

## Frederick Louis MacNeice - Prayer before Birth



**Frederick Louis MacNeice** (Belfast 12 September 1907 – County Down 3 September 1963) known as Freddie until his teens, when he adopted his middle name, was an Irish poet and playwright.

In early 1941, MacNeice was employed by the BBC. At the end of the year, he started a relationship with Hedli Anderson and they were married in July 1942, three months after the death of his father. Brigid Corinna MacNeice (known by her second name like her parents, or as "Bimba") was born a year later.

In 1947, the BBC sent MacNeice to report on Indian independence and partition, and he continued to produce plays for the corporation, including a six-part radio adaptation of Goethe's *Faust* in 1949.

MacNeice was awarded the CBE (Order of the British Empire) in the 1958 New Year's Honours list.

A South African trip in 1959 was followed by the start of his final relationship, with the actress Mary Wimbush, who had performed in his plays since the forties. Hedli asked MacNeice to leave the family home in late 1960. In 1961 he was "living on alcohol", and eating very little, but still writing (including a commissioned work on astrology, which he viewed as "hack-work"). In August 1963 he went caving in Yorkshire to gather sound effects for his final radio play, *Persons from Porlock*. Caught in a storm on the moors, he did not change out of his wet clothes until he was home in Hertfordshire. Bronchitis evolved into viral pneumonia, and he was admitted to hospital on 27 August, dying there on 3 September, aged 55. He was buried in Carrowdore churchyard in County Down, with his mother.

## **Prayer before Birth**

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.

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.

I am not yet born; provide me  
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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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

## Layout

The poem **Prayer before Birth** is made up of eight stanzas.

Stanza 1 and stanza 6 consist of three lines, stanza 2 and stanza 3 consist of four lines, stanza 4 consists of six lines, stanza 5 of seven lines, stanza 7 of ten lines and the last one, the eighth stanza, of two lines.

The number of lines per stanza, then, is in some equal and in some different, but the layout, at first sight, gives the general impression that each stanza is shorter than the following one.

Each stanza begins with two aligned lines with an initial capital letter and runs on with indented lines which begin with a small letter.

The sixth stanza is shorter than the preceding and the following ones because it is a key stanza and for this reason it has been made more visible on the page.

The last stanza is the shortest because it is made of two aligned lines beginning with a capital letter but they don't have the same starting point of the other seven stanzas, they are a bit indented. It is typographically isolated as it is a key stanza too.

Throughout this poem the poet tries to build the world the unborn child must live in. A world of humanity and life; as **life is movement** the visual shape of the poem on the page gives us the impression of movement. **Movement** is also caused by the irregularity of the lines which are of various length. Line 2 of each stanza is longer while the final line of each stanza is shorter. Line 2, which is made up of fifteen syllables is the longest, while line 27, which consists of three syllables, is the shortest. Starting from the third line the lines become shorter, in this way the stanzas narrow into a funnel-shape. The layout seems to say, then, that at the top part of the funnel the unborn child is secure while at the bottom is less so.

The poet wants to create a world of solidity for the unborn child but this attempt can't be successful because the society of his time is not human and his construction seems to slide. In fact, while the first two lines of each stanza are solid, because they are aligned and with a capital letter, the following ones, which are indented and with an initial lower-case letter slip on the page and make the reader think of the vulnerability of mankind.

The anxiety conveyed by the speaker is also visualized by the numerous run-on lines which seem to hurry and overflow. They create effects of continuity and have a conversational ring.

**Run-on lines:** stanza 1: line 2 / stanza 3: lines 8-9-10 / stanza 4: lines 12-13-16 / stanza 5: lines 18-19-20-21-22-23 / stanza 6: line 26 / stanza 7: lines 28-29-31-32-33-34-35-36.

The end-stopped lines, instead, sound firm and create a feeling of expectation, most of them are invocations.

**End-stopped lines:** stanza 1: ll. 1-3 / stanza 2: ll. 4-5-6-7 / stanza 3: l. 11 / stanza 4: ll.14-15-17/ stanza 5: l. 24 / stanza 6: ll. 25-27 / stanza 7: ll. 30-37 / stanza 8: ll.38-39.

The layout of this poem with its unusual line arrangement and its movement contributes to the effectiveness of the message.

## Form

**Prayer before Birth** is a poem in free verse because it lacks the conventional stanzaic division and regular rhyme scheme and makes use of repetition of sounds, words, syntactic structures and alliterations.

## Sound

The poet makes an occasional use of rhymes.

**Rhyme scheme:** a b a / a a a a / a b c a / a b a a c a / a b c d e f a / a b a / a b c d e f g h i a / a a

There are words which rhyme in the same line: line 2: *bat, rat* / line 5: *tall, wall* / line 7: *black, rack* / line 10: *white, light* / line 35: *hither, thither*.

