Prayer Before Birth

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.