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Analysis of prayer before birth

" Prayer Before Birth" by Louis McNiece is a dramatic monologue written from the perspective of an unborn child. Through the persona of an unborn child, the monologue makes an anxious plea for individuality, a worthwhile and natural life free from any manipulatory and corrupting powers of threats and terrors. The poem "Prayer before Birth" was written amidst the Second World War. The 'war' can be a three-lettered word but its consequences are always massive and enormously depressing. The common belief, 'war to end all wars' is not accepted anymore. A war brings nothing but destruction. It halts a country's progress, the common man is disillusioned, displaced and several go astray. The poet in this poem expresses his fear of threat to mankind which may be brought about by war. He voices out his fear about what the world's tyranny can do to the innocence of a child. The poem is divided into six stanzas and each are slightly longer than the others indicating the growth of the baby inside the womb. The first stanza is about the childish fears that every little child has. He asks God to 'hear' him and keep him away from nocturnal beasts like the 'bat or the rat or the stoat', both real and unreal so that they do not harm the child. The 'bloodsucking bat' may refer to the parasites that exist within us. The world seems to be infested with vermin and the poet asks us to shield ourselves from them. In the second stanza, the child wants God to 'console' him because the child has fears that the human may intoxicate him with deadly drugs and control him clever lies or 'rack' him in 'black racks' and 'roll' him in 'bloods-baths'. The child wants God to provide him and surround him with nature, the only remnant to be corrupted by man. He also asks for some guiding light in the back of his mind. The baby seems to be a little matured in the stanza four. He asks to God to forgive him for the sins that world commits through him, the words that speak through him, his "treason engendered by traitors." The child means to say the society may compel him to murder someone or the traitors may cause him to betray his own motherland. He asks for forgiveness for all these sins. The next stanza is about lessons. The child asks God to be his teacher and teach him about how he should react when he faces situations like bureaucracy, old men lecturing, mockery on lovers, his own children cursing him or the beggars refusing his gift. The sixth stanza more or less summarizes the whole poem. The first lines of the sixth stanza may refer to men like Hitler and Xerxes who think themselves to be God and he asks Him to keep him away from such men. Moreover, he asks to 'fill' him with courage and willpower to stand up against the inhumanity and such humans who would destroy him to recreate him into an insignificant part of a machine, or turn his face into one expressionless face or like as if the child was a small stone which the winds plays with, "hither and thither or hither and thither." Loius MacNiece uses a number of poetical devices like the alliteration, assonance, repetition, personification and so on to enhance the truth behind his poem. The punctuation shows that the child is in a hurry in making the pleas to God. The lines "I am not yet born" are repeated in each stanza signifying that even if the child is not born, he is aware of the cruelty and darkness that prevails in the world. The technique 'O hear me', 'O fill me' gives the child's prayer more power and emphasizes his emotions and portrays his fears vividly. Loius MacNiece uses alliteration and assonance in great deal. The noticeable alliterations are 'strong drugs dope me', 'with wise lies lure me', 'black racks rack me' showing the horror captivated in the mind of the little child. The assonance of 'bat' and 'rat', 'tall wall', 'wise lies' provides a different yet appealing rhyme to the poem and its readers. The poem contains religious themes and metaphor, the one being the use of the child as the metaphor of Christ. In the third stanza, the poet has used personification and has personified Nature in the lines 'trees to talk to me, skies to sing to me, water to dandle me' and so on. It shows that the child wants the company of Nature more than the company of cruel world. Nature still remains unaltered by man's influence. Additionally, the poet uses 'mountains frown at me'- an image created in our minds that the only refuge, when everything else is lost, is Nature- but even now Nature seems to have deserted him. There are historical references too. The poem was written during the height of the Second World War and certain references are linked to it. The phrase "cog in a machine" symbolizes that the child feels that the society will mould him into something insignificant and totally worthless. This has a connection to the First and the Second World Wars where soldiers were 'dragooned' into being an 'automaton.' The ultimate stanza is a long breathless sentence and the repetition of images bring out the agitation of the speaker. All through the poem, we find the poet effectively creates evil and devilish images which reflect the decadent state of the world and the presence of evil that lingers and continues to haunt our humanity. Therefore we can say that Prayer Before Birth is a powerful monologue, copious with alliteration and assonance, rhyme and repetition making each of the verses poignant and dramatic in intensity. The poem ends with a stark conclusion and the child finally asks to be killed instead of being born and sent to such a cruel world, if his pleas are not granted. Through the prayer of the child, the poem makes an outright statement about the deplorable condition of our world which may soon turn into Hell. Dear Readers- If this summary/analysis has helped you, kindly take a little effort to like or +1 this post or both. Make sure you like Beamingnotes Facebook page and subscribe to our newsletter so that we can keep in touch. We'll keep informing you about stuffs that are really interesting, worth knowing and adds importance to you. 7th February 2013 Prayer Before Birth I am not yet born; O hear me. Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the club-footed ghoul come near me. I am not yet born, console me. I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me, with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me, on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me. I am not yet born; provide me With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light in the back of my mind to guide me. I am not yet born; forgive me For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me, my treason engendered by traitors beyond me, my life when they murder by means of my hands, my death when they live me. I am not yet born; rehearse me In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white waves call me to folly and the desert calls me to doom and the beggar refuses my gift and my children curse me. I am not yet born; O hear me, Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God come near me. I am not yet born; O fill me With strength against those who would freeze my humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton, would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with one face, a thing, and against all those who would dissipate my entirety, would blow me like thistle-down hither and thither or hither and thither like water held in the hands would spill me. Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me. Otherwise kill me. Louis MacNiece Context Written during the Second World War, more specifically in 1944. During 1944 London was being bombed to a large extent and as such it was a time of fear for the future. Content An unborn child expresses its fear of what the world can do to the innocent. It does this through the form of a prayer (possibly to God) in which it pleases to be preserved from the dangers that future on earth might hold, including its own corruption (4th stanza). Tone The tone of this poem can be interpreted in a number of different ways. The child seems fearful of the future and as such urgent and impassioned in its dialect. The poem also seems to have an apocalyptic or nightmarish feel to it. The continuous negativity could also illustrate the hopelessness of the situation. Themes The world is cruel and dangerous The world is manipulative A plea for human freedom Nothing is safe from corruption Form and structure The poem is written as a dramatic monologue which is spoken by an unborn child. This in itself is a very unsettling concept. The dramatic nature of the monologue is increased by a series of increasing stanzas (apart from the 6th and final stanza) which build up the potential horror on earth to a crescendo. This poem is also laid out in a very unconventional fashion. The cascading lines of the poem could represent the danger and chaos of life on earth, or maybe they are just used by the poet to speed up the delivery of the stanzas. The shorter stanzas near the end of the poem without cascading lines are successfully used to break this sequence. By surrounding the penultimate stanza with two of these shorter stanzas, the poet brings our attention to this stanza and highlights its content. Language The repetition of 'I am not yet born' at the start of each stanza makes the poem like an incantation, which relates back to the idea of a prayer. The phrase also makes it clear that even though the child has not yet been born, it understands the danger and cruelty of the world, immediately creating a hopeless tone. Each stanza also follows this repeated clause with an imperative. This illustrates the desperation of the child's plea. The first stanza seems to illustrate the child's imagination. Alliteration of b in 'blood-sucking bat' and the classic horror image of 'club-footed ghoul'. Even children, unborn children are being corrupted by humans in their imagination. Stanza 2 is all about what harm humans can do. The alliteration 'drugs dope' and the internal repetition of 'tall walls wall' and 'black racks rack' create a feeling of oppression and claustrophobia. Illustrates the hopeless task of trying to escape this danger and corruption. Stanza 3 contains the child's optimistic view of what life on earth might hold. The sibilance of 'sky to sing to me' creates a soft hissing sound which is much gentler than the harsh alliteration of 'drugs dope' in the previous stanza. Personification throughout this stanza gives nature the properties that are usually used to describe humans, and this contrasts with the child's views of humans, emphasizing how the child wants to stay one with nature and how nature is now more human than humans themselves (anything human is corrupted). In the 4th stanza the child expresses its fear of becoming corrupted like everyone else on earth. The use of the 3rd person pronoun 'they' is slightly disturbing. Gives a sense of the child being controlled by a faceless authority (manipulative nature of humans on earth). The 5th and 6th stanzas replace the simple horrors experienced in stanza 1 with more abstract horrors experienced by adults. Personification of 'mountains frown at me' and 'white waves call me to folly' could suggest that the whole world, including nature could actually become human and threaten him also (such is the intensity of the corruption that not even nature can remain pure forever). Slightly ironic as the waves are 'white', a colour the traditionally symbolises purity and peace, but are actually leading the child into danger and evil. In the 7th stanza the metaphor 'cog in a machine' could suggest how the world is manipulative and due to this manipulation you no longer have an identity. Most important though is the phrase, 'dragoon me into a lethal automation'. As this poem was written during the war, this phrase immediately creates the image of a soldier. The soldier must not show any emotion (be automated) and should kill whatever the cost. This is sort of like a person without any soul, controlled by his country and the humans that run it. A plea for freedom and a protest against total control. Louis MacNeice expresses a strong disgust towards the corrupted and evil world through Prayer before Birth in which he takes the persona of an unborn child who prays to God. The poem starts with a plea to be heard as the unborn child asks God to keep away the nocturnal creatures, both real and imaginary away from him so that they might not cause him any harm. The unborn child's need to be comforted against people who with the help of deadly drugs and clever lies will control him and dictate his actions is made clear in the second stanza. Wary of the influence man will have on him; the unborn asks to be surrounded by nature, which man has still not been able to corrupt. He prays for a clear conscience that can show him his way on the path of life. The unborn child knows that he will do lots of evil things in this world under the influence of Man, and asks to be forgiven