Prayer Before Birth – A selection of criticism

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 pleas 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 a t 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 “thistledown 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, McNeice 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.

<http://litxpert.wordpress.com/2011/12/02/analysis-prayer-before-birth-louis-mcneice-2/>

**Context**

Louis MacNeice (1907 – 1963) was born in Belfast. He was educated in England and read classics at Oxford University where he met his wife, Giovanna. Following his graduation he worked as a lecturer, before joining the BBC as a writer and producer for radio. Six years after their marriage, his wife divorced him, leaving him as the single-parent of their son.

Early in his career, MacNeice was identified with a group of left-wing poets known as the ‘Auden Group’. Though he was politically aware, and often wrote on the topic of politics, he himself expressed scepticism of political groups and the attitudes championed by the Auden Group.

Although he lived in London for most of his adult life, MacNeice took pride in his Irish heritage, returning to his childhood home many times, and referring to Northern Ireland in many of his poems. His work is [*colloquial*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/1/) and often ironic, combining humour and tragedy in tackling issues of the time.

*Prayer Before Birth* was written during the Second World War

**Subject matter**

The poem is a plea from an unborn child to a divine power. It suggests all the horrors that the world may inflict on him, in contrast with the wonders of nature. He will be powerless to stop himself from being used in some way for evil, for which he asks forgiveness. He prays for strength not to be made into a part of a machine, which clearly represents an army and war. If this happens, he would rather die.

The poem highlights the horrors of war by [*juxtaposing*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/2/) them with the innocence of an unborn child. Although every soldier began in this way, it is somehow much more horrific to imagine them in the context of a baby.

**Form and structure**

The poem takes the form of a prayer, with repeated use of the first person, followed by [*imperatives*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/3/) to God. Each [*stanza*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/3/) begins by describing the speaker as an unborn child, followed by an imperative on the same line of verse in the form of a single request. The only exception to this is the final stanza, which is also the shortest, placing particular emphasis on it.

It is [*free verse*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/3/), but the high level of repetition of the structures of sentences, and the use of the word ‘me’ as the last word of the first and last line of each stanza creates a rhythm to the poem. Each stanza, except the last, is a single sentence, which echoes the prayer format.

**Language and Imagery**

**Imagery**

The third stanza is the only positive request in the poem, something that the child wants rather than wants to be protected against. It describes the wonders of nature, which are contrasted with the man-made horrors of the later verses. The final thing it asks for is a light to guide him – effectively a conscience. This is linked to the concept of prayer.

The fourth stanza creates an impression of powerlessness. The child will not speak his words or think his thoughts; instead, they will speak or think him. This escalates to the idea of the world using him to commit murder, which is a reference to the war.

This [*allusion*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/4/) is revisited in the second to last stanza, where MacNeice uses the[*metaphor*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/4/) of a machine, with the unborn child a small part of it, to represent the army and the war. The sense of powerlessness is enforced by the choice of verbs in this stanza, and by the [*simile*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/4/) of him as thistledown – something that can be blown any which way in the wind. The danger is not only to others, but also to the narrator, who could be completely destroyed as part of the machine.

**Sound**

The prayer format is enhanced by the use of the ‘O’ cry, repeated through the poem. Similarly there is a high level of [*alliteration*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/4/) throughout the poem that creates a deliberate sense of ceremony, and echoes the language used in religious services.

**Attitudes, themes and ideas**

*Prayer Before Birth* creates a horrifying image of the dehumanising effect of war. This is particularly effective because of the juxtaposition of these horrors with the innocence of the unborn child. In doing this, it raises the point that this should not make it more horrific – everyone was an innocent, unborn child once.

The theme of innocence is raised elsewhere in the poem, when the child asks to be forgiven for the sins that will be committed in his lifetime. These sins are not the result of deliberate action, however, raising the idea that people are victims of circumstance. This suggestion of powerlessness is continued in the stanza relating to the war machine.

The impact of other people upon us and our helplessness in the face of everything that is causing us to go wrong creates a sense of inevitability to the poem – that we cannot help but go wrong. The only sense of hope is in the third stanza with the idea of a conscience to guide us. However, the end of the poem reduces all the requests to a single one – don’t let me be used to hurt, nor to be wasted in war. The last line suggests that the unborn child would rather be dead – a sense of despair, and also fear of what the world can do to him.

The contrast of the wonders of the world suggested in the third stanza and this sense of despair invites the reader to consider the fear of the unborn child and the situation the world finds itself in.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetry_wjec/relationships/prayerbeforebirth/revision/5/>

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 pleas 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 that 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.

<http://graducation.weebly.com/gcse-english-prayer-before-birth-analysis.html>