Poetic Analysis of “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border”

In “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border,” William Stafford skillfully demonstrates how a short poem can convey many layers of meaning, and can carry weight and impact far beyond its simple appearance on the page. In this poem of just ten lines, Stafford tackles not one, but three substantial themes: war, peace, and friendship. Recognizing that these are closely related even linked and inseparable, the poet uses a sophisticated irony to compress them into one. The human tendency to glorify war is silently acknowledged but shown to be folly. Nationalism may teach us to cheer the victory at battle, but one cannot read “the battle did not happen” or “no people were killed” without being genuinely relieved. The physical setting of the poem, established by the title, takes peace, or rather the absence of war, and positions it along the Canada-US border.

The longest undefended border on Earth, for those of us in these two nations at least, is definitely taken for granted. We don’t always appreciate its monumental nature, but that just supports Stafford’s assertion that it is “hallowed by neglect and an air so tame / that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.”

Stafford uses images of war to describe peace and this juxtaposition of concepts enables to reader to truly visualize the “heroic” nature of peace where normally one would see nothing at all, or would not be moved to look for anything. It is the absence of conflict that this poem celebrates, but normally the absence of something is very difficult to grasp and to appreciate. Here, however, we actually see the battle that “did not happen,” and we are relieved that the “soldier did not die.” Unusually, we can see, and feel, and respect that the sky can be, and is in fact, heroic.

In the first stanza there are images of (anti-) conflict juxtaposed with images of nature (“grass joined hands” and the heroic sky). Here the message is that conflict, at least on the scale of human wars, is in contrast to nature. In the second stanza, these images continue but become more animated, more alive. The birds unfold their wings (alluding to openness, friendship) and their flight is silent and peaceful (as contrasted in ellipsis to the din of bullets’ flight).

In human history, there is much celebration of victory at battle. It is in our nature to applaud success and to deplore failure, but it is especially rare to stop and to appreciate the quiet, the mundane, the non-event. In the final three lines of this poem, Stafford helps us to do this by presenting vivid images of life both as natural (birds in flight) and as the best in human nature (“No people killed—or were killed—on this ground.”) This place of nothingness, before unseen, is now clearly seen and appreciated as something rare and precious. The non-event is a major event. The reader at this point sees what was previously taken for granted as something worthy of acknowledgement and may even be moved to feel a bit of guilt, or at least to ask whether something should not be done. This question is answered in the final lines. We do not think of this place because no one was killed there. This is a good thing. That it is neglected may be the greatest monument of all.

Turning Tides: A Poetic Analysis of E.J. Pratt’s “The Shark”

“The Shark,” by E.J. Pratt, uses strong imagery and rhythm to create the perfect setting to explore the methodical movements and wild instincts of the creature. The title of this poem is very direct, creating a clear idea of what is to come. Through language and various poetic devices, such as alliteration and onomatopoeia, Pratt has created tension throughout the stanzas and is constantly surprising the reader with twists and turns.

The first line of the poem immediately introduces us to the character of the shark and establishes a familiarity of place. This sense of routine is brought about through both the setting of the harbour as well as through the language with which Pratt describes the shark’s movement using words such as “leisurely.”

The idea of routine is furthered as the stanza continues to describe the shark’s body, in particular the comparison of his fin to a piece of “sheet iron.” The way in which Pratt has chosen to describe the fin moving through the water resonates with the reader, drawing upon the image of a knife slicing through the surface. This comparison creates a feeling of calculated process and precision and the idea of the dangerous yet controlled weapon, building tension in the reader. The second stanza continues to build the image of the shark as it describes the body as “tubular” and “tapered.” The alliteration adds strength to the lines but also draws focus to the image of the shark’s body as a “smoke blue” torpedo.

There is a powerful shift midway through the second stanza that changes the rhythm and direction of the poem as both literally and figuratively “he turned.” The language and imagery becomes more active increasing the pace of the poem. The use of onomatopoeia, for example “snapped,” creates an immediacy and intensity to the poem. Sharper tones are also found within the lines with specific emphasis on words that begin or end in the letter “t.” Pratt continues to increase the rhythm extensively using alliteration that connects the images together, such as the “flat-fish,” “floating” and “flash.”

The final stanza of the poem returns to a more natural or controlled movement and rhythm as well as returning to the image of the harbour, creating a frame for the poem itself. The language also revisits the smoother, rounder tones that are evident at the start of the poem and uses softer alliteration such as the “l” sound in “lithely, leisurely.” Many of the descriptive words are also repeated and give the reader the sense that the process is starting over. The shark is on his controlled, calculated hunt and is only waiting for his moment to turn and strike once more.

Pratt concludes the poem with a comparison of the shark to other wild animals such as a vulture that poaches and a wolf that hunts. He is, however, very specific in reminding the reader that the shark is neither of these things for he has the distinct characteristic of being cold blooded. These lines separate themselves from the rest of the poem and therefore command attention. It leaves the reader at the end of the poem with the sense that the shark is not only a wild animal with the natural instinct to hunt, but is also a ruthless, cold-blooded killer.