

2. "Prayer Before Birth" by Louis MacNeice

POET

Louis MacNeice (1907-1963)

MacNeice was an Irish poet and playwright. His father was a Protestant minister and later a bishop of the Anglican Church of Ireland. He attended Oxford University where he met W.H. Auden and began publishing poetry as an undergraduate. He was part of the Auden Group of poets writing in the 1930s which included W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis. He was critically-acclaimed during his own lifetime. He spent World War II working for the BBC writing and producing radio programmes intended to create support for Britain's allies in the conflict. His poetry focuses on both the importance of human kindness in the face of totalitarian regimes, and the significance of Ireland.

MacNeice wrote in the introduction to his "Autumnal Journal": "Poetry in my opinion must be honest before anything else."

BACKGROUND

The poem was written at the end of World War II, 1944, after a period of prolonged bombing in London. It encapsulates the fear the nation felt for the future.

SUMMARY

The poem is spoken by an unborn foetus. The child pleads to the world into which it is about to come to be kind to it and not mistreat it. The baby concludes that if mankind cannot guarantee his wellbeing then he would rather be killed before being born.

ANALYSIS

The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by an unborn child. The sex of the child is not specified which makes it universal and relatable to all readers.

The word "prayer" in the title suggests that the foetus needs to pray or appeal for help even from the womb. It is shocking to the reader that an unborn child might have any troubles or concerns; most readers would perceive a foetus as an innocent entity. This suggests that the world the child is about to enter must be terrifying and brutal. The word "prayer" is also part of the religious diction of the poem. This is employed ironically as there does not seem to be a god or moral force in the world which is described for the child to pray to.

The poem is written in free verse, with no set rhyme scheme or rhythm. This echoes the sense of randomness in the world which the baby fears. The brutality of the universe into which the child is going to be born is also made explicit in the ragged edges of the stanzas. They are jagged and violent looking.

The first stanza begins with a personal pronoun, "I". The rest of the poem also contains many personal pronouns, especially the word "me". The repetition of these pronouns creates a strong sense of the child's individual voice speaking. It also creates the impression of intense personal concern and anxiety.

The opening line is an imperative with an exclamatory word, "O hear me." The exclamation "O" communicates the intense anxiety of the speaker. The sentence is also an instruction to

be heard. The implication is that there is some force out there which will hear the child, but it is not clear if it is a god, God or mankind. Notice the voice speaks the entire poem without receiving an answer. This suggests that God may not listen or exist and that humanity does not care about the child.

Phrases like "Let not" echo the Biblical grammar of the Old Testament, such as the Ten Commandments. The expression reminds the reader of the seriousness of the child's appeal. The baby wants to be protected from the "bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the club-footed ghoul". The list is made to seem anxious through the repetition of "or the" which keeps adding on more things of which to be afraid. There is also alliteration on "bloodsucking bat" and assonance in "bat", "rat" and "stoat". These echoes create a sense of excess and a pace to the list. The images of the vampire bat and the monster from a scary film show the child is afraid of traditional forms of horror. However, as the poem progresses, we see that these are the least of the child's concerns; mankind is more horrific than fiction and myth.

The second stanza echoes the first verse, creating a refrain with the line "I am not yet born" which is repeated at the start of all the stanzas apart from the final one. This gives the poem a structure as well as the suggestion that if the child's appeal does not change throughout then no one is listening to it.

In the second stanza, the foetus wants someone to "console me". This means to provide comfort. The suggestion is that babies are not comforted or supported by grownups. The baby goes on to explain that it fears humans will "wall me", "dope me", "lure me" and "roll me". The repeated verbs emphasize strongly the things the child is afraid of. The human cruelties include oppressing, creating addiction, manipulating with lies, and submerging in torture instruments. The "black racks" and "blood baths" are a terrible vision of man's cruelty to fellow man.

In stanza three, the baby moves on to asking for things – "provide me". Interestingly, the things the baby wants are personified – water to "dandle me", "sky to sing to me". This suggests that nature is more maternal and kind than human beings. It shows that humans are out of step with the natural world and are crueller than it. The "white light" may be a moral sense which the child thinks it cannot learn from humans and can only find through untouched nature.

In stanza four, the child begs "forgive me". It explains that as all humans do cruel, sinful things, therefore it will not be able to prevent itself from also doing them when it is born. It is asking to be forgiven for the things it will inevitably do in the future, just by virtue of being human. This implies that mankind is inescapably cruel. The sins the child fears and expects to commit include cruel words and thoughts, as well as betrayal and murder. These acts are not only the child's responsibility. The stanza repeats the pronoun "they" four times, suggesting there is a faceless force or authority which coerces men to do evil.

In stanza five, the child asks to "rehearse me". This means to learn how to act. The suggestion is that in life people play "parts" and cannot be honest and true to themselves. The baby realises it must learn how to respond to a list of different types of people who will turn against him. He describes an unfriendly universe where "lovers laugh at me" and "my children curse me".

Stanza six begins a deterioration of the verse form as the stanzas become more randomly structured. This shows either the breakdown of modern society or the increasing pace of the terror which will lead to a crescendo of horror in the final line. This stanza repeats the first stanza, showing no one is listening the baby. Indeed the anxiety of the foetus has only increased since the opening of the poem as now the child says that man “is beast” or animal and he “thinks he is God”. This suggests a power-crazed and brutal society where there is no higher moral guidance. Worse still, the baby now pleads for someone to prevent man ever coming “near me”. The baby ironically despises mankind even though he will soon be part of it.

Stanza seven, finds the baby begging to be filled up with “strength” to prevent the dehumanising aspects of modern life. This is the opposite of stanza three where nature was personified as providing care for the baby. Here the baby fears that he will be turned into a “lethal automaton”. This is a robot which kills. It is not clear if the robot kills others or destroys the baby who becomes it. Both interpretations are horrifying. The metaphor “a cog in a machine” is also used which suggests the child will be part of something beyond its control which exploits the baby. This loss of free will is a source of terror. The baby repeats the word “thing” in the stanza to show he fears becoming not human. Finally, the baby dreads being treated carelessly. He uses two similes. The first is “like thistledown” and then “like water”. Both these natural products are delicate and easily lost. He imagines himself blown around or spilt. The child fears being turned into a machine or having his individuality lost.

The final stanza is made of two lines; each one is a separate sentence. This gives the verse a sense of climax and finality. This is the culmination of the horror which the child dreads; it could be a simple crescendo or a moment of explosion. The child once again uses Biblical grammar – “Let them not”. He is still appealing to a listener which has not responded. The baby describes his fear with two related metaphors. First, the child does not want to be made “a stone”. The metaphor suggests a hardening and deadening of human emotion. Secondly, the child begs “let them not spill me”. Here he imagines himself as a liquid, possibly water which is usually held to be the opposite of stone. The water is dealt with carelessly and allowed to escape and be lost. Therefore the child is afraid of being misused without thought or compassion. The last line of the poem is an incomplete sentence – “Otherwise kill me.” This makes it seem even more abrupt and anxious. The child offers an alternative to being born into this horror. The baby asks to be killed rather than made evil and exploited by mankind. The shock that an unborn child might want to die is profound. The reader is left with a powerful image of the way new life rejects the modern world and would rather not exist within it.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Half Past Two” – provides an alternative child’s point of view. The speaker has also been neglected by grownups.

“Hide and Seek” – provides another portrait of cruelty and lack of compassion towards children. This time the cruelty is meted out by other children.

“Poem at Thirty Nine” – provides a contrasting style of personal address to the reader about an individual becoming a person they can be proud of. This is a strong contrast to MacNeice’s poem where the baby would be ashamed to be human.