

Stylistic Analysis of the Poem “Prayer before Birth” by Louis MacNeice

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If we look at the title then it is quite ironic as in Christian myth there is a prayer for all souls day where all the Christian faith gather and pray for the departed souls , but here someone is praying for someone who is yet not born into this world . Here both death and birth are ironic and contrastive in nature. “I am not yet born” means a state of inertia and of death. There is ironical contrast in the statement “I am yet not born” means I am not yet alive but when the speaker says I am yet not born that means the speaker is alive.

Looking at the narration then it is first person narration, In the first person narration it is not characterized only by subjectivity but is objective because a child which is yet not born cannot tell lies and in some way we believe that children do not tell lies and the child here which is in the state of the foetus cannot tell lies, there is nothing subjective here but the objective reality here is the ugliness of the world, the atrocities and brutalities that are committed in the world and because of this stark naked truth the child does not want to be born into this world.

Moving ahead with the structural form we observe that there is no regular metrical pattern, there are run on lines and end stopped lines as well. In every stanza one can find the run on lines and the end stopped lines. Enjambed lines represents the feeling here of more chaotic, nervous, flowing, or fast feelings and movements. Choosing to end-stop or Enjambed can has helped in better communicating the poem’s overall mood and theme through lineation. Some clauses are big in the syntactic structure and are not fixed whereas some clauses are expanding and some are contracting. We also come across that the first letter of each of the first line is in capital letters and the remaining is in small letters.

The poet has used expanding and contrasted clause and if we look at the poem closely we find it an instance of graphological deviation as we find the poem in the shape of a basket. Shape of the poem and the use of expanding and contrasting in the poem have been used so that the form of the poem on the paper resembles that of the cosiness of the foetus and also to a womb. We observe the shape of the basket is somewhat taking a shape of a womb in which the foetus is growing. If such contrast and expansion was not used then we could not have given it this kind of shape and this is the idea behind it to showcase and highlight the concept behind the poem.

We find consonantal and assonantal alliteration everywhere in the poem. We also find syntactical and lexical repetition. Syntactical expansion of clauses or contraction of clause used in the poem, most of the time every stanza is a single sentence which consists of several

embedded and subordinate clause and the use of embedded and subordinate clause is supposed to intensify the increasing fear of the unborn child or of a foetus and that highlights the complication of the world and its evil, and that's why the syntax is complicated. The poet has highlighted the opposition between the born and the unborn; the unborn is innocent whereas the born is corrupt. Unborn is represented by the foetus and the born is represented by the world which is full of corruption and full of malice and lot of disintegration taking place and for these reasons the child does not want to be born. Here the unborn is conscious while the born is unconscious. The Unborn child is aware of all the atrocities of the world ,while the born child inhabits the world and is not aware of the atrocities ,the terror and havoc of the world and is opaque to all the incidents. Thus we can see an ironic opposition between the born and the unborn

The poem is in the form of an invocation wherein we find in every first line of the stanza towards the end there is a request, an entreaty, a supplication like “I am not yet born : O hear me” , ‘Console me’ , ‘Provide me’, ‘Forgive me’ , ‘rehearse me’ , ‘O hear me’ , ‘O fill me’. This is similar to Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, wherein Shelley also uses a similar kind of plea in each stanza. The Poem is in the form of a prayer that is why we can find words and invocative phrases like O hear me, Console me and forgive me. We can find the Syntactic repetition of the lines *I Am not yet born*, 7 times in the poem to highlight the impact of the prayer on the readers, so that the readers comes to know that it is a serious prayer for the better of the mankind and this is how the repletion here works. The effect of incantation highlights the point, a significant matter and its seriousness as to why the child does not want to be born.

Alliteration is used here in the poem to intensify and reinforce the world of unhappiness, the world of brutality and realities that the child foresees. Following are some of the examples from the poem:

In Stanza 1: bloodsucking bat

Stanza 2: tall walls wall.....wise lies lure....black racks rack....blood-baths

Stanza 3: grass to grow....trees to talk.....sly to sing

Stanza 4: my words/when...thoughts when they think....treason engendered by traitors.....murder by means of my

Stanza 5: parts I must play...lovers laugh...the white/waves....desert calls/ me to doom

Stanza 8: make me.