beforehand. Everything that he will say, think or do will harm someone else and for that he asks repentance. He then asks to be prepared beforehand for all the roles that he must play in life when the entire world turns against him to the extent that even his children hate him and the beggar is indifferent to him. The sixth stanza adequately summarizes the whole poem. The unborn asks God to keep away such people who are either as savage as animals or act tyrannously thinking they are as supreme as God Himself. He then asks for the willpower to stand up against those who would try to destroy all that is unique inside him and turn him into an insignificant part of a large machine. They would control him like as if he were a small stone which the wind can blow here and there as it likes, or like as if he were the water which a person tries to hold in his hands but ends up spilling everywhere. The poem ends with a final ultimatum: The unborn pleases to be protected against those who would do such things to him or asks to be killed instead of being sent into such a world. Louis MacNeice uses a number of literary devices to make the stark truth behind the poem clear. The most noticeable among these is the repetition: The phrase 'I am not yet born' is repeated at the start of every stanza which makes it very clear that even though the child has not appeared in the world, he is aware of the darkness which surrounds it, giving a dark and hopeless tone to the poem. Then the abundant use of assonance juxtaposed with alliteration such as the assonance of 'bat' and 'rat' and the alliteration of the letter B in "bloodsucking bat or rat"; or the repetition of the letter L in "lies lure" and the assonance in "wise lies" in the phrase "wise lies lure me"; give an internal rhyme to the poem. Going on to the third stanza one finds nature personified in several instances: "Trees to talk to me. Skies to sing to me" Giving nature the qualities normally attributed to Man emphasizes the disgust that the unborn child feels towards the world as he wants nothing to do with it and craves the company of nature. However MacNeice contradicts himself by using the paradox in the next stanza "white waves call me to folly" where white waves, metaphorically resembling purity are personified to be beckoning the unborn towards evil. This thus proves that the intensity of corruption is such in the world that nothing, not even nature, can remain pure for long. The last stanza is flowing in metaphors as the poet describes how mankind will manipulate the actions and emotions of the child. He fears that he'll become a "cog in a machine" or be blown like "thistle-down hither and thither" or be wasted like water held in hands: These metaphorical comparisons emphasize the acute absence of control that the unborn can exercise on his life. Thus is Prayer Before Birth a potent monologue, with its cascading lines, each heavy in their use of internal rhymes and repetition, assonance and alliteration, are insistent, driving, a crazed litany; they're powerful, yet wonderfully poignant. Right from the title to the lethal ending, this poem casts a very harsh light on the evilness of society and the corruption of mankind all over the world. The fact that MacNeice had to take up the persona of the unborn child shows how little he thinks of Man. The world is such that he does not think that even a young child; an infant, cannot remain unblemished from its cruelties. He was propelled to see it through the eyes of an unborn child, one that is still within the safe confines of its mother's womb, to have an untainted point of view. The poem is quite depressing and sad as it paints the world in such dark colors that no matter what the unborn child does, once he is in the world, he is going to get affected in some manner or the other. If the people can't manipulate and control him with their lies and drugs and cage him within tall walls of social refrain, making him do evil things to cause other people harm that he would not have otherwise done; if he fights them and resists their dictation of his life, then they'll reject him and he'll become an outcast. People of all classes: wise old men, cunning politicians, happy lovers, mean beggars and even his own innocent children, will turn their backs on him and he'll be left standing alone in the path of life. If seen in a wider perspective, the unborn's unwillingness to be controlled could also be a desperate outcry against being categorized; everyone in this world is sorted, either into religions or class or color or country. This is also a way of subtle manipulation that the world has a whole exercises on the individual. Thus he wants nothing to do with Man. He craves the company of nature, asking God to provide him with all those things which aren't anymore found in this world, things which remain pure and unaltered by man's influence, like the sky which cannot be conquered and the water which cannot be contained. The strongest stanza of the poem, the seventh, is a personal favorite. With the poem being written at the height of World War II, this stanza has a particular importance. As the unborn prays for strength against those who would 'dragoon him into a lethal automation', the thought of a soldier immediately comes to mind. A person who is not allowed to show any emotion, and is asked incessantly to kill on behalf of his country, can only be considered a 'thing' without a 'face'. A strong protest against Totalitarianism, a type of government where every aspect of public and private lives is dictated by the government, this poem and this stanza in particular, is a strong allegory against the world war. Yet despite the definitive historical period of time that it was written in, McNiece makes his plea universal by using the voice of an unborn child, innocent and frail, to convey his fear of the world, cruel and tyrannous. Dramatic in intensity, the poem makes a sweeping statement on the deplorable state of the world. Living is a painful experience; being born is a terrifying one. The child's plea is a representation of the poet's anguish, grief and fear in a world that has steadily metamorphosed into a hell. The poet paints a picture of a world devoid of compassion, love and remorse through the haunting appeal of the unborn infant. The poem reflects the poet's utter dejection and hopelessness expressing the thought that the world will not correct itself, but perpetuate its evils in an ever-ascending spiraling pattern of violence.

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