**Alliteration:** *may, me - walls, wall* line 5 / *with, wise - lies, lure* line 6 / *black, blood, baths - racks, rack, roll* line 7 / *with, water - grass, grow* line 9 / *my, mind, me* line 11 / *world, word - the, that* line 13 / *thoughts, think* line 14 / *my, me - treason, traitor* line 15 / *my, means, murder* line 16 / *my, me* line 17 / *men, me, mountains* line 20 / *lovers, laugh,* line 21 / *call, calls* line 22 / *my, me* line 24 / *make, me, machine* line 31 / *make, me* line 38.

**Assonance:** *mind, guide* line 11 / *my, by - play, take* line 15 / *my, life, by* line 16 / *death, when* line 17 / *gift, children,* line 24.

### **Vowel and consonant sounds**

In this poem the poet has chosen to use sounds and group them in order to produce smooth and pleasant musical effects. He makes use of a lot of vowels (each line begins with *I*), semi-vowels “*w*” and “*y*” (the words beginning with “*w*” and “*y*” are 19) and liquids-nasals (*l, m, n, r*) which are the smoothest and softest ones on the scale of increasing hardness. The words beginning with “*m*” are 61; the word “*me*” is used 38 times; the word “*my*” 11 times; the word “*not*” 11 times.

The sound devices used by the poet in **Prayer before Birth** ( rhyme, alliteration, assonance, vowel and consonant sounds) make the poem pleasant to listen to and contribute to the clearness of the message.

## **Language**

**The title** of this poem is clear, it creates curiosity in the reader inviting him to read the poem.

**The language** is very simple and natural since a child cannot communicate with the reader through complicated expressions or poetic diction. In fact, the **grammar** and **syntax** of this poem are straightforward. To this end the poet uses many deictic words such as *I, me, my, hither* and *thither*. These words prove directly the meaning he wishes to convey, pointing out clearly the implied context.

In the poem there are a lot of invocations and imperatives which also demonstrate the poet’s intention to be understood. In fact, the importance of the message is such that everybody must understand.

Each stanza begins with an **anaphora** and ends with an **epistrophe**; the combination of the two, in the same line, creates a **symploce**. Then, there are seven symploces in this poem.

The poet uses only 151 words, 154 including the title of the poem, but the poem is actually of 326 words because of the numerous repetitions. All the words are monosyllabic, like musical notes; only a few of them are of two or three syllables.

In the poem there are a lot of repetitions, repetitions of sentences, phrases and single words.

“I am not yet born” is repeated 7 times.

“Let them not”, “Let not the”, “O hear me”, “Come near me”, “To me”, “At me”, “A thing”, “I must”, “Make me”, are repeated twice. The word “me” is repeated 38 times, “the” 15, “my” 11, “not” 11, “to” 9, “and” 8, “am” 7, “born” 7, “yet” 7.

The usefulness of repetitions, in this case, is that of building up tension and stressing: a) the extreme importance of the birth of a child; b) the musical qualities of the text which produce an incantatory effect.

From the title and from the first line we notice that it is a case of “**impossible situation**” or “**semantic deviation**”, that is to say a “nonsense” or “absurdity”.

The “absurdity” consists in the fact that the speaker is an unborn child and this unborn child speaks very well, he is wise and has a voice of experience even before the event: his birth.

It is an “absurdity” like that of Wordsworth’s “*The child is father of the man*” or Keat’s “*Beauty is truth, truth beauty*”.

If we reason like a mathematician or a philosopher it is impossible for X to be Y’s father while X is a child and Y is a man.

But inferred situations created by the poet are free from constraints of reality. They do not have to obey the rules of reason or the laws of nature. The most commonplace example of **impossible situation** or a **semantic deviation** is an **apostrophe** which is a rethoric figure of speech that consists in addressing someone or something by nature or circumstances unable to hear or reply. Sometimes a lyrical poem is entirely cast in the form of an apostrophe like in the case of **Prayer before Birth**. We can find many examples of apostrophe in John Donne and Thomas Hardy.

## Theme

In this poem Louis MacNiece makes his psychological exploration of identity even before birth. The unborn child is frightened by the prospect of taking on an identity like that of the majority of the men of the author’s time.

Each of the eight stanzas begins with an invocation demonstrating his fear of coming into the world.

**Lines 2-3:** he is afraid of nocturnal animals and of evil spirits because neither live in the open air but underground; both are active during the night and fear light and freedom. In these two lines there’s a longing for freedom and knowledge as the unborn child is afraid of being a slave of darkness and ignorance.

**Lines 5-7:** there are images of imprisonment, enticement, temptation and torture. In these lines the poet underlines his love for freedom and independence.

**Lines 9-11:** images of ease, pleasure, love for nature. These images contrast with the preceding ones and describe a perfect world for the child. In fact, these are the only lines in which we find an optimistic point of view and a feeling of hope for the future.

**Lines 13-17:** images of sin, betrayal, instrumentalization, being forced to act against one’s will. These lines convey a prayer for indulgence and the need of the child to be free and not oppressed by society or obliged to commit crimes in its name.

**Lines 19-24:** images of behaviour, roles, social pretence, fear and inhibition, scorn, rejection. Here we find fear of life in general, fear of experience, fear of isolation, madness or self- destruction. But for the poet the most atrocious thought of all is that of being cursed by his own children.

