

## How are the conflicts of the twentieth century represented in its poetry?

On the one hand the twentieth century is representative of elementary political conflicts. The two World Wars, the collapse of different ideologies such as Fascism and Communism, a long period of Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union are the major political disputes of this time period. On the other hand, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a period of major internal conflicts too. Hence, the change of social structures is a reflection of feminist achievement and the Flower Power of the 1970s indicates an alteration in sexual behaviour. Questions of identity, which are related to nationalism and language, have arisen and although they often end in isolation and insecurity they represent inner conflicts and critical arguments.

W.H. Auden in his poem "In memory of W.B. Yeats" unifies external and internal conflicts and is as a result representative of the controversies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Louis MacNeice with "House on a cliff" deals with these external and internal conflicts similarly when he plays with the words "indoor" and "outdoor" (Keegan, 977). In contrast, his poem "Meeting point" reflects the dispute of time, which is just "away" and "somewhere else" (Keegan, 939-940) so that the opposite of a conflict, this impressive convergence of two people, can take place. Feminism is one way of interpreting Jenni Joseph's "Warning" but the contrast of age and youth is also an interesting way of looking at this poem.

Auden is the consistent speaker in his elegy on Yeats and so gives the poem a clearer sense of coherence than the reader can find in other twentieth century poems such as *The Wasteland*. The poem is divided into three unequal sections where the language alternates from a narrative non-rhyming style in the first two sections to nine stanzas of rhyming poetry in the last section. Therefore, the poem symbolizes in a sense the parted Europe in 1939 in its conflicts in language, style and rhythm and in its contrasting images.

However, in the first Stanza the reader is confronted with a deep conflict, the description of the outside winter scene reflecting the inside feelings of Auden and Yeats. The disfiguring snow and the frozen brooks describe scenery, which could be assimilated with death, stillness and emptiness - both inside and outside. Louis MacNeice in contrast uses the synonyms "indoors" and "outdoors" (Keegan, 977) to create a similar more literal picture in his poem "House on a cliff". When MacNeice speaks of "Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind" (Keegan, 977) he mirrors the outside reality to an inside transformed insubstantiality and creates a

similar picture of reflections as Auden does. Auden further deals with this conflict of inside and outside in his use of geographical vocabulary in Stanza three of the 1<sup>st</sup> section to describe Yeats' illness. "Provinces of his body" and "squares of his mind" is a phraseology, which clearly displaces the outside geographical world into an inside physical world (Keegan, 929).

To some extent this geographical choice of words can also be seen as referring to war vocabulary. Auden describes the "nightmare of the dark" and European nations that are "sequestered in its hate" (Keegan, 931). Thus he describes accurately the situation before World War II where Nazis dominated the western part of Europe and fuelled hate against other nations and other nationalities. Therefore "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" demonstrates Hynes' view that poetry is influenced by the surroundings of the poet and is in a sense created by the world's history and politics (350-351).

In MacNeice's poem "Meeting point" the threat of World War II finds its expression as an underlying meaning. "God or whatever means the Good" (Keegan, 940) has to be praised for the meeting but not for the death and market crashes and the conflicts of the twentieth century.

This illness of a world on the eve of World War II can be linked to Yeats' illness and death, which is confirmed by "all the instruments" (Keegan, 929). The conflict between death and life finds its expression in Yeats' physical death and the spiritual survival of his thoughts through his poems. His death, which neither affects some social classes such as the poor and bourgeois nor detains the world from going into war, cannot prevent his self-realization in his poetry. Although Yeats' poems survive because they will be "scattered among a hundred cities" they will be "modified in the guts of living" and so "punished under a foreign code of conscience" (Keegan, 930). These lines support the view that poetry itself takes a life of its own in the consciousness of the reader and so the world. Through his poems the poet could live on and even be modified and so in the end does not "become his admirers" and find happiness in "another kind of wood" (Keegan, 929-930). The few thousand, who are still interested in Yeats' poems, are enough readers to ensure Yeats' transformation and survival in his written thoughts. Yeats' poems and in addition Auden's elegy let the world never forget Yeats' fondness of "parish women" and his sense of dealing with his Irish ties in his poetry and perhaps not even forget that "the day of his death was a dark cold day" (Keegan, 930).

