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*Discuss the ways in which Hardy and MacNeice represent society and the individual in The Man He Killed and Prayer Before Birth.*

Both Hardy and MacNeice present their audience with two very different interpretations of war, society and the individual. The purpose of this assignment is to analyse and explore the similarities and differences between the two texts.

After initially reading both poems it is very easy to assume that MacNeice has a much more vehement and passionately angry disposal to the concept of society than that of Hardy. Just in the way the poem is laid out structurally it appears like a very haphazard sprawl of stanzas with random length and no particular rhyming scheme or meter. This almost implies that the poem is not only a prayer but also a very desperate cry for help. That maybe time is running out and that the narrator is trying to plead with the reader as much as possible.

Immediately in the first two stanzas MacNeice refers to society both from the point of view of a child, ‘let not the blood sucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the, club-footed ghoul come near me’, to the more rational and realistic fears of an adult, as seen in stanza two, ‘I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me, with strong drugs dope me’. Straight away we are bombarded with very negative and disturbing imagery. This is also exacerbated with the excess of alliteration. In doing this MacNeice successfully emphasises his point by really reinforcing all the horrific images he is conjuring and the idea of a society completely devoid of all hope.

Contrastingly the opening of Hardy’s poem is a fairly pleasant one. Indeed even comparing how the poems are laid it’s plain to see that Hardy’s follows a much more traditional structure. It uses both traditional rhyming schemes and also an iambic trimeter. Maybe suggesting that even though he is at war the narrator hasn’t given up all hope on society and still sees some structure and organisation in the world around him.

Before we are aware of what the soldier has done we are painted quite a pleasant picture of ‘an ancient inn’ where the narrator and the other person he is talking about could have ‘sat us down to wet, Right many nipperkin!’. The non-standard English dialect used here is very important as it lets us know that we are dealing with a soldier who is most likely very low in rank. This also informs the audience that the poem as a whole will probably not be some sort of grand anti-war speech but maybe an internal monologue or argument that the soldier is having with himself as he reflects on war.

Interestingly MacNeice also has a moment very early on in his poem that could be considered very beautiful. He talks about nature and not only makes it quite clear how beautiful and perfect it is but also personifies it to convey the goodness of the natural world and how it is almost a nurturing and motherly element. ‘Provide me with water to dandle me’, ‘trees to talk to me, sky to sing me’, all create this image of a nature who is caring and will be the one incorruptible thing in this world.

Sadly however it is quite clear that MacNeice’s faith in society and even nature is very little to non-existent as even the natural world itself has turned on our narrator by stanza five. Again nature is personified to stress and reinforce the point that all hope is gone. ‘Mountains frown at me’, ‘white waves call me to folly and the desert calls me to doom’ all present us with a world where no climate is safe from corruption.

A parallel can also be drawn with this point of view to MacNeice’s view of the actual people within society. Throughout stanza five he lists various people that he believes to be evil or of ill repute and intent. From ‘bureaucrats hector me’ to ‘lovers laugh at me’ and ‘my children curse me’ it is made quite clear that much like nature there remains not one facet of human society that remains untouched by the inevitable disease in our world.

Hardy on the other hand only touches on society in very subtle ways. Whereas there is no mistaking MacNeice’s very blunt view on humanity we need to remember that *The Man He Killed* is from the view of the individual, and that individual is only an infantryman. So when the soldier is pondering the concept of war ‘I shot him dead because, Because he was my foe’ and ‘yes; quaint and curious war is! You shoot a fellow down’, you really are left to your own interpretations as to whether or not the soldier is just talking to himself about events that have transpired or if he has reached some sort of philosophical conclusion about the pointlessness of war and his role as the individual within it.

Again MacNeice is much more straight to the point and explicit in his views on the individual’s role in a war. Stanza seven is littered with references to war and what the narrator’s fears and anxieties are. The most obvious of which would be the image of being ‘a cog in a machine’. There are very strong connotations here about being a small part in a much bigger picture. Maybe even an insignificant part that if broken could be easily replaced. MacNeice even returns to his idea of nature betraying the narrator when he talks about being like thistledown and blown ‘hither and thither or hither and thither’. This creates harsh imagery of the narrator being blown about and tossed and turned out of control in an inescapable destiny that isn’t truly his own. It also represents nature as a sporadic and random force that can be just as cruel as man.

The conclusions to both of these poems, as to be expected, both suggest two very different futures for the path that society and our humanity are on.

When Hardy’s nameless soldier is finishing his reflection on the events that transpired and led him to the act of murdering a man, he concludes when talking about the dead soldier, ‘You’d treat, if met where any bar is, Or help to half-a-crown.’ I feel that this is a very positive way for the poem to end. It is really expanding on the point, which was first alluded to in stanza one, that had this not been a time of war and had these two soldiers not met on opposite sides of a battlefield. Then there is still hope and still a chance that these two men could have sat down as equals and treated each other to a drink or helped each other out with money. If only they hadn’t met in war. It almost acts to restore your faith in humanity. To know that even after the act of killing a man, because he was left with no other choice, he still hasn’t let war change him, he still can recognise the good in the world and has not let war turn him into a machine.

MacNeice’s conclusion to his journey is much more damming. Not only to society but also to his narrator. In a very short yet straight to the point stanza the narrator starts by saying, ‘let them not make me stone and let them not spill me’. This pleading and metaphor heavy line instantly conveys that the narrator does not want to be made stone. In other words ‘don’t make me hard, emotionless or unfeeling’, he sees these attributes in all things around him from the people to nature itself and he does not want to become a product of the society that he loathes so much. ‘and let them not spill me’, an interpretation of this could be that he as well as being made too hard he also does not want to be, metaphorically, the consistency of water. Something that is easily spilt, vulnerable or easy to fit in to a mould.

MacNeice then ends his prayer in the most hopeless way possible, ‘otherwise kill me’. What makes this even more tragic is that the narrator has already made it clear that he believes death will happen. In stanza five the use of phrases like ‘rehearse me’ and ‘in parts I must play and cues I must take’, bring forth really strong metaphorical meanings that his life is preordained, part of a play and a script that is already written and can’t be deviated from is in place. This contrasts entirely to Hardy’s ending in the most extreme way. Hardy’s narrator at least sees some good left in the world, some hope, whereas this unborn child sees absolutely no chance for redemption should he let society get its claws into him. As far as he is concerned, if he becomes even remotely like anything he can see in the world around him then there is no second chance. His only respite will be in death.