

7. "Hide and Seek" by Vernon Scannell

POET

Vernon Scannell (1922-2007)

Scannell was born in Lincolnshire to a poor family who moved around the country a lot to find work. He left school at fourteen to take a job in an insurance office. In 1940 he enlisted in the army. He fought in the North African desert. However, he was court-martialled for desertion after walking away from his fellow soldiers when they looted and abused the dead after a key battle. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in a military prison; he served six months and was released to fight in the Normandy landings. Following the end of the war in Europe, he deserted again and spent two years on the run. He was eventually arrested in 1947 and sent to a military hospital. On his release, Scannell went to London where he supported himself through teaching and boxing professionally. This gave him time to write poetry.

He published many poems in his lifetime and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

BACKGROUND

Scannell writes a number of poems about the pains of childhood. Many of them are focussed specifically on his son. His time in the army made him particularly sensitive to injustice and cruelty. This is evident in the poem.

SUMMARY

The poem describes a children's game of hide and seek. The boy thinks he is clever to hide in the shed. The searchers laugh outside the door, but do not find him. After a very long time, the boy emerges, thinking he is the winner, only to discover his friends have abandoned him as part of a cruel trick.

ANALYSIS

Like much of Scannell's work, the title of the poem, "Hide and Seek", has an obvious and a deeper meaning. The obvious meaning is that the poem will describe the children's game of hide and seek. The deeper meaning is about the game as a metaphor for growing up. It suggests that all people experience a process of discovery about the world which often reveals the cruelties of others.

The poem is written in one long stanza. This gives it a sense of concentration and focus. The reader must pay attention to the details of the game which become increasingly significant. The poem is told from the point of view of a third person poetic voice which speaks to the child and also describes how he feels. The first line of the poem is an instruction from the poetic voice "Call out. Call loud". This is a double imperative from the narrator to the character in the poem. This could sound dictatorial, but the voice advises the boy wisely throughout the poem. Thus the voice becomes a helpful friend to the child. This highlights the fact which emerges fully at the end of the poem, that the child does not have any other friends. The voice could also be interpreted as expressing the inner thoughts of the boy; it is as though he is encouraging and instructing himself.

The first line gives us the voice of the child "I'm ready! Come and find me!". This piece of dialogue at the beginning of the poem provides a sense of the boy's character. He seems excited, friendly and happy. It is a stark contrast to the tone at the end of the poem. It also makes the poem seem quite dramatic and immediate; the reader is involved in a scene which is about to unfold. The drama of the poem is enhanced by using the present tense. The entire poem is written as though it is happening while we read it. This is an effective technique which transports the reader to the moment of the game, and places us within the action as it happens.

Next we discover where the boy is hiding, "The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside". The simile here is effective because it reminds us of playful times at the beach. This suggests that the boy is happy in his hiding place. The poetic voice goes on to reassure him, "They'll never find you in this salty dark". The metaphor here is an interesting one. "salty dark" mixes two different senses: taste and sight. This makes the image powerful, showing that the boy's senses are more alert than normal because he has no light in the shed. The poetic voice continues to advise the boy on how to hide without being found – "be careful that your feet aren't sticking out. Wiser not to risk another shout". These pieces of advice add to the feeling of excitement and enjoyment in the opening of the poem.

The next section of the poem from line six to ten describes the discomfort of hiding and the boy's attempts to hear what the searchers are doing. In line six the floor is "cold". This is the first hint that something more sinister might be happening. The poetic voice describes the boy's thought process. He is wondering what the other children are doing – "They'll probably be searching The bushes near the swing". The importance of the game is underlined by the narrator who advises the boy that "Whatever happens" he should not sneeze. This sense of there being a lot at stake in the game increases the excitement the reader feels. The narrator goes on to imagine the behaviour of the seekers when they find the boy as "prowling in". This is an image with lots of implications. The verb personifies the searchers as animals. "prowling" means to move stealthily, usually in pursuit of prey. Therefore the children have started to be described as predators hunting for their victim. This escalates the impending danger in the poem, placing the hiding boy in the role of victim.

Line nine begins a new sentence with a conjunction, "And". These are meant to connect two parts of a sentence, not to introduce one. By using it at the beginning of the sentence, the poet is showing the abrupt surprise the boy feels when he realises the searchers are outside the door – "And here they are, whispering". The fact the other children are "whispering" is made more suspicious by the next line which tells us, "You've never heard them sound so hushed before". The idea of "whispering" suggests that there is a secret being discussed. It excludes the boy from the activity of the seekers and makes the reader feel concerned.

