

The Poems of Nissim Ezekiel Summary and Analysis of "Night of the Scorpion"

- Summary

In "Night of the Scorpion," the speaker tells a story from his childhood in which his mother was bitten by a scorpion. The poem begins with a simple declaration: "I remember the night my mother / was stung by a scorpion" (1-2). The scorpion had entered the speaker's home because it wanted to hide from the rain. When it bit the speaker's mother, it was hiding beneath a sack of rice.

The speaker describes the incident in which the scorpion stings his mother without mentioning his mother at all. Instead, he focuses on the scorpion and what he did immediately afterward: "Parting with his poison—flash / of diabolic tail in the dark room— / he risked the rain again" (5-7). Rather than stick around and look at the scene he had caused, the scorpion ran back outdoors.

After the speaker's mother was bitten, the speaker notes that poor people went to his mother's side "like swarms of flies," buzzing with Christianity and

hoping to kill one of their visions of Satan (8). The peasants look for the scorpion on their hands and knees with lanterns. Their wish is to find the scorpion quickly because they believe that every movement the scorpion makes without getting killed affects the speaker's mother: "With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's / blood, they said" (16-18).

The peasants begin to share good wishes for the speaker's mother, hoping that the scorpion will die that night, or at least sit still, that the sins of her past life will be burned away, and that she may return to an even better life in her next life because of her suffering.

The peasants continue making wishes for the speaker's mother, wishing that the forces of evil might be diminished by the speaker's mother's pain. They sat on the floor around the speaker's mother, hoping that the scorpion's bite would "purify" her, with "the peace of understanding on each face" (29).

As more people come to visit the speaker's mother, the speaker takes in his surroundings: "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, / more insects, and the endless rain" (30-31). The speaker's

mother, oblivious to it all, spent this time suffering and twisting on a mat.

The speaker turns his attention to his father, who he describes as a "sceptic" and "rationalist" (34). The speaker notes that even his father is making an effort to help his mother in any way that he knows how, which means turning towards that which he wouldn't otherwise believe: "trying every curse and blessing, / powder, mixture, herb and hybrid" (35-36). The speaker's father even lit the bite on fire in an attempt to remove the poison.

The speaker's mother suffered for 20 hours. Her only response at the end of it all was her gratitude that it didn't happen to anyone else in their family: "My mother only said / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children" (43-5).

Analysis

"Night of the Scorpion," which was published as a part of *The Exact Name*, demonstrates a new and emerging aesthetic in Ezekiel's poetry. Whereas his early poems conformed to a strict meter and rhyme, later poems like "Night of the Scorpion" adopts a

natural, colloquial meter and tone. This poem was published in a time when Ezekiel was making a deliberate attempt at formal innovation by using a loose, seemingly free-verse structure for his narrative poems. Additionally, Ezekiel stopped putting capitals at the beginning of each line, which allows his later poems to flow much more easily on the page.

The fact that Ezekiel distances himself from formal poetic conventions does not imply a lack of care when it comes to the form of "Night of the Scorpion." In fact, Ezekiel makes deliberate choices about line breaks, enjambment, voice, chronology, and tone in this poem which gives it the effect on the reader that made it so famous to begin with. There is only one line break in this poem, which occurs right after the speaker's mother is released from her suffering:

"After twenty hours

it lost its sting.

My mother only said

thank God the scorpion picked on me

and spared my children" (44-48).

This line break is a literal break in the tension of the poem and endows the conclusion with a quiet depth. The tension in the poem before the line break comes from two sources: first, that the speaker's mother is suffering with little prospect of relief, and second, the tension that the speaker holds between personal crisis and mocking social observation.

While the personal crisis is clearly on the surface of the poem, the mocking social commentary is evident through the speaker's tone. The speaker in the poem, who inhabits a perspective between the little boy watching his mother suffer and the older man looking back upon that memory, relays the events of the crisis in a calm and detached manner. The casualness with which the speaker relays this scene is incongruous and even alarming for the reader. Even so, the speaker moves slowly through the events of the poem in one long stanza without breaks—unhurried and, it seems, unbothered. This emotional detachment lets the poem speak directly to the reader, who understands right away what Ezekiel means without having to juggle emotional pain over the suffering mother.

When the speaker addresses the peasants, we find a tone that we often see in the Collected Works—Ezekiel's sardonic and mocking gaze, which is the gaze of an insider that is nonetheless distanced from his subject. In this poem, Ezekiel's irony dramatizes the peasant's, as well as the speaker's father's, superstition in their desperate attempts to save the speaker's mother. The speaker does not see the peasants in a positive light and instead compares them to "swarms of flies" in their desperation to help his mother (8). Their mixture of Christianity and Hinduism allows for slight confusion, as they pray to God for the mother's wellbeing yet also hope for the best in her reincarnations. The speaker highlights how futile their spiritual efforts were in helping his mother: "My mother twisted through and through / groaning on a mat" (32-33). While this perspective does reflect a slight elitism—the speaker is looking down on the peasants for believing what they believe—it also indicates the religious and cultural diversity that India holds. In this way, "Night of the Scorpion" is a quintessentially Indian poem in that it shows the meeting of worlds through a sense of community ties after a specific disastrous event.

Though "Night of the Scorpion" does not use the strict formal structures that Ezekiel had used in his

earlier poetry, this does not mean that the poem is not rhythmic or musical. The punctuation and enjambment of the lines cause the poem to flow in the large first stanza. This helps to build tension and make a large block of text easier and more pleasant to read. For example, the descriptions of the peasants looking for the scorpion contain an easy internal rhythm: "With candles and with lanterns / throwing giant scorpion shadows / on the sun-baked walls / they searched for him: he was not found" (11-14). These lines start out in an even rhythm (with CAN-dles and with LAN-terns), which is broken by the colon, and the depressing revelation that the scorpion was not found. In this way, the careful variation of rhythm throughout "Night of the Scorpion" helps Ezekiel achieve different emotional effects.

Finally, this poem communicates a tension between urban living and the natural world that Ezekiel returns to again and again in this work. The speaker's community, which lives close together and keeps itself informed about its residents, rose up in this work to surround the mother as she burned. The antagonist of the poem is the scorpion, who is forgiven by the speaker very early on since he was indoors simply for survival: "Ten hours / of steady rain had driven him / to crawl beneath a sack of

rice" (2-4). In this way, the true force of chaos and evil is the rain, which drove the scorpion indoors and beats down upon the speaker and his family throughout their ordeal: "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, / more insects, and the endless rain" (30-31). Like "Monsoon Madness," the natural world is a force of its own in "Night of the Scorpion" and is directly responsible for all of the characters' troubles.