

Theme via Technique: Fear of the Human World as Reflected in the Poetic Techniques Used in Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth'

Abdel Mohsen Ibrahim Hashim
Department of English, Faculty of Arts
Assiut University, Egypt

Abstract

Can a poet convey his themes and ideas through the technical devices he uses? The main aim of this paper is to seek an answer to this question and show how the poetic techniques which Louis MacNeice employs in his poem, 'Prayer before Birth', help develop his thoughts and feelings. In fact, MacNeice resorts to a variety of poetic techniques that enrich his poem such as diction, anaphora, enjambment, alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, metaphor, personification, paradox, irony and many others. 'Prayer before Birth' is set out like a plea, a cry for help from an unborn baby who prays to God to protect him from a harsh and ruthless world he is going to enter. The poem reveals the speaker's depression and hopelessness expressing the thought that the world would not correct itself, but continue in its evils. Consequently, the unborn baby is worried about losing the unity and wholeness of character; there is also a fear of being made incomplete through the process of socialization, of being indifferently driven away by the pitiless world. The unborn speaker hopes to do without the humans and their wicked, corrupt world. Thus, he asks God to provide him with all those things which no longer exist in this deformed world, things which remain pure and unaltered by human hands, like the pure water, the green grass, the beautiful trees, the unconquered sky, the singing birds and the clear conscience or the guiding insight that can instinctively show him the right path. Finally, the unborn speaker makes it clear that it is better for him to be denied life than to be denied a real protection against all those who will try to nullify his humanity. Brilliantly, all these ideas and feelings can be interpreted by the poetic techniques that MacNeice employs in 'Prayer before birth'.

Keywords: fear-human-MacNeice-technique-theme

Theme via Technique: Fear of the Human World as Reflected in the Poetic Techniques Used in Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth'

The American poet and critic Paul Engle writes, "poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words" (as cited in Strachan & Terry, 2011, p. 190). A careful reading of this quote indicates that the way 'the delicate, tough...words' of a poem are written can vividly convey the poet's 'ideas' and 'emotions'. Put another way, the poetic techniques used in a poem help the writer develop his themes and feelings. The aim of this paper is to show how Louis MacNeice's 1944 piece 'Prayer before Birth', centering around the fear of the human world, can be interpreted by studying the technical devices employed in the poem. Outstandingly, MacNeice makes use of a variety of poetic techniques which enrich the poem. Of these devices some are related to sound-patterns such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme. Other devices which MacNeice uses are metaphor, personification, paradox, symbolism, juxtaposition, irony, sarcasm, and satire. Other techniques employed in this poem are diction, anaphora, enjambment as well as the form and structure of the poem.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle (1968) argues that good writing consists of a balance of "common" words which make the writing comprehensible and "strange" or "unusual" words that make the writing interesting and distinctive (p. 39). Fully aware of the old master's emphasis on the importance of diction for the literary work, MacNeice uses carefully selected vocabulary to convey his message and make the reader see sense in his point of view. The word 'prayer', for example, shows that the baby is trying to get help for something which troubles him. This, in fact, raises a significant question: why would a soon-to-be born baby who still has a lot of opportunities in a future life be worrying about 'sins' that he hasn't even got the chance to commit? That a not-yet-born baby can have the ability to think or even narrate such a horrifying poem even if he isn't yet subjected to the wicked world suggests that the evil characterizing the human world is so intense that the fetus could feel it from within the mother's womb.

