

5. "Half Past Two" by U. A. Fanthorpe

POET

U.A. Fanthorpe (1929-2009)

Fanthorpe attended St Anne's College, Oxford where she received a First Class Degree in English before teaching at Cheltenham Ladies' College for sixteen years. She eventually turned her back on teaching to do a number of office jobs while writing poetry. She published her first volume of poetry, "Side Effects" in 1978 and went on to become the writer in residence at St Martin's College, Lancaster. In 1987 Fanthorpe started working full time as a writer, giving readings and producing a number of poetry collections. She died aged 79.

She was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and received the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2003.

BACKGROUND

Fanthorpe's experiences as a teacher and Head of English permeate much of her poetry. This poem criticises the behaviour of teachers who fail to communicate clearly with their students. Ironically, the lesson the child is taught through the punishment is not the one the teacher intended. He learns about a world outside time, not that he should not behave in a certain way.

SUMMARY

The boy is being punished for a mistake which has not been adequately explained to him. The teacher gives the boy a detention, telling him to stay in the classroom until half-past two. However, because the boy has not yet been taught how to read the clock, he doesn't know when to leave. When the teacher forgets about the boy, he enters a world outside normal time, discovering an intense experience of the present which he remembers for the rest of his life.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem, "Half-past Two", is the time which the child is told he must wait in the classroom until. It is the end of his detention. Ironically, in a poem with a named time in the title, the concept of doing things at specific times is overturned. Instead, the poem turns the title on its head as the times on the clock are dissolved and the boy learns about other forms of time, as well as how to enjoy the present.

The first stanza opens with an allusion to fairy tales – "Once upon a schooltime". The initial phrase is the conventional way that children's stories begin. It suggests that the poem will be occupied with a traditional fairy story; there will be a hero, a villain and an eventual happy ending. This is all true, but in this case it is the teacher who is the evil character. This challenges the reader's attitude to teachers and invites us to consider the lasting effects of their carelessness. The first line ends with the compound word "schooltime". This is not a real word; it is formed by putting two already existing words together to create a new one. This emphasizes the fact the story will take place during a special kind of time – the hours spent at school. The use of the compound word also makes the language sound childlike.

The entire poem is written using an unusual point of view - free indirect speech. This means the story is told in the third person using "he", but the words are those spoken or thought by the character who is being described. In this case, a boy too young to tell time. Free indirect speech is a technique often employed by writers when trying to express the inner emotions of a character who is not able to tell you them directly. This might be because the character is too young to be able to communicate fluently with the reader. Fanthorpe uses this technique effectively in the poem. A boy too young to read a clock is given a voice through the third person narrator in order to explain what it felt like to be abandoned and consequently outside time.

The use of childlike phrasing is continued in the next line "He did Something Very Wrong." The capital letters stress the words the child feels most deeply. They imply that he is echoing the words an adult has told him, but the way they are phrased suggests that he does not know what his crime is. The boy only knows he has done "Something" which his teacher deems "Very Wrong". The word "Wrong" could mean incorrect, but it also holds the implication of something morally frowned upon. The phrasing suggests the boy feels a terrible weight of adult disapproval, while not actually understanding what he did. The final line of the stanza is in parentheses or brackets - "(I forget what it was)". This dismissive phrase by the third person speaker shows that the child's wrong doing was clearly not very great as they cannot remember it. This is comic and ironic. There is a gap between the child's perception of events as very serious and the grown up speaker who realises that a small boy could not have done anything terribly bad.

The second stanza begins with a conjunction "And". Conjunctions are meant to connect two parts of a sentence together, but here it is used to open it. This shows the eagerness of the child's voice to explain what happened to him. The boy's anxiety is also expressed by his description of the teacher as "She" with a capital letter. This gives her almost godlike status. It underlines the importance of her words to him. Indeed the speaker repeats the phrase the boy has been told "Something Very Wrong". The repetition of the phrase and the capital letters emphasize the importance the event has for the boy, but the terrible irony is that he is being punished for a crime which has not been explained to him. Consequently, the learning experience has been entirely derailed. A punishment without a clear reason is simply cruel. The teacher has put him in detention and he must "Stay in the school-room till half-past two". Even worse, the teacher has not given the boy anything productive to do during the punishment; he must sit and wait. She is using boredom to reprimand the child, but the teacher's plan backfires as the boy is far from bored.

The third stanza is written entirely in parentheses. These brackets are used in writing to show an afterthought or piece of less important information. Here they highlight the way the teacher treats the child as an afterthought, something to be "forgotten". Fanthorpe is criticising the teacher's attitude to the boy. First, the teacher "Being cross" had "forgotten She hadn't taught him Time". Anger should not drive a teacher's treatment of a student. Secondly, the teacher has not taught the boy a crucial skill - to read the time. This makes her punishment impossible to implement. The stanza ends with the sad realisation that the boy is "too scared at being wicked to remind her". Therefore the boy's experience of education is clouded by fear; he is not able to speak to his teacher and consequently it is impossible for him to learn. The use of the word "wicked" here is telling. It suggests the sorts of words the teacher has used to tell the child off. It shows that he has been severely reprimanded and told

he is evil or “wicked”. This is out of step with the punishment the child receives and with the fact the teacher forgets completely about the boy and his crime by the end of the poem. Again, it shows that the teacher is misusing her power over the boy.