The subject of time, which is treated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section, analyses in another interesting way the subject of life and death. Although the body elapses in endlessness the words and thoughts in written and spoken form have a chance to survive. If the “writing was well”, time will “worships language” and accepts writing well as a “strange excuse” (Keegan, 931). “House on a cliff” deals with death and time otherwise. The “clocks grow louder”; for MacNeice’s aged man time does not have an excuse and his purposes will vanish after his death and the “silent moon” will move on in ruling the “garrulous tides” (Keegan, 977). In “Meeting point” the reader is reminded that individuals are occupied with themselves in some moments of time and golden hours can only be spent when “time was away and somewhere else” (Keegan, 939).

Auden’s view that “poetry makes nothing happen” (Keegan, 930) because it has no substantial influence on the world has to be rejected by the reader and later in the poem is rejected by Auden himself. Poetry creates impressions and so changes and influences people and, most important, touches hearts. In “Meeting Point” MacNeice’s words create the picture of true love when he speaks of the “two people with the one pulse” and so create hope in the reader’s heart, which is now prepared for Auden’s true healing process. This process can only take place if the poets use their ability to make a “vinyard of the curse” (Keegan, 931). Poets must “sing of human unsuccess” and the “deserts of the hearts” (Keegan, 931) because this is the only possible description of a “world of political disorder and injustice” (Buell, 123). These lines illustrate the political situation of Europe and show that Europe’s “living nations” suffer from hate and hopelessness. Only if the “seas of pity” are not “frozen in each eye” anymore the picture of “free man” praising is possible again (Keegan, 931). These ending strophes of the poem show the poet’s ability to create unfading hope, which must be the basis for starting the final healing fountain for a peaceful world.

“Meeting point” is written in a very strong language and form. It is either written in rhyme or half rhyme and so reflects the unity of the couple in the text. The poem continuously reminds the reader that “time was away and somewhere else” (Keegan, 939-940) which is opposed to *The Wasteland*, for example, where the reader is steadily reminded to “hurry up” because “its time”.

MacNeice tries to test his poetry against the century. He tests it against politics, philosophy and the pressure of cities and wars. MacNeice’s poem “Meeting

Point” shows no obvious conflict of the twentieth century on the foreground. The poem rather “combines stanza and syntax into a unit which reproduces loves’ suspension of temporal laws” (Longley, 112). In the background, however, there is an elementary conflict of time in a time of war. An existential argument between the couple as unity and the time and the war takes place. The couple in the poem only exists in rejecting this outstanding world of time and war. Only as “time was away and somewhere else” the prevailing circumstances for this suspension are created. Only if the couple does not care “if the market crash” they can move on in their togetherness (Keegan, 939-940).

Thus, the couple in this poem has the ability to escape time and so exists outside the twentieth century conflicts and defeat the imperatives of time and duty. But what happens if time in the end comes back? The clock and the waiter might forget them for now, but there is a sense that this does not last forever. The reader feels that although the elevator stops and the “bell was silent in the air” (Keegan, 939) the static camels do not stop crossing the miles of sand and the world still moves into war.

In MacNeice’s poem “House on a cliff” the conflict of identity in relation to age, illness and isolation is dealt with. The title “House on a cliff” is a symbol for isolation itself and stands in close relation to the “locked heart” (Keegan, 977). The poem consists of three stanzas where the use of the two words ‘indoors’ and ‘outdoors’ creates a continuing interaction between these settings. This conflict is also illustrated in the irregular rhyme scheme of the poem. Indoors becomes a metaphor for life and human kind whereas outdoors is the symbol of heaven but also of death. So the “locked heart” (Keegan, 977) is not only a literal metaphor for the health problems, which accompany age, but also a symbol of isolation in aging and the lost time in the past. To make sense of these continuing opposites the reader has to combine both images into an integral whole. The outdoors “winking signals on the waste of sea” relates to the indoor “tang of a tiny lamp” and so miniaturises externalities to internalisations.

This poem deals with the conflict of death and life, illness and health but it also deals with the steady conflict of an individual against the rest of the world. Is the dying man an insider or an outsider of this world, this nation or this society? MacNeice himself feels as an outsider in two countries when he says: “I wish one could either live in Ireland or feel oneself in England” (Longley, xiii). The major

characteristic of the dying man is that he lost the key to his heart somewhere in the past and thus the “purposeful man” can only talk “purposes, to himself” in his indoor isolation (Keegan, 977).