**Lines 26-27:** images of humanity and supreme arrogance. This stanza is much shorter than the preceding and the following ones to reach the visual effect of standing out on the page because in this stanza there is the core of the message.

**Lines 29-37:** images of reaction and opposition, rejection of unwanted roles, diminution of identity, lack of solidity, fear of being made sensitive or being wasted. Here the child begs for strength to fight and win against a society who would make him lose his identity.

**Lines 38-39:** conclusion. The unborn child concludes with the wish to be neither stone nor water. Stone because it is lifeless and water because it is transient and inconsistent. He prefers death to living soulless and inhumane.

The poet knows that the unborn child needs a secure world of solidity based on justice, solidarity, freedom, knowledge, on the human values but he is afraid he will not be listened to.

The poet has nothing certain to offer and nothing certain to expect from the future. He lives between two worlds, i.e. a world of death and an unknown new world which could arise from the ruins of the old one.

The lyric is the first of the volume **Springboard** (1944) and is a protest against the social and political oppression typical of the Age of Anxiety. Alienation, isolation and anxiety were the key words of this age.

## Literary background

Louis MacNiece attended Merton College, Oxford and worked as a lecturer at Birmingham University, Bedford College in London and at the University of New York. From 1941 to 1949 he was a producer for the BBC, wrote various plays for radio including *The Dark Tower* (1947). By the end of the war MacNiece had written well over sixty scripts for the BBC. The radio play *Christopher Columbus*, produced in 1942 and later published as a book, featured music by William Walton, conducted by Adrian Boult, and starred Laurence Olivier. His works include *Letters from Iceland* (1937) which he wrote with W.H.Auden, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1938), *Autumn Journal* (1939), *Springboard* (1944), *Holes in the Sky* (1948), *Visitations* (1958).

In 1950 he was given eighteen months' leave to become Director of the British Institute in Athens, run by the British Council.

He belonged to the Auden Group (or The Oxford Group or the Pylon Group) whose members were: W.H.Auden (1907-73), Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72).

It was not really a homogeneous group and they always refused to be considered a new poetic school or movement.

In the thirties they used poetry to discuss ideas and to try to improve the world they live in.

They believed that poetry should be topical, comprehensible and political; that the poet's role was a public one, his task was to show man what is and what should become.

Unlike The Georgians (1911-1922) who were inspired by rural life and purposely avoided contemporary problems, the Auden Group needed to communicate with their fellow-men and to participate actively in public life in order to better human conditions. Because of the brutal facts of the day, such as: unemployment, the economic crisis, Nazism and Fascism, the approach of war and the encouragement given them by their Oxford teachers to develop a social conscience, they concerned themselves with social and political aspects of human life.

They went to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war embracing the Republican and the Communist cause for they were strongly anti-fascist and believed that communism and democracy were the same thing.

They used slang and jazz rhythms in poetry and drew their images from the world of technology. Spender, especially, was attracted by pylons and railway engines in which he saw the energy society had to absorb.

Louis MacNiece stands somewhat apart from the Auden Group, he was never doctrinaire in his approach and his poetry was not propagandist. He was wary both of parties and systems. He was never a Party member and "*his political colour was deep pink/liberal*", "*he thought of the great issues of the day - the raise of Hitler, mass unemployment, the Spanish war - as Auden, Day Lewis and Spender thought of them. The subjects of his poetry were similar and so was his notion of the right poetic methods. The poet's first business is mentioning things. Whatever musical or other harmonies he may incidentally evoke the fact, will remain that such and such things and not others have been mentioned in his poem*"<sup>1</sup>.

"... he rejected all current dogmas, he insisted at the same time that 'to shun dogma does not mean to renounce belief' and held strenuously to the end by his faith in the present of transcendent ultimates that reveal themselves in phenomenal experience in a consistent, but constantly changing pattern. Out of this arose, almost as a tenet of faith, his abhorrence of static pattern, his insistence on the absolute necessity for renewal - in life as in poetry - but renewal within a shapely, and consciously shaped, pattern"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>D.E.S. Maxwell, *Poets of the Thirties*, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1969

<sup>2</sup>W.T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream*, Oxford University Press, 1971

## How to teach this poem

The teacher will deal with this poem when the students are studying The Age of Anxiety and the Oxford Group. If the poem is not already been inserted in a **module** or a **teaching unit** the teacher should prepare a teaching unit consisting of three or four lessons foreseeing a lot of activities and tasks for his/her students. Each lesson plan must be complete, from the **warm up activity** to the **rounding off** and must comprise the pre-listening, listening, while-listening, post-listening, pre-reading, listening-reading comprehension, speaking and writing activities.

This poem may be exploited for a debate on themes such as life, death, tyranny, freedom, alienation, politics, capitalism, communism, population increase, abortion.

Furthermore it lends itself perfectly to be used for a theatrical performance. An unseen speaker (voice over) recites the poem while on a darkened stage the students mime the scenes portrayed in the poem.