Throughout the poem, the diction underpins the poet's ideas reflecting the helplessness of the unborn baby in the face of the heartless absurdity of the world. At the very outset, the unborn speaker points out, 'I am not yet born' as if he wants to draw attention to his powerlessness in facing the evils of the world or coping with its tricky maneuvers. This anaphora not only contrasts the innocence of the baby to the vicious world of the humans, but also asserts the idea that though the unborn baby is still inside the safe confines of his mother's womb, he feels worried and frightened of the challenges waiting for him. Though the baby has not yet been born, he seems apprehensive of the darkness which surrounds human life, giving a gloomy and hopeless mood to the poem. Weak and helpless, he cries for aid and support using words that reflect his powerlessness and need for help such as 'hear me', 'console me', 'provide me', 'forgive me', 'rehearse me', 'come near me', 'fill me', and the shocking closing words, 'otherwise kill me' (MacNeice, 1979, pp. 193-94⁽¹⁾). The unborn baby fears to come into a cruel world that MacNeice portrays as a horrible place full of 'blood baths', 'tall walls', 'strong drugs', and 'black racks' [93]. As the unborn speaker states in the poem, it is a wicked world marked with 'treason', and 'murder' [93], a world in which the person can easily be subjected not only to 'folly', but also to 'doom' or 'curse' [93].

The first stanza of 'Prayer before Birth' reads as follows:

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. [193]

The unborn speaker starts his appeal seeking protection against the nocturnal creatures, both real and imaginary. These 'bloodsucking' creatures symbolize a bloodthirsty world of which the unborn baby is really horrified. In addition, the symbolism of these creatures which signify decay and corruption reflects the moral decadence of the world, and the presence of evil which lingers and continues to feed upon our humanity. Remarkably, there is a common use of alliteration in the above lines. As the quoted lines reveal, the unborn baby asks for protection against 'bloodsucking bat', a phrase in which both the words 'bloodsucking' and 'bat' start with the consonant sound /b/ which connects the two words together, attracting attention to the fear-provoking nature of the 'bat'--that nocturnal creature which kills its prey and feeds on its blood. This is a horrible image of death which terrifies the baby and makes him feel afraid of a bloodthirsty world he is going to enter. This conveys the baby's gloomy interest in death even before birth, as a reaction to the frightening atmosphere prevailing in the human world. The unborn speaker feels he is not free to develop according to his preferences, and his prayer is a plea to escape the rigid confines of social conformity and the painful results of exercising personal choices, as we see in the second stanza:

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. [193]

Noticeably, the poet makes use of both assonance and consonance in the above stanza. Examples of assonance can be noted in the words 'tall' and 'wall', 'black' and 'rack' where the vowels /ɔ:/ and /a/ are successively repeated. Significantly, these two pairs of words also contain examples of consonance as the consonant /l/ comes at the end of the words 'tall' and 'wall', and similarly the words 'black' and 'rack' end with the same consonant /k/. I think that the repetition of a vowel and a consonant in each pair of words joins the two words together reflecting the meaning intended by the speaker. Connected together by the same vowel and the same consonant, these words reflect the state of fear and horror conveyed by 'tall walls' that may imprison the baby and hamper his freedom. In addition, the unborn speaker fears that 'black racks' may 'rack' him making him suffer pain and torture.

Juxtaposition is another poetic device MacNeice uses in the poem. In the third stanza, the poet creates a lovely, positive image of the natural world juxtaposing it with the hateful, depressing image of the human world as it is portrayed in the other stanzas. This indicates that the speaker has no trust in 'the human race' and consequently resorts to nature which, unlike the world of humans, is pure, uncorrupt and reliable. The unborn baby wishes to substitute the failings of 'the human race' with the blessings of nature simply because the natural world can sufficiently 'provide', as he says,

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. [193]

Seeking the company of nature, the unborn speaker hopes to do without the humans and their wicked, corrupt world. Thus, he asks God to provide him with all those things which no longer exist in this deformed world, things which remain pure and unaltered by human hands, like the pure water, the green grass, the beautiful trees, the unconquered sky, the singing birds and the clear conscience or the guiding insight that can instinctively show him the right path. This romantic portrait of nature is juxtaposed with the gloomy portrayal of the human world where everything arouses the fear of the unborn: the 'bloodsucking' creatures, 'tall walls', 'black racks', 'blood-baths', 'sins', 'treason', 'murder', 'death', and 'the man who is beast or who thinks he is God' [193].

