writing verse again in earnest. It is a meditative religious poem in which Taylor's speaker becomes a metaphorical spinning wheel on which God will weave a fabric for his glory. It is a poem of submission and worship, with a sense of longing for relationship with God.

"Huswifery" is among Taylor's best-known works, and it is often anthologized because of its graceful treatment of an important theme in the literature and thought of its time. The poem conveys the Puritan mindset and expresses basic religious beliefs and how they were internalized by early Americans who adhered to them. The poem was first published in 1939 and appears in numerous collections, including *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1983), where the poem appears with the title's spelling modernized as "Housewifery." The title refers to daily domestic activities, such as weaving, suggesting the intimate connection between a Puritan's faith and his or her everyday life and thoughts. Taylor's own knowledge of spinning would have come at least from his life in rural settings, both in childhood and later in adulthood in America, but some historians also believe he worked in England for a weaver's shop in the nearby town of Hinckley. The specifics of the poet's background knowledge are less important than the elaborate metaphor that he creates in the poem.

**Plot**

**Stanza 1**

From the beginning of this meditative poem, the speaker's desire to be used in God's service is clear. He uses an extended metaphor of weaving to express his servitude to the Lord, beginning with the spinning wheel image, then considering the loom, and finally describing the garment made from the cloth. In the first stanza, the speaker asks the Lord to make him a spinning wheel in the Lord's service. The distaff is the part of the spinning wheel that holds the wool in place so that it can be run through the wheel and spun into yarn or thread. He specifically asks that scripture be this distaff, the steady tool that holds the thread. The speaker acknowledges his own human traits and failings as he describes certain parts of the spinning wheel in human terms. The flyers, for instance (which turn so that they can twist threads into heavier yarn for weaving and then wind it onto the bobbin), are likened to the speaker's affections. This is a revealing comment about the speaker's self-knowledge, indicating that he is fully aware of how fickle his affections can be. At the same time, he acknowledges a purpose in those affections because the flyers, though they spin and change position, accomplish the changing of thread into something more usable. The speaker refers to his soul as a spool (the piece on which the yarn is wrapped as it is spun) on which the thread is wound. He sees verbal interaction with the Lord, in turn, as the energy that winds the spun wool, making ready for use in whatever project the weaver chooses. This reel (which is the piece that holds the finished yarn so that it can be woven on a loom) represents the final preparatory step before the wool yarn takes on a unique shape and purpose according to the design of the weaver.

**Stanza 2**

Now the speaker becomes the loom upon which the thread created in the first stanza is made into cloth. A loom is a piece of equipment that enables the weaver to pass the yarn through its slats in an alternating pattern back and forth. The loom has an arm that pushes these rows together tightly to make the cloth stronger and more substantial. The process of weaving on a loom requires patience and skill. The Holy Spirit is to perform such tasks as winding the quills (which are spools on the actual loom) so that the Lord can weave the cloth into the pattern of his choosing. Taylor uses the word *web*to refer to the cloth, and this image reminds the reader that the cloth is natural while also carefully crafted and engineered. A web is a complex structure that is made with a plan for a purpose, as is the cloth. The speaker will add his faith to the cloth, connecting him to the weaver. This is all performed so that the cloth can be made into clothing of salvation.

The word *fulling* refers to the process of thickening the cloth by wetting it, then heating and pressing it between rollers. This gets the cloth to the point where it does not change over time. Taylor credits God's ordinances, or laws, with enabling this process. At this point, the cloth is ready to be dyed and made beautiful in heaven's colors. This makes the cloth readily identifiable as being God's handiwork and belonging to him.

**Stanza 3**

In the third stanza, the speaker asks that the garment made from the cloth cover his own human failings and flaws, specifically his understanding, will, affections, judgment, conscience, memory, words, and actions. Only then can those things be transformed in such a way that they shine with glory and in turn bring glory to God. The speaker's humility is clear; he expresses that the only way for glory to become part of his ways is with God's participation. It is also interesting to note that the speaker includes words among the things that, without the garment of salvation, would be hopelessly flawed. Because the current meditation is in poem form, the reader can consider whether or not the poem is a flawed human work or whether, through the weaving motif, Taylor's words have become something greater. Wearing this garment of salvation will not only enable the speaker to radiate God's glory in life but also prepare him for heaven when he dies.

Source Citation   (MLA 7th Edition)

"Overview: 'Huswifery'." *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Sara Constantakis. Vol. 31. Detroit: Gale, 2010.*Literature Resource Center*. Web. 13 Sept. 2015.