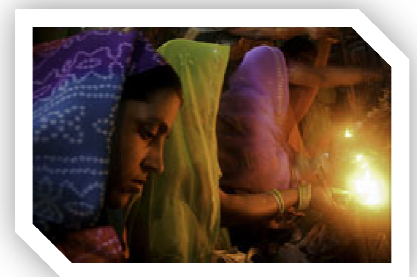


Nissim Ezekiel: Night of the Scorpion

Nissim Ezekiel (1924 - 2004) was born in India to an Indian Jewish family. He studied in Bombay and London. He wrote eight collections of poetry and won the Akademi Award for a volume called 'Latter Day Psalms'. He was also a renowned playwright, art critic, lecturer and editor. He is credited with beginning the **modernist**: *Modernism was a movement or style in 20th-century art, architecture and literature characterised by a deliberate departure from tradition and the invention of new forms.* Movement in India and was one of India's best known poets.

Night of a scorpion

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.
Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.
The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.
May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through,
groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.



He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites
to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.



What is Night of the Scorpion about?

The poem is about the night when a woman (the poet's mother) in a poor village in India is stung by a scorpion. Concerned neighbours pour into her hut to offer advice and help. All sorts of cures are tried by the neighbours, her husband and the local holy man, but time proves to be the best healer - 'After twenty hours / it lost its sting.'

After her ordeal, the mother is merely thankful that the scorpion stung her and not the children.

Structure and language

Structure: The poem is written in **free verse** (*Poetry that has little or no rhyme scheme, regular pattern of rhythms, or line lengths.*) with varying line lengths and no rhyme. The first part is long and full of activity - the scorpion's bite and the reaction of the villagers. The second part - the mother's reaction - is just three lines long.

Sometimes, this poem will be printed as if it were prose. What differences does it make when it is set out in lines? What, if anything, do the lines and the breaks between them contribute?

Language: Think about how the language the poet uses helps to convey his ideas. Here are some points to consider:

- The title is in some ways deceptive. It leads us to believe we are in for a frightening and dramatic tale with a scorpion taking centre stage. In fact, the poem is not about the scorpion at all, but about the reactions of different people to its sting.
- The poem starts off in the **first person**: *The 'I' or 'we' used by a narrator who is a participant in a narrative, in contrast to the third person 'he', 'she' or 'they' of a narrator who is not directly involved.* - Ezekiel describes an event that really happened. However, he does not give his own feelings or reactions: we realise he is merely the narrator. Most of the poem is in the **third person**: *The verb form that indicates the action is being done neither by the speaker ('I') or by the person being addressed ('you'), but by a third person - a 'he', 'she' or 'they'.*, as Ezekiel reports on what other people do and say.
- Ezekiel does not portray the scorpion as a villain: it was driven to shelter 'beneath a sack of rice' (line 4) after ten hours of rain. It probably stung the poet's mother instinctively as a warning to her when she approached its hiding place, rather than harming her on purpose; and having delivered the sting, scared off the people indoors, 'he risked the rain again' (line 7).

- However, the villagers are more superstitious and link the scorpion to 'the Evil One' (line 10). They claim that the poison will help in many ways. For example, by burning away the sins of the woman's former life - 'her previous birth' (line 19) - and ease her life after this one - 'her next birth' (line 22). Perhaps this is their way of making sense of the event: if good comes out of it, it is easier to bear.
- The events of the night are described in rich detail - we know about the mud hut and the candles and lanterns, yet we know little about the individual neighbours. Ezekiel lumps the neighbours together as 'they'. What effect does this have?
- Ezekiel's father is usually a sceptic and a rationalist - in other words, he does not believe in superstitions and is not religious. Yet when his wife is suffering, he tries 'every curse and blessing' (line 37) to help her. The final, simple 'After twenty hours / it lost its sting' (lines 44-5) is a put down: nothing worked, after all.
- The final three lines are poignant. We hear Ezekiel's mother's exact words, her simple speech is in contrast to the gabbling neighbours. She doesn't show any bitterness about her ordeal: she is just grateful that she was the one who was hurt rather than her children. (Children are more vulnerable to scorpion bites than adults.) She thanks God (line 47). Do you feel that the poet sees the god she prays to as more powerful than the spirits the neighbours were conjuring with?