In her *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, Burroway (2011) argues that good writers are those who "show" and "don't tell" (p. xviii). Burroway here urges authors, particularly poets, to pick out specific sensory details that evoke deeper abstractions in the reader. This is what the author of 'Prayer before Birth' exactly does when he resorts to imagery, "a technique so simple and yet so elusive" (Burroway, 2011, p. xviii). MacNeice here uses effective images to reflect the unborn baby's lack of trust in the human world and his wish to immerse himself with nature--that safer, purer world. Throughout the third stanza, nature is personified many times. Examples of personification are clearly shown in 'water to dandle me', 'trees to talk to me', 'sky to sing for me', and 'a white light...to guide me'. In these instances, water is personified as an individual, a mother for example, who moves the baby up and down in a playful or affectionate way as if she lulls him to sleep. Both trees and sky are personified as people talking and singing for the baby. Furthermore, nature provides the baby with a white light which the poet personifies as a human being who safely takes the baby and guides him to the right way. Here, the white light may be a kind of insight or a sort of moral guidelines that show the baby the path to virtue and keep him away from vice. These examples of personification reveal how the baby admires and trusts the natural world as an alternative to the human world that cannot provide him with these simple things which form some of the basic needs of every baby.

As argued above, the unborn baby foresees that he will not be able to cope with the community in which he will lead his life and that it will in turn dominate or destroy him. "Like war," Longley (1988) points out, "the perspective of the unborn highlights the powerful imperatives which mock our belief in individual autonomy" (p. 86). Accordingly, the unborn baby goes on to place blame for all his future sins on the social factors that may mould and control him:

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. [193]

Regarding imagery as an essential element of poetic craft, MacNeice comes now to use metaphor in order to reflect the unborn speaker's fear of being sinful in such a cruel world. This can be seen in 'my words / when they speak me', 'my thoughts when they think me'. This indicates that the social control which the baby expects to be practiced on him is so authoritarian that he

becomes afraid of finding no voice to express himself or being brainwashed, performing actions beyond his control. Put another way, the unborn baby will speak thinking the thought or language to be his own, but in fact it will be someone else's; he will simply be reduced to a mouthpiece for a powerful mind controlling influence around. Thus, the resistant will embodied by the voice of the unborn speaker seems to be unable to deflect the violent domination exerted by others. The social forces beyond individual control dominate mental, emotional, and even physical growth. That's why the baby prays to be forgiven for committing these sins, simply because they are beyond his control. More importantly, he realizes that to be in this world is to know sin, death and betrayal.

Anticipating such a horrible world, the unborn baby asks to be prepared beforehand, to be accustomed to the roles he will have to enact in life:

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. [193]

The old men and bureaucrats here refer to the force of tradition and the imposed order of civilization against which the unborn baby rails. Significantly, MacNeice here makes use of both paradox and personification to show how the image of nature has paradoxically changed from being a source of hope and optimism for the unborn baby into being a cause of fear and horror, with 'mountains' frowning and 'desert' calling him to his death. Even 'the white waves' which metaphorically signify purity are depicted as beckoning him towards evil and foolishness. Thus, nature that has previously been a supporting factor comes to be a conspiring force suddenly turning its back on the helpless baby. This suggests that corruption in this world is so rampant that nothing, even nature, can remain pure for long. For the unborn baby, the world has become like a wasteland and he tries to "pursue a nightmare journey in a world now apparently deprived of meaning" (Kenner, 2007, p. 27), a sense also shared by the speaker in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* which similarly depicts a gloomy, chaotic world that lacks spiritual depth. In such a world, Eliot (1936) writes,

... one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
 There is not even silence ...
 But dry sterile thunder without rain
 There is not even solitude ...
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
 From doors of mud-cracked houses. (p. 74)

The sixth stanza adequately summarizes the whole poem as the unborn baby asks God to protect him against Man, the main factor behind deforming everything beautiful in this world:

I am not yet born; O hear me,
 Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God

come near me. [193]

Obviously, the paradox between 'man' and 'beast' reveals irony in a clear way; the poet mocks the human world in which man is depicted either as a savage animal or a tyrant thinking he is as supreme as God Himself. The portrayal of man in such a brutal way emphasizes the depressing mood of the poem and reflects the unborn speaker's fear of the human race.

