

J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER
(A Constituent Unit under Munger University, Munger)
Department of English
B.A. Part-III, English (Hons.)- Paper VI

Night of the Scorpion

-Nissim Ezekiel

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's blood,
they said.

May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world

against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through,
groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

A Summary of “Night of the Scorpion”

“Night of the Scorpion” is a poem that focuses on a single episode in the life of an Indian family. A scorpion has been forced by persistent rain to seek refuge inside, under a sack of rice. It ends up stinging the mother of the family, which brings people flocking to her side wanting to help out with the subsequent pain.

All this is observed by the speaker, in first person. Perhaps this is a child, a daughter or son. Names and ages are not divulged; suffice to say that the observations are keen and precise, so the reader can only conclude that this speaker has an exceptional eye for detail.

The poem also generates layers of tension as the drama progresses. Look out for:

- the attempts by the peasants to help alleviate the mother's pain.
- the actions of these same peasants to kill the scorpion.
- the reaction of the rational father.
- the various superstitions versus the 'scientific'.
- the religious undertones with regards to karma.
- evil versus good.

Nissim Ezekiel is seen as one of the front runners in early modern Indian poetry. He was the first Indian poet 'to express modern Indian sensibility in modern idiom.' Born in 1924, he published *Night of the Scorpion* in his book *The Exact Name*, 1965.

“Night of the Scorpion” does have a twist at the end, welcomed by many readers, disliked by a few. Whatever the opinion there is no doubting the poem's vivid imagery and powerful language.

- The narrative shifts and stops and rattles on as the unusual syntax helps build up a tense atmosphere, the scenes coming and going on what is an extraordinary night in the life of a village scorpion, villain of the peace, or innocent protector of his own space?
- Simple and complex sentences together with direct and indirect narrative, enjambment and repetition (anaphora), create a topsy-turvy atmosphere of disturbing distortion. This reflects the ongoing search of the peasants for the scorpion, their incantatory voices, the monotonous rain and the long hours spent in pain for the mother.

And what about the unlucky woman, full of poison, having to deal with excruciating pain and what amounts to a circus of people around her, all wanting to help but left feeling helpless. Her dignified response right at the end of the poem is both humbling and inspirational.

Literary Devices – “Night of the Scorpion”

Alliteration - stung by a scorpion, Parting with his poison, diabolic tail in the dark, risked the rain, poison purfiy, through and through, poured a little paraffin, flame feeding.

Antonyms - previous/next, evil/good, sceptic/rationalist, curse/blessing.

Assonance - candle/lantern, buzzed/hundred, Mother's blood.

Metaphor - scorpion is the Evil One.

Simile - like swarms of flies.

Analysis of “Night of the Scorpion”

“Night of the Scorpion” is a free verse poem with 8 stanzas and a total of 47 lines. There is no set rhyme scheme and the metre (meter in USA) is mixed, which reflects the unusual subject matter and unfamiliar nature of the incident.

This is a narrative poem which follows the story of an anonymous mother and her unfortunate encounter with a scorpion, driven indoors by relentless hours of rain. So there is a dynamic set up - human interaction with the wild side of Nature.

The scorpion is seen by some as an evil force, bringer of pain and hardship and even death. Note the use of the word *diabolic* as the desperate creature stings the woman and makes off out into the rain.

Or is the scorpion an innocent victim in this drama, doing what only comes naturally in an attempt to protect himself?

- The peasants are seen as being superstitious and old fashioned, even illiterate, not having moved on in their thinking and culture. Is this a fair assumption to make? But they have a primitive impulse to help the mother, bringing candles and lanterns and company, which shows a willingness to share the pain.
- The father meanwhile is just the opposite in the sense that he is a rational, reductive type of person who is unimpressed with the peasants and their mumbo-jumbo. Yet, he resorts to using paraffin on the mother's toe, setting it alight, not a very scientific response. Note the use of the term - *flame feeding on my mother* - which suggests that the flame is eating up his mother.

And all the while the speaker is there, soaking up the atmosphere, articulating, trying to make sense of ritual and rite, behaviour and reaction.

In the end there is little any of those present can effectively achieve. Superstition, folk tales, folk medicine, the complexities of occult belief, fundamental religious ritual, faith - there is no known antidote.

The mother perseveres; she is in agony all night but finally triumphs and does not succumb to the venom of the scorpion. For all that time she was unable to utter a word, capable only of groans, until the pain subsided and the relief she felt gave her the power to sum her experience up: thank goodness it was she who took the sting, and not her children, for they probably would not have survived.

How selfless, self-effacing the mother is! How noble a statement this is, bringing light and goodness back into the once darkened room!

Acknowledgement (Sources taken help of):

<https://allpoetry.com/Night-of-the-Scorpion>

owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-The-Night-of-the-Scorpion-by-Nissim-Ezekiel

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