

Night of the Scorpion-Nissim Ezekiel

MATCHES:

Two Scavengers in a Truck, Nothing's Changed-Two Cultures
Vultures, Limbo-Contrasting Views

Nissim Ezekiel (White male poet):

1. Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay, now Mumbai, India in 1924.
2. His parents were Israeli and he was brought up with the Jewish faith, though he had friends of many different religions.
3. As a child he was very serious about religion and often spoke to his friends on a deep scale in relation to religious matters.
4. As an adult he was strongly influenced by **atheism**- the belief that there is no God. He was therefore considered an **atheist**.
5. Ezekiel travelled to London in his early 20's and it was there that he decided to become a poet.
6. Ezekiel is considered to be an Indian poet who writes in the western tradition.

CONTENT:

1. In this poem the poet tells us about the events of a particular night when his mother was stung by a scorpion.
2. He describes it as if he were a stranger viewing the scene from outside the family.
3. He seems to comment on everyone's reactions to his mother's suffering in contrast to her own selfless attitude.
4. It is a **narrative poem**, i.e., it is told as a story.
5. **First person** is used (**I** saw...**I** ate...) at the start as it is told from a personal reflection-something that really happened. However he does not give his own feelings or reactions to what happens. He is merely the narrator.
6. Most of the poem is in the **third person** as Ezekiel reports on what other people do and say.
7. The focus of the poem keeps shifting thus emphasising the role of the narrator as the observer/onlooker of what is happening.
8. The **Hindu belief of REINCARNATION** is evident throughout the poem.
9. **REINCARNATION** is the belief that when a person dies, their soul leaves their body and is reborn into another.
10. Their new identity on rebirth is decided on the good/bad deeds they carried out in their previous life.
11. The spiritual aim of Hindus is to purify themselves in each new life so eventually they will reach/achieve a state of **MOKSHA**-which is release from the cycle of reincarnation, when the soul returns to the eternal stillness of the divine **BRAHMAN** or godhead.

SETTING AND CONTEXT:

1. A woman is stung by a scorpion-the neighbours gather to offer support and advice.
2. All sorts of cures are tried by her husband, neighbours and the local holy man, but time proves to be the best healer. **After twenty four hours/it lost its sting.**
3. After her ordeal the mother is simply thankful and grateful that the scorpion stung her and not her children.
4. This poem seems to be **autobiographical**-the poet is writing from a personal experience.
5. The details of the poem, e.g., lack of electricity, neighbours described as peasants-suggest a rural/country setting in a developing country.

FORM AND TECHNIQUES:

1. The poem takes the form of free verse. One long stanza and one very short stanza. The final stanza is a comment from the mother.
2. The first long stanza is full of activity-the scorpion's bite and reaction of the villagers.
3. The second stanza is the mother's reaction and is just three lines long.
4. Line 3-**steady rain had driven him**-use of personification in describing the scorpion; the scorpion is given human characteristics.
5. Line 6-**diabolic**-word used to describe the scorpion, which introduces the idea of evil in the poem. This is a word we associate with negative religious images, especially the devil.
6. Line 7-**he risked the rain again**-personification used again to give the scorpion human characteristics.
7. An **extended image** is used in the poem, i.e., an image that is carried through for some time in the poem.
8. This extended image shows the neighbours as pests.
9. Line 8-**like swarms of flies**-simile describing the neighbours.
10. Line 9-**buzzed the name of God**-giving their opinions on what was going on.
11. Line 10-**The Evil One**-the devil-more religious imagery.
12. Line 12-**throwing giant scorpion shadows**-their shadows are like giant scorpions. The neighbours are becoming like the scorpion, which is part of the problem, making the situation worse.
13. Line 32-32-**more neighbours/more insects**-this reinforces/emphasises the idea of how the poet views these neighbours.
14. Line 17, 18, 20 and 22-**they said**-repetition of the phrase 'they said' undermines/makes little of the neighbour's comments, as it implies that all of them are making different comments that mean nothing and are of no help. It makes fun of their views.
15. Line 26-**diminished**-lessened
16. Line 27-**purify**-cleanse from sin
17. Line 34-35-**twisted through and through**-mother's suffering emphasised by use of alliteration.
18. Line 35-**groaning on a mat**-here we have a glimpse of the mother's pain, whereas the focus before this was the neighbours.
19. Line 36-**sceptic**-person who doubts the truth of religion
20. Line 36-**rationalist**-person who thinks that logical thinking can explain everything.

