

Oliver Carlisle

The Sunlight on the Garden

Is this a pessimistic poem, or is it celebratory and life-affirming? The overhanging threat of war and the inevitability of man's destruction (on an individual and universal scale) dominate the poem's content but I read it as joyful, seeking not to depress but to encourage appreciation and pleasure in those beautiful things that we take for granted.

The Poem is titled, and starts and ends with, 'The Sunlight on the Garden'. For all the 'evil iron / siren[s]' and advancing 'towards its end' the strongest and most incessant image in the poem is the peaceful, simple, and pleasantly familiar. How often do we notice the way the sunlight falls on our gardens, the intricate shades of light and the delicate beauty 'Within its nets of gold'? The answer is probably far too little, but whether we have a concrete memory or a vague impression this repeated line forces it out of us, and we can acknowledge the simple pleasure of something we see but notice little.

This theme runs through every stanza, from the pleasure of dancing (line 12) to the romanticism of enduring a passionate thunderstorm with a love one (lines 21-22). Take too the references to 'freedom': the way the 'birds descend' and 'The sky was good for flying' (an ambiguous line that could refer to birds or to human activities like flying a kite) and we have a poem that celebrates the freedom of now. This joy at living for the moment and finding pleasures in little, common things is enhanced, not jeopardised, by the looming threat of war and death.

It is hard to read a poem written in 1937 without the pessimistic impression that war was inevitable, but it is refreshing to find one that uses all this potential suffering to point out how lucky we are for any period of peace. Great emphasis is put on the passing of time; how 'We cannot cage the minute' and 'Our freedom as freedom lances / Advances towards its end'. This is shown as another reason to appreciate and enjoy our lives, but also alleviates the dread of war.

MacNeice repeats the phrase 'The earth compels': it is not man who is moving us towards our deaths so rapidly, but nature. 'We are dying', but not because of 'the church bells / And every evil iron / siren' (which we are 'Defying' and hence have the ability to avoid), but because the earth says we must, and we have always known this. The form and pace of the poem invokes this rapid passing of time. Little punctuation is used: excessive use of enjambment allows the lines to flow quickly into each other, an effect heightened by the rhyming of the last word of the first line with the first word of the second line, and the last word of the third line with the first word of the fourth line in every stanza. The short iambic trimeter lines rush the poem along with a fluent, racy rhythm, while the even shorter fifth line of each stanza, which contains only two iambic feet, offers an unexpected but welcome pause for reflection, and adds extra weight to what in every stanza is a conclusive and telling last line. The pace is further quickened by frequent internal rhyme ('Hardened in heart anew'), assonance ('glad to have sat') and alliteration ('cannot cage') that combine the occasional hiccups in the rhythm (the second line starts with a trochee, then an iamb, followed by a single stressed syllable) to make the poem seem both fluent and slightly twitchy, mirroring the peace of now and the chaos of the future.

What the poem realises in its cyclical progression is that aging and death are inevitable, and in the lines spent reading 'Sonnets' and watching 'birds' we come to the stoical, liberating conclusion that we are 'not expecting pardon, / Hardened in heart anew'. If our attitude is to accept the inevitability of death, with or without war, we may have hardened our hearts but we have opened our eyes, and thunderstorms and sunlight on the garden stop passing us by and start being magical.