Half-Past Two by U. A. Fanthorpe

In her poem, ‘Half-Past Two,’ U. A. Fanthorpe utilizes childish vernacular and mismatched capitalization to reflect the stress of a young child who in the past was punished for “Something.”

The child did not understand the time in which the punishment occurred. They were not worried over what he had done or how his parents would react, but rather the uncertainty involved with not understanding what a detail as large as “time” meant in that particular context.

The parallel between the adult and child highlights a difference in thought while still allowing for a bit of similarity to shine through as both adult and child showcased changing views in the duration of the poem. Both of these elements are driving forces for the poem—the child’s innocent lack of understanding and the compare/contrast between the adult and the child.

Summary

‘Half-Past Two’ by U.A. Fanthorpe is a clever poem told from the perspective of a young child.

In the first lines of this poem, the speaker, a child, describes how a child did “something very wrong.” Their teacher told them this was the case and that they had to stay after school till “half-past two.” But, it is soon revealed that the teacher had never taught the child time and therefore he had no concept of it. All he knew were phrases like “Gettinguptime” and “timeyouwereofftime.” The clock meant nothing to him. So he waited, outside of time, and unbothered. Finally, after forgetting about him, the teacher finds him again and sends him home.

Structure and Form

‘Half-Past Two’ by U.A. Fanthorpe is an eleven stanza poem that is divided into tercets, or sets of three lines. The poet chose to compose this piece in free verse. This means that the poem does not have a set rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. The lines are of very different lengths with the speaker using the voice of an innocent, youthful child. There are clever uses of language and words that get combined together, to evoke the way a child talks. For example, “Timetogohomenowtime” and “timeyouwereofftime.” This allows the reader to understand the world in the same way a child does.

Literary Devices

Fanthrope makes use of several literary devices in ‘Half-Past Two.’ These include but are not limited to:

Alliteration: occurs when the poet repeats the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words. For example, “Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime” and “time” and “tick-less.”

Enjambment: occurs when the poet cuts off a line before its natural stopping point. For example, the transition between lines one and two of the first stanza as well as lines one and two of stanza three.

Caesura: when the poet inserts a pause into the middle of a line they create an example of caesura. It might be done through the use of punctuation or meter. For example, “He knew a lot of time: he knew.”

Detailed Analysis

First, Second and Third Stanza

Once upon a schooltime

He did Something Very Wrong

(I forget what it was).

(…)

(Being cross, she’d forgotten

She hadn’t taught him Time.

He was too scared at being wicked to remind her.)

The narration in this series of stanzas immediately relates to the vernacular and mindset of the child who “did Something Very Wrong” and had to “[s]tay in the school-room till half-past two.” That clear connection is established through simple choices, like the capitalization of words that would be significant to the child. For instance, “Something Very Wrong” has no grammatic rationale for being capitalized since there is no proper noun within that phrasing. To a child though, this concept of having done “Wrong” would be so significant as to merit the status of a proper noun.

Likewise, the person in authority over the child is not referred to by a noun, but even the pronoun bestowed upon her is capitalized. This shows a great amount of importance and superiority connected to the adult by the child. Essentially, the situation would be so cut-and-dry to the child that the authority figure would merit capitalization even without the usage of a proper noun.

“Time” is another word that would not need to be capitalized for an adult, but the idea was so mysterious to the child that it extended beyond the commonality of a typical noun. Additionally, “Time” is the core concept in this poem since the child was being disciplined “till” a certain “Time” without understanding the concept well enough to know what “half-past two” meant. “Time” was the stress factor for this child, one that was larger than the child’s comprehension, so what would have been a regular noun is treated as a proper noun.

Another concept that showcases this as a child’s dilemma is that he was afraid to confront the adult about his concerns, not because he was afraid of the adult herself. Rather, “[h]e was too scared at being wicked.” This indicates he was concerned over a label that would have been given to him by an adult, which is a child’s mentality as well.

Furthermore, in these stanzas, the reader can see the disconnect between the adult and the child since the narrator—the child in his older years?—does not remember what the “Something Very Wrong” “was” while the adult was adamant that it was significant enough to merit punishment. In fact, the narration hints that she was so aggravated about this “Something Very Wrong” that she did not realize that “half-past two” had no meaning to the child since “[s]he hadn’t taught him Time.”

Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Stanza

He knew a lot of time: he knew

Gettinguptime, timeyowereofftime,

Timetogohomenowtime, TV time,

(…)

So he waited, beyond onceupona,

Out of reach of all the timefors,

And knew he’d escaped for ever

These stanzas continue with successfully detailing the “Something Very Bad” and “Time” dilemma as a child by exploring the concept of “Time” in a childish manner. Just as “schooltime” was combined into one word to reveal that the idea was one united concept, the words that reference different notions of “Time” in stanzas four through eight expresses the same trait. “Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime, [t]imetogohomenowtime, TVtime, [and t]imeformykisstime” are all ideas that would be relevant to a child in regard to being awoken by a parent for school, having to leave under the instruction of an adult, watching favorite shows, and gaining affection from a relative. These are concepts that would surface in a child’s day, and they would be so significant to a child, so solidly a part of their life, that it is reasonable that they are treated as one-word concepts.

This strategy continues when the narration addresses “onceupona,” which is a childish, fairy-tale “Time,” and “timefors,” which is vague enough to apply to a number of guided activities that a child would experience during their day, as in “time for lunch” or “time for bed.” Scaling back these “time[s]” into ideas that are not the way a “clockface” would reveal them connects to a childish mentality just as much as rushing them together in single words.

Another element that is at work with using the mentioned “onceupona” choice is that it is linked to the stress the child felt in regard to his “half-past two” punishment. This fairy-tale concept elevates the scenario into something larger than reality as if the child were stuck in a new realm of mystery and wonder by having to deal with “half-past two.” This “out of reach” feel is reinforced in the eighth stanza where common details like “chrysanthemums” and a “hangnail” hint that the situation was commonplace to the adult, while the child was so overwhelmed that he was like “the air outside the window, into ever.” This once more represents the disconnect between the adult and child as well since it is mundane for the adult, but as never-ending and uncertain as “air” and “ever” to the child.

It is also worth noting that in stanza four, “time” is not capitalized as it was in stanza three. This reveals a varied level of significance for different “time” ideas. Clearly, the child understood and was comfortable with some concepts—those are lowercase to show their commonality—but others were so mysterious that they require capitalization. This overall uncertainty about “time” is addressed in the childish explanation of the clock as well since the child’s “little eyes” could see it, “[b]ut he couldn’t click its language” to understand what it meant.

Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Stanza

Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk,

Into the silent noise his hangnail made,

Into the air outside the window, into ever.

(…)

But he never forgot how once by not knowing time,

He escaped into the clockless land for ever,

Where time hides tick-less waiting to be born

The disconnect between the authority figure and the child becomes more pronounced in stanza nine when “she” came into the room to declare she “forgot all about” the child, and that he needed to “[r]un along or [he’d] be late.” To the child, this experience had been so vast that it felt like “ever”—massive and unending. This moment, however, was so insignificant to the adult that “she” “forgot” about it. This is a twist to the earlier stanzas where the child did not necessarily understand what his “Something Very Wrong” was, showing how insignificant the act was to him, while the adult found the act so significant that “she” insisted on punishment. The adult, it seems, was focused on the action that was “Wrong,” while the child was focused on the punishment itself.

Once more then, the reader can see a disconnect. In fact, this punishment of “waiting” until “half-past two” was so momentous to the child that “he never forgot” it, and he treated it in his mind as “escap[ing] into the clockless land for ever.” Since he did not know the “time,” essentially, “time” felt endless and non-existent, as it if was “waiting to be born” or had stopped completely.

Within the changes of capitalization though, the reader can find a similarity between the adult and the child since just as the adult changed her mind on how “important” this punishment was—she “forgot,” after all—the child seemed to change his mind on concepts enough to take them from uppercase to lowercase ideas. The words, “Time” and “She,” become lowercase as the poem progresses, which indicates that their level of rank shifted as grandly as the adult’s take on the punishment. In this, even though the adult and child were at odds on the ideas of “Time” and “Something Very Wrong,” they seem to reflect one another in their changing decisions on what is “important” and what is not.

The stanzas also continue with the childish concepts of “time” by addressing different “time[s]” in one-word blends, and the child’s mentality prevails as the primary focus of ‘Half-Past Two.’ As similar as the adult and child turn out to be, the child’s misunderstanding and the otherworldly dilemma of not understanding “time” is the core element, one that allows the reader to see such a simple prospect through the eyes of a child. This innocence is a driving force of the stanzas, and it creates the childlike atmosphere that depicts a situation where adults and children are separate in thought, but still united on some level.