In line eleven the poetic voice tells the boy "Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb." This triplet of three imperatives instructs the hiding child how to behave if he wants to evade detection. Each of the orders builds on the tension of the scene as we see how hard the child is trying not to be found, how much effort he is prepared to give to win the game. However, the final instruction "Stay dumb" has more sinister connotations. "dumb" means to remain silent, but it also suggests the more colloquial meaning of remaining stupid or ignorant. It seems the poetic voice may be noticing that the boy is foolishly not understanding the trick his friends are about to play on him or it might be wishing that he could remain innocent or

ignorant of cruel pranks forever. Either way, the word seems even more worrying when we reach the next sentence – “Hide in your blindness.” This metaphor describes the boy in the darkness of the shed. However, it imagines him as blind, unable to see at all. This implies that he is blind to what is actually happening to him. He doesn’t realise he is the victim of a prank.

Outside the shed, the boy hears the other children “moving closer”. The poetic voice then says “Their words and laughter scuffle”. This is a metaphor. It gives the voices of the searchers a human movement – a “scuffle”. This usually means a small fight. Therefore the boys who are looking for the child are being described in aggressive terms. The boy is advised in line fourteen “don’t come out just yet”. He thinks he is winning because they have not searched the shed. The poem goes on to say “They must think that you’re very clever”. Here we see the pride of the hiding child as he begins to believe he has defeated all the others in the game. If the reader has read the poem carefully, then they will be feeling increasingly anxious for the boy as his perception of events is not accurate. He views the behaviour of his friends with innocence, whereas the experienced and older reader can see that things are not as they seem.

By line eighteen even the boy is realising that the game has lasted longer than usual – “It seems a long time since they went away”. At this point the description of the boy’s location begins to become more sinister. His legs are “stiff” and “the cold bites through your coat”. The personification of the cold trying to take chunks out of his body with its teeth is disturbing. The description continues with the deadening sound of the alliteration on the letter ‘d’ in “dark damp smell”. This time, the smell “moves in your throat”. Coupled with the biting, the idea of a smell which occupies the boy’s throat depicts him as being assaulted by nature. It is as though the garden has turned on him, trying to wound and suffocate him.

The poetic voice now advises the boy “It’s time to let them know that you’re the winner”. Up until this point, the poem has been structured with rhyming couplets every five lines. For example, “out” and “shout”, “door” and “before”, “lane” and “again”, and finally, “coat” and “throat”. These infrequent rhymes give the poem a sense of harmony and happiness. However, from the moment the boy decides to emerge from the shed, the rhymes disappear. This implies that the jolly and childlike world which he used to occupy is ending.

The boy emerges from the shed calling, “I’ve won” Here I am”. His triumph is in stark contrast with the final lines of the poem – “The darkening garden watches”. This personification of the garden describes it as getting darker or more sinister, and observing the behaviour of the boy. The fact the garden stands back and watches, but does not help the boy makes him seem even more isolated and friendless. The next short sentence tell us “Nothing stirs”. The sense of emptiness is emphasized here. The boy is alone in the garden and the other children have deserted the game.

In line twenty four “The bushes hold their breath”. This personification describes the bushes like a person waiting for something to happen. Someone holds their breath because they are expecting an event; in this case the event is the realisation that the boy has been abandoned. The poet now uses pathetic fallacy or the technique of using the environment, and especially the weather, to mirror a character’s feeling – “the sun is gone”. This not only tells us that it is the end of the day and the game has lasted a long time, it also communicates a powerful image of the loss of light and goodness from the boy’s world.

The final line of the poem is a rhetorical question; a type of sentence designed to influence the reader by asking them to think about a particular idea. The poetic voice says to the boy, "Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?" The question is left hanging at the end of the poem, meaning the story never gets resolved. There is no happy ending. Moreover, the question makes the reader think about where the other boys have gone. Like the boy, the reader now discovers the truth; his friends have deserted him. The wider implication of this story is that growing up involves realising that people will not always support you, and that the world will not necessarily be your friend.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

"Prayer Before Birth" – provides interesting contrasts between an unborn child who already knows that human beings are cruel and the child in the poem who has to learn this.

"Blessing" – provides comparisons between children enjoying themselves together in adversity and the children in this poem who turn their game into an act of bullying.

"Half-past Two" – provides a strong comparison between a child who is let down by grown ups only to learn a positive lesson about life, and the boy in this poem who is disappointed by other children and learns a harsh lesson about life.