Imagery and sound

Imagery: Ezekiel uses a simile [**simile:** *An explicit comparison of one thing to another, using the words 'like' or 'as'. 'Sleeping like a log' and 'bright as a button' are similes.*], comparing the villagers to 'swarms of flies' (line 8). It is striking that he uses an insect image to describe the people's reaction to an invertebrate's sting. He develops the simile in the following line: 'they buzzed the name of God' (line 9). What does the fly simile suggest about Ezekiel's attitude to the neighbours?

- The neighbours' candles and lanterns throw 'giant scorpion shadows' on the walls (line 13). We know that the scorpion has already fled, so are these images of the people themselves? (A scorpion has eight legs, so the shadow of a small group of people standing together could look like a scorpion.) If so, what does this show about Ezekiel's attitude to the neighbours?
- There is a contrast between the neighbours' 'peace of understanding' (line 31) and the mother who 'twisted... groaning on a mat' (line 35). It is ironic that they are at peace because of her discomfort.

Sound: There is alliteration [**alliteration:** *Words strung together with repeated (often initial) consonants, eg Max made many men mad.*] throughout the poem that helps to link or emphasise ideas: the scorpion is seen 'Parting with his poison' (line 5), Ezekiel's father tries 'herb and hybrid' (line 38), Ezekiel sees 'flame feeding' (line 41) on his mother. Underline other examples of alliteration and see if you can explain the effectiveness of their use?

- There is a lot of repetition, so that we hear the villagers' prayers and incantations. Ezekiel uses direct speech, 'May...', to dramatise the scene and the echoed 'they said' is like a **chorus:** *A group of characters in classical Greek drama who comment on the action but don't take part in it. In a song, the chorus is a section that is regularly repeated..*

Attitude, tone and ideas

Much of the meaning of a poem is conveyed by the attitude it expresses towards its subject matter. Attitude can be thought of as a combination of the poet's tone of voice and the ideas they are trying to get across to the reader.

A good way to decide on the tone of a poem is to work out how you would read it aloud. Should this poem be read:

- In a factual tone, like a report, narrating the events of the night?
- In a mystic tone, to contrast the different calls to gods and God throughout the poem?
- Reverently, to show Ezekiel's pride in his mother?

Select a short quotation to justify your choice.

Ideas: The ideas in this poem concern our difficult feelings towards aspects of the natural world that seem to threaten us - the frightened insect becomes the Evil One! - and the complex ways in which individuals and communities respond when disaster strikes one of their number.

- **Have a look at these quotes and suggestions about how they fit into these themes:**

Quotation	Commentary
- flash/of diabolic tail in the dark room -	It is hard to know whose opinion this is - Ezekiel's or the neighbours'. Ezekiel initially sees the scorpion quite sympathetically, but, here, it is linked with the devil.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,	Ezekiel seems irritated. More and more peasants are arriving with their lamps and nothing can help his mother. The repetition of more shows how frustrated he is.
Thank God the scorpion picked on me...	By using direct speech, Ezekiel shows his mother's selflessness. He chooses her simple words to end the poem to highlight his love and admiration for her.

Comparison

Which poems could you compare 'Night of the Scorpion' to? There will be a number of ways in which the poems can be compared and you may well be able to think of other similarities!

A comparison with Chinua Achebe's 'Vultures'

Poet and poem	What to look for in your comparison
Chinua Achebe: 'Vultures'	- Both poems use unexpected changes of mood to engage the reader with the ideas of the poems. We start off feeling sympathy for the scorpion, but we are left thinking perhaps this really is a diabolical creature. With the vultures, we feel that they represent something depressing and violent and yet we are surprised by the affection between the two birds.