Stanzas four and five move on to the boy’s experience of time. It explains that the child knows a variety of different types of time. The compound words used to describe the varieties of time - “Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime, Timetogohometime, TVtime” – show that from a child’s point of view time is not the numbers on the clock, but the experiences which occur. The boy organises his day by the things he does. This seems a much more active way of seeing time as it is always an event. By contrast, the teacher has made time into something which does not have an event or activity – a perpetual waiting which is punishment. Stanza five ends by underlining that it is not that the child does not understand time: he does. It is just that his understanding of time is not bound to the clock, “All the important times he knew, But not half-past two”. Fanthorpe is suggesting that the boy’s experience of time is more real and “important” than the one that grownups use to rush through their day. As the poem is written in free verse with no set rhythm or rhyme scheme, the fact these two lines rhyme with each other “knew” and “two” makes them stand out all the more. Indeed they chime in the middle of the poem, summing up that the boy’s understanding of time is more harmonious or pleasant sounding than our own.

In stanza six the narrator explains what the boy knows about telling the time. The description is an extended personification. The clock is compared to a person; it has “little eyes And two long legs for walking”. This shows the childlike and innocent nature of the boy who sees the clock in a friendly way. However, the poem explains that although the boy knows what the marks on the clock look like “he couldn’t click its language”. It is interesting that Fanthorpe changes the conventional description of a clock’s sound from tick to “click”. This underlines the idea that the boy views clocks with a fresh new perspective. However, “click” sounds more mechanical and frightening than tick. It shows that the boy imagines the clock’s noise to be a language he has not yet been taught, and because that language is clicking it seems to be inhuman and difficult. Again, the inadequacy of the boy’s teacher is underlined here; surely she should have taught him how to read the clock.

Stanza seven begins with the word “So”. This is synonymous with therefore. It shows the reader that the consequence of the boy not understanding clocks is that the following things happen to him. His waiting takes his mind “beyond once upon a”. This implies that the boy’s thoughts go past telling himself stories and imagining things. Instead the boy “knew he’d escaped for ever”. The verb to escape suggests that the boy has been imprisoned. In a way he has been held captive in detention, but the boy has also been imprisoned in a larger sense – through the adult obsession with time keeping. The boy has managed to escape the idea of specific times when things must be done to find a world full of the present. It is ironic that his escape is described as “for ever” as there is no time where he has gone. There is only now.

The next stanza tries to depict what being absolutely present in a world without time might feel like. Every line of the stanza begins with the word “Into” to show that the boy is truly entering the world for the first time. Each line contains a sense – smell, hearing and touch – to show that the boy finds a world where how things feel is everything. He joins “the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk” and “the silent noise his hangnail made”. There is an

oxymoron in the phrase “silent noise”. This means that even though the two words contradict each other, when put together they show us a startling experience. Here the boy is able to hear the sound of his own snagged nail because everything else in the world is so quiet. The boy’s growing self-awareness ultimately enables him to enter “the air outside the window, into ever”. Thus he is able to leave normal reality and become a part of the natural world.

However, just as the boy reaches a state of absolute contentment with the world around him, the teacher finds him. The teacher is described “Scuttling in”. This metaphor imagines the teacher as a beetle or insect moving in a scampering way. It underlines her lack of human feeling towards the child. She reveals “I forgot all about you”. Thus the boy is not important to her; she is a poor teacher. She sends him home, “Run along or you’ll be late”.

Immediately the boy is put back into an adult timetable where there is rushing and the possibility of lateness. Stanza ten goes on to describe how she “slotted him back into schooltime”. The teacher has destroyed the boy’s positive experience of the world and returned him to a realm of deferral, where he must wait for “teatime, Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime”.

The final stanza leaves the reader with some hope. The boy “never forgot how once by not knowing time, He escaped into the clockless land”. Therefore the child did learn something from school. Ironically, it was not the lesson his teacher meant to teach him. The boy learnt through experience a world beyond adult time. The poem ends with an extended metaphor describing the “clockless land”. This returns the poem to the diction of the fairy tale where there are exciting new kingdoms. In this land the poem personifies time hiding. It is as though time does not want to be found and exploited by human beings. Time is “tick-less waiting to be born”. Therefore time is an unborn foetus not yet brought into existence. The ticking would mark its life in the world. Cleverly, time is left waiting in this land in the same way the boy was left waiting in the classroom. The poem concludes with the idea that waiting and being inactive could actually be an exciting and illuminating experience.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Prayer Before Birth” – provides strong links with the poem. Like Fanthorpe’s boy, the unborn child recognises some of the evils of the world.

“Piano” – provides comparisons with the themes of memory and time.

“Hide and Seek” – provides many comparisons between the experiences of being forgotten or abandoned as a child and what this teaches.