21. Line 38-**hybrid**-a mixture of things.
22. Line 41-**flame feeding**-alliteration used again for impact of the mother's suffering.
23. Line 42-**rite**-actions in a religious ceremony.
24. Line 43-**incantation**-the saying of supposedly magic words.
25. Line 44-45-**After twenty four hours/It lost its sting**-simple and brief lines which could indicate exhaustion after the ordeal OR an *anti-climax*-meaning that after all that waiting it was over. It is a simple statement telling us that the poison took its course.
26. Line 46-48-**My mother only said/Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children**. The poet remembers the simple act of selflessness. A new stanza is used here to change the perspective/viewpoint of the poem.

THEME AND INTERPRETATION:

1. The poem expresses irritation and annoyance at people who prefer to sit and comment on another person's pain and suffering instead of doing something about it.
2. The father is slightly ridiculous, but at least he is active.
3. The final comment is left to the mother in the final stanza of the poem.
4. She has endured pain throughout the poem and her final remark is genuinely generous and caring regarding her children and the scorpion.

LANGUAGE:

1. The title is deceptive/misleading. We think at first that we are in for a dramatic and frightening tale about a scorpion. However the poem is mainly about the reactions of the different people to the sting.
2. Ezekiel does not portray the scorpion as a villain, though we do associate it with evil imagery. It was driven to shelter **beneath a sack of rice** (Line 4) after ten hours of rain.
3. It probably stung the poet's mother instinctively as a warning to her as she approached its hiding place, rather than harming her on purpose.
4. Having stung the poet's mother, scared of the people indoors, **he risked the rain again** (Line 7).
5. The villagers are more superstitious and link the scorpion to the **Evil One** (Line 10).
6. They claim the poison will help in many ways such as burning away her sins from her 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 dealing with and making sense of this event, if good comes out of it, it will be easier to bear.
7. The events of the night are described in rich detail. We know about the mud huts, the rain, the candles and lanterns, yet we know little about the individual neighbours.
8. Ezekiel clumps them together as **they** as they are all the same in this moment of crisis-not much use at all.
9. Ezekiel's father is usually a **sceptic/rationalist**, in other words he does not believe in superstitions and is not religious.
10. Yet when his wife is suffering he tries **every curse and blessing** (Line 37) to help her.

11. The final sentence of the first long stanza is simple and perhaps a put down. Lines 44-45- **After twenty four hours/it lost its sting**. Nothing worked after all.
12. The final stanza is touching/poignant. Ezekiel's mother speaks directly and simply in contrast to the gabbling neighbours.
13. She shows no bitterness over the whole ordeal; she is just grateful that she was hurt and not her children. Children are more vulnerable to scorpion bite than adults.
14. She thanks God for **sparing** her children. Ezekiel may think that the God she prays to is more powerful than the spirits the neighbours were trying to conjure up OR he may be finishing on a more sceptical/ironic note suggesting that the sting was going to happen anyway-it had nothing to do with God.

IMAGERY AND SOUND:

1. The extended image of comparing the neighbours to pests/flyes suggests that the poet sees the neighbours as a nuisance more than anything else. It highlights a negative attitude towards them.
2. The neighbour's candles and lanterns throw **giant scorpion shadows** on the walls. Again Ezekiel is suggesting that the neighbours are like the scorpion- predators who prey on other people's misfortune.
3. There is a contrast between the neighbours' **peace of understanding** (Line 31) and the mother who is **twisted...groaning on a mat** (Line 35). It is **IRONIC** that they are at peace while she is in discomfort.
4. Alliteration is used throughout the poem for impact in relation to the mother's suffering. **T**wisted...**t**hrough and **t**hrough. Line 34. See also Lines 5, 38 and 41.
5. There is a lot of repetition in the poem as we 'hear' the villagers prayers and incantations.
6. **They said** is echoed like a chorus-it also serves to undermine the reactions of the neighbours.