Perhaps, the most important stanza of the poem is the seventh. Here, MacNeice alludes to war whose influence is particularly noticeable in his mention of 'lethal automaton' [193]. The thought of a soldier immediately comes to mind. A person who is not allowed to show any emotion and is asked ceaselessly to kill on behalf of his country can only be a 'thing with / one face, a thing' [193]. The unborn baby is completely horrified by the concept of merely becoming a 'thing', a bureaucratic static for a totalitarian regime which, instead of allowing the individual to choose between multiple social identities, "crushes all autonomous institutions in its drive to seize the human soul" (as cited in Rozeff, 2008, para. 7). The unborn speaker states:

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 thistledown hither and
 thither or hither and thither
 like water held in the
 hands would spill me. [193]

Thus, this stanza is a strong protest against Totalitarianism, "an oppressive system" dominating people, permitting no individual freedom and seeking to subordinate all aspects of the individual's life to the authority of the government (Gregor, 2009, p. 12). Furthermore, the unborn speaker is worried about losing his 'entirety', his wholeness, his unity; there is also a fear of being made incomplete through the process of socialization, of being indifferently driven away by such a pitiless world. In these metaphorical comparisons, the baby is compared, one time to 'a cog in a machine', a second time to a mere 'thing with one face', a third time to something thrown away 'like thistledown hither and / thither', and finally to 'water held in the / hands' and therefore spilt unnoticed. These metaphors reveal the acute absence of control the unborn would exercise on his life.

Written at the height of World War II, 'Prayer before Birth' stands as an allegory of war, a theme which features strongly in MacNeice's poetry. As an active participant in the socio-political scene of his time, MacNeice was very close to the horrible consequences of war which destroyed people all over the world, filled the poet with disappointment, and added a gloomy tone to his poems. As Goodby (2000) puts it:

In the wider-post-war international contexts in which he was involved, a narrative of disenchantment can be discerned, from his coverage for the BBC of the communal bloodletting which accompanied

Indian Partition, to his role as a British Council employee in Greece just after the 1943-49 civil war (in which British troops supported monarchist forces and the Right against communist partisans)... (p. 59).

As the above extract reveals, 'a narrative of disenchantment' can be detected in MacNeice's poetry. The same note of bitterness is also felt in 'Prayer before Birth', a poem in which the poet uses the voice of an unborn baby, innocent and frail, to convey his fear of a bloodthirsty world.

Enjambment is the poetic technique MacNeice uses in the seventh stanza to convey his message to the reader. This can clearly be noted at the final part of the stanza where the unborn baby prays to be kept away from those who

... would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me. [193]

But how can this technical device convey the idea of the poet? Reading these lines carefully, I feel that the speaker is so frightened that he wishes to throw away all the causes of his fear and horror in one breath; he likes to get rid of the huge amount of fear that terrifies him bringing to his mind the thought that he may, in this harsh world, be blown like 'thistledown hither and / thither' or be wasted 'like water held in the / hands'. I think that uttering these words quickly in one breathless sentence lessens the speaker's sense of anxiety and anguish.

Asking for the protection of God, the unborn baby concludes his plea as follows:

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me. [194]

The above lines clearly reveal sarcasm and satire. The unborn speaker makes it clear that it is better for him to be denied life than to be denied a real protection against all those who will try to nullify his humanity or stand against his liberty as if he likes to ask sarcastically: is this life worth living? The poet here directs his satirical arrows at the human world which turns the person into a senseless 'stone' that has neither thought nor feeling.