We can see a particular type of alliteration where in the line Tall Walls wall me, one Wall is used as a noun and other wall is used as a verb Noun and verb similarly in Strong drugs dope me, Drugs is a noun and dope is a verb, Racks rack me, wherein Racks is a noun and rack is a verb so this way the poet has used a different type if alliteration.

Assonance can also be observed in the repeated vowels in words close to each other and it has helped to add music and build phonetic interest of the content:

Stanza 1: bat/rat

Stanza 2: tall walls wall...wise lies...black racks rack

Stanza 3: white light....mind/guide

Stanza 4: sins/in....

Stanza 5: lecture/hector...mountains/frown.

We can recall of the satanic intention in the lines Wise lies lures me where the world is enveloped in his intentions. Like how the Satan with his wise lies lured Eve and convinced her to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Every stanza except the last stanza starts with 'I' and ends with me. We now should look at the reason why does the poet use the first person (I, Me and My) many times in the poem. He has used the personal pronouns to emphasize the individual consciousness. He wants to focus on individual consciousness instead of collective consciousness. The unborn child is seeking forgiveness and repentance for the sins that he has still not committed. The poet wants individual consciousness to be paid focus on because dehumanization can be only stopped by individuals and it can be well promoted by forgiveness. The child here is seeking forgiveness because he knows that once he enters the human world and is born then he too can no longer be a chaste and will get drenched in the worldly caste of blood and mire. Here the child is not talking about the entire world but here he is talking about his own individual self and the danger he foresees after coming into the world, he wants a world to be safe and a place where he can live. The poem is quite paradoxical wherein the unborn is seeking forgiveness for the sins that he has not committed whereas the born child has no intentions of doing so and is lost. The ambience which the unborn child is afraid of is a reflection of a world which is corrupt and which does not want to seek the forgiveness of the Almighty. The child in the poem says that he will come across of so many evil and corrupt people and:

---the man who is beast or who thinks he is God

Come near me

---Who would freeze my

Humanity, would drag me into lethal automaton,

Would make me a cog in a machine (lines 26 -27, 29 -31).

Foreseeing the brutal realities of the world in which he will be born and fearing his existence the child in advance seeks forgiveness for a world wherein he can breathe and which can prove safe for him. The people who have corrupted the world, responsible for war, were not at all anticipative and were not seeking any kind of forgiveness. For all these reason the poet suggests a solution to end dehumanization by raising individual awareness and this way the society can be saved. He also proposes the Christian virtue of forgiveness to end dehumanization and brutality. This virtue of forgiveness is practiced by all religions and in Hindu religion also it emphasizes on this virtue of forgiveness “Ahimsa Parmo Dharam”. If forgiveness is practised by all then only violence can be ended.

The syntax contracts and expands, clauses growing in some stanzas, fading off in others. Capitals start a line, lower case continues; long, rambling sentences make up a stanza, a short sentence finishes one off. The grammar is peculiar like ‘Let them not’. Poem is expanding from beginning till the end. To reinforce meaning and create familiarity every sentence of the first stanza starts with the line “I am yet not born”.

Under Lexical item we see some of the words getting repeated like –I, me, my and yet throughout and would in 7th stanza- to emphasize dehumanization and brutality.

Parallelism can be observed in the following sentences: Mountains frown at me, lovers laugh at me (5th Stanza) and hither and thither or hither and thither (7th Stanza).

Irony and paradox can be seen in the following lines “the man who is beast or who thinks he is God come near me.” Simile and metaphor also can be noticed in the poem at few places in stanza seven– *Blow me like thistle down* and *like water held in hands* and we can find simile and in sentences of stanza 7 & 8 we can notice the metaphor: would make me a cog in a machine, Let them not make me a stone. Similarly personification can also be found in stanza 3- “Trees to talk to me” and in stanza five “Mountains frown at me.”

REFERENCES

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