Feminism is an important movement of the twentieth century and one way of accessing Jenny Joseph’s poem “Warning”. The poem is written in a loaded non-rhyming style and so sustains the more or less hostile title. The woman in “Warning” is in a conflict between two different stereotypical ways of life. Either she is the housewife, who is a “good example for the children” (online, 05.03.05) and so follows the traditional rules of the society. Or she wears “purple” and uses all her money for “brandy and summer gloves” and so might be happier and feel free but is not accepted by society (online, 05.03.05).

Otherwise as in “House on a cliff” where the reader has to deal with death and illness in old age, the reader in “Warning” is confronted with an assessment of youth and age. Joseph compares the housewife’s grey stereotypical early days with a colourful, eventful aging. Joseph impressively shows the breaking out of the housewife from this stereotypical life in the last stanza of her poem when she just wants to “practise a little now” (online, 05.03.05). This can be seen as the first step in the direction of own identity and own thinking and a new way of living. Freedom and liberty must be the consequence when she does not care what society says and “grow more fat” or even “shall go out in my slippers in the rain” (online, 05.03.05). Yet, the people who know her may be “shocked and surprised” (online, 05.03.05) when she starts to wear purple but the question may be asked, why should the reader care, if poetry makes nothing happen?

All four poems are full of reflections on deep inner and outer conflicts. Either in criticizing society, as Joseph’s poem “Warning” and MacNeices’ “House on a cliff”, or in dealing with a world “sliding downhill towards World War II” (Hynes, 297) as “In memory on W.B. Yeats” of Auden and MacNeices’ “Meeting Point”. Each poem offers an intensive dispute with different conflicts of the twentieth century. The poem’s forms as well as their deeper meanings, created pictures and use of vocabulary express the poets dispute with these inner and outer conflicts. Since the methods of expression of each poet are different a lively dispute of similar themes can take place. The reader can either enjoy the words themselves and materialize the images or think beyond and deal critically with the conflicts between the lines. Whatever the reader is willing to do, the response paved the way for changes and influences:

Either emotional touches inside, like in “Warning” and “Meeting Point”, or outside effects when reading as the basis of a poet’s survival makes a lot happen.

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## Appendix

### *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*

*W. H. Auden*

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
And snow disfigured the public statues;  
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness  
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;  
By mourning tongues  
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,  
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;  
The provinces of his body revolted,  
The squares of his mind were empty,  
Silence invaded the suburbs,  
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of tomorrow  
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,  
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,  
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,  
A few thousand will think of this day  
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.



II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:  
The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

## ***Meeting Point***

*Louis MacNeice*

Time was away and somewhere else,  
There were two glasses and two chairs  
And two people with the one pulse  
(Somebody stopped the moving stairs)  
Time was away and somewhere else.

And they were neither up nor down;  
The stream's music did not stop  
Flowing through heather, limpid brown,  
Although they sat in a coffee shop  
And they were neither up nor down.

The bell was silent in the air  
Holding its inverted poise -  
Between the clang and clang a flower,  
A brazen calyx of no noise:  
The bell was silent in the air.

The camels crossed the miles of sand  
That stretched around the cups and plates;  
The desert was their own, they planned  
To portion out the stars and dates:  
The camels crossed the miles of sand.

Time was away and somewhere else.  
The waiter did not come, the clock  
Forgot them and the radio waltz  
Came out like water from a rock:  
Time was away and somewhere else.

Her fingers flicked away the ash  
That bloomed again in tropic trees:  
Not caring if the markets crash  
When they had forests such as these,  
Her fingers flicked away the ash.

God or whatever means the Good  
Be praised that time can stop like this,  
That what the heart has understood  
Can verify in the body's peace  
God or whatever means the Good.

Time was away and she was here  
And life no longer what it was,  
The bell was silent in the air  
And all the room one glow because  
Time was away and she was here.

***House on a Cliff***

*Louis MacNeice*

Indoors the tang of a tiny oil lamp. Outdoors  
The winking signal on the waste of sea.  
Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind.  
Indoors the locked heart and the lost key.

Outdoors the chill, the void, the siren. Indoors  
The strong man pained to find his red blood cools,  
While the blind clock grows louder, faster. Outdoors  
The silent moon, the garrulous tides she rules.

Indoors ancestral curse-cum-blessing. Outdoors  
The empty bowl of heaven, the empty deep.  
Indoors a purposeful man who talks at cross  
Purposes, to himself, in a broken sleep.

***Warning***

*Jenny Joseph*

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay our rent and not swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.