A skilled poet, MacNeice knows that "the words of a rhyme... are the icon in which the idea is caught" (Wimsatt, 1982, p. 165). Accordingly, he employs the technique of rhyme in 'Prayer before Birth' in order to convey the theme of fear resulting from the endless violent practices of the human world. It is noteworthy that the poem consists of thirty nine lines; of this total number, twenty lines end with 'me', a monosyllabic word that often rhymes at the end of lines with itself as seen in the second stanza:

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. [193]

The use of this pronoun in the objective form, I believe, suggests that the speaker is always threatened by something; he is always the victim and the one against whom something is plotted. In addition to being repeated in all the lines of the above stanza, the object pronoun 'me' is repeated at the end of many other lines throughout the poem as we can see in 'console me', 'wall me', 'lure me', 'roll me', 'provide me', 'guide me', 'forgive me', 'think me', 'live me', 'rehearse me', 'curse me', 'come near me', 'fill me', 'freeze me', 'spill me', 'kill me'. Again, the repetition of the objective pronoun 'me' throughout the poem foregrounds the exclusively passive position of the unborn speaker. The preceding imperative verbs add to this foregrounding the element of agony and anguish resulting from the speaker's utter helplessness. Furthermore, the regular rhyme scheme of the poem harmonizes with several instances of internal rhyme, as noted in 'tall walls wall me', 'white light', 'black racks rack me', 'speak me...think me', 'thither...hither', 'make me...spill me'. This technique not only adds to the pace of the poem but also reflects on the fast paced movement of life largely marked by tyranny, oppression, death and destruction.

Finally, MacNeice resorts to the irregular structure or form of the poem as an effective technical device to express his views and convey his themes. Expressively, the varied length of the stanzas and lines is a reflection of the chaos characterizing the human world. The deterioration of humanity is effectively brought out through the cascading lines of the poem--we are left with the feeling that with every second that passes by, the world is falling apart and humanity is losing its spiritual significance. Throughout the poem, MacNeice uses such a form that each stanza starts with longer lines and then the lines get shorter towards the end as if the baby's sense of safety in the mother's womb is gradually decreasing as he starts to enter the human world which is characterized by "disappointment, defeat, [and] betrayal" (Goodby, 2000, p. 57).

To conclude, the main concern of this paper has been to explore how the technical devices employed in MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth' help the poet develop his themes and ideas. As has been argued, MacNeice's craftsmanship outstandingly enables him to convey the unborn speaker's fear of the human world through the poetic techniques that enrich 'Prayer before Birth'. Diction, anaphora, symbolism, alliteration, assonance, consonance, juxtaposition, personification, metaphor, paradox, irony, enjambment, sarcasm, satire, rhyme and the structure or form of the poem are techniques that the poet employs to express his feelings and elucidate his thoughts. For future research, exploring the religious implications in Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth' is highly recommended. The quest for individual freedom in Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth' is another important topic. Finally, modern world as depicted in Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth' is an idea worth researching.

About the Author:

Dr. Abdel Mohsen Ibrahim Hashim, is a lecturer in English Literature (PhD). He works at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, The New Valley, Assuit University, Egypt. His research interests lie mainly in twentieth-century and contemporary Anglo-Irish poetry as well as comparative literature.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ MacNeice, L. (1979). *Collected Poems*. Ed. E. R. Dodds. London: Faber & Faber. [All quotes from 'Prayer before Birth' are from this edition and hereafter cited between square brackets as page numbers only.]

References

- Aristotle. (1968). *Aristotle's POETICS: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*. Trans. Leon Golden. Commentary by O. B. Hardison. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Burroway, J. (2011). *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, 3rd ed. London: Longman.
- Eliot, T. S. (1936). *Collected Poems: 1909-1935*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Goodby, J. (2000). *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Gregor, A. (2009). *Marxism, Fascism, and Totalitarianism: Chapters in the Intellectual History of Radicalism*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Kenner, H. (2007). The Waste Land. In Harold Bloom (Ed.), *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. New York: InfoBase Publishing. 7-34.
- Longley, E. (1988). *Louis MacNeice: A Study*. London: Faber & Faber.
- MacNeice, L. (1979). *Collected Poems*. Ed. E. R. Dodds. London: Faber & Faber.
- Rozeff, M. S. (2008). Who Decides Who Lives and Who Dies? Retrieved September 12, 2013 from <http://www.lewrockwell.com/2008/12/michael-s-rozeff/the-euthanizing-state/>
- Strachan, J. & Terry, R. (2011). *Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Wimsatt, W.K. (1982). *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press.