

Critical Essay - Worked Example

Choose a poem in which the poet has created a perfect blend of form and content. Show how the poet achieves this and discuss how it adds to your appreciation of the poem.

A Perfect Blend of Random Accident

"Visiting Hour" by Norman MacCaig is a poem in which the poet has created a perfect blend of form and content. In this piece we are presented with an experience (that is probably personal) of a narrator visiting a dying woman in hospital. The narrator's feelings change as the experience progresses. Free verse cleverly supports this shifting emotional landscape due to the freedom it affords.

Visiting hour begins with a person in denial, walking through a hospital trying not to think about the implications of his visit. MacCaig presents us with a turmoil of shifting emotions as the narrator walks through a busy hospital scene before coming to his destination. It is at this point that we see the narrator overcome by the emotion of the situation as he finds himself unable to connect with a heavily drugged patient in a weakened condition. As the narrator's reaction to the situation develops, MacCaig expertly manipulates the form of the poem in order to allow the experience to resonate with the reader.

The first resonance MacCaig instigates in the reader comes about as a result of his skilful evocation of the hospital scene in stanza one. The first element of the hospital MacCaig uses to achieve this is the smell we all associate with these institutions. He uses a hyperbolic image:

"The Hospital smell
combs my nostrils"

to heighten the impact of this. The idea of nostrils being combed suggests discomfort and invasion, both of which hint at the strong emotion of the event without explicitly stating it.

The emotion of the narrator is further indicated by the poet's description of him marching briskly towards his destination;

"as they go bobbing along"

Critical Essay - Worked Example

This synecdoche is an appropriate means of conveying the agitation of the narrator as well as suggesting that he is focused on his destination. Both these ideas (the narrators discomfort and the speed of his walking) are supported by the form of the poem. As the poem is written in free verse, MacCaig is able to use short lines to match a marching rhythm and also allows for the use of enjambment to emphasise the images I have described.

This match between form and content continues in stanza two where we see the poet struggling with the purpose of his visit for the first time. Here the image we are given focuses on death through the word choice of 'corpse', 'vanishes' and 'heavenward'. Through this imagery we see that the narrator is thinking about the possible outcome of the patient's illness. The poet's use of free verse helps us to focus on the choice of these words as it permits MacCaig to place them at the end of a line. This enjambment is an effective means of bringing home the narrators fight to control his emotions.

This struggle for emotional control continues in stanza three. Here the narrator is repeating the phrase;

"I will not feel"

inside his head to attempt to force down the rise of concern with which he is overcome. MacCaig's use of free verse allows him to intensify the atmosphere with both the repetition and the rhythm of this stanza. The rhythm here mirrors the way the narrator is walking down the corridor repeating the phrase inside his head. This effectively adds to my realisation that the narrator is beginning to near his destination and thereby being forced to confront his fears.

We continue to be given a sense of the narrators growing concern with death in stanza four. Here we read a chaotic description of a busy hospital which is enhanced by the poets use of jumbled syntax in the line;

"Here and up and down and there,"

It is as if the poet is adrift in a chaotic mass of movement. He is amazed by the ability of these hospital workers to cope with the pain and suffering he sees. Again, because free verse allows this, the

Critical Essay - Worked Example

poet uses enjambment effectively to emphasise this point through the placement of the word 'miraculously' at the end of a line. This also indicates his continued consideration of death and the possible loss that he is facing through the religious intervention this word suggests.

The seemingly random and chaotic structure of this stanza continues through the poet's wondering at the ability of the nurses to cope with their 'burden' of 'pain', 'death' and 'farewells'. All these ideas come over a reader in the kind of unbroken wash of imagery that is encouraged by a free verse approach. The reader can begin to get a sense that what we are reading is a deeply personal, instinctive and convincing reaction to an experience. It is this that is the poem's real strength, as though, as MacCaig himself often suggested, the poem was written in the time it takes to smoke two cigarettes.

It is in the second half of the poem that the form of the poem begins to really pay off. It is as though the poet has lost himself in the experience and the imagery flows freely, describing in eerie detail the pain of death and loss.

The first thing the poet does at this stage is stop the reader cold in their tracks with the minor sentence:

"Ward 7."

Free verse allows this to be placed with the full stop in the middle of a line, further emphasising the cessation of the narrator's carefully constructed forward momentum. The narrator has arrived at his destination, is looking at the sign on the ward door (as we can deduce from the use of the numeral) and the jerk with which the reader is arrested helps us to appreciate the extent of the narrator's agitation, discomfort and fear.

This stanza continues in a confused manner, with images relating to the patient's suffering being crammed together, with free use of enjambment and frequent use of sentence endings mid line. Indeed, this part of the poem is difficult to read, allowing the sense of confusion to be transferred to the reader. Truly, we are there in the heaven-like 'white cave' that metaphorically places us in an isolated and distant emotional landscape. The physical descriptions of the

Critical Essay - Worked Example

woman support the idea that she is either heavily drugged or near death. Indeed, the metaphorical 'white cave' could be related to the white tunnel often described after a near death experience.

Further use of metaphor continues this confused description of weakness; for example, in the line:

"A withered hand
trembles on its stalk."

The pain implicit in the idea of a dying flower is both poignant and painful to the reader. Pain that continues to build through images of vampires and through the poet's word choice in the phrase;

"wasted of colour"

Throughout this stanza, the use of free verse enhances the sense of struggle within the poet as he attempts to come to terms with the loss of a loved one

Despite the stanza break that follows, we continue to find ourselves struggling with both the structure and content of the writing. In a miraculous climax, the poet seems to be on the edge of losing the sense of what he is trying to say. Who is growing fainter? Who is the one that is heavily drugged? It is as though the narrator and the patient he is visiting have become blended in their shared pain. The use of a long, multi phrase sentence (allowed in free verse) adds to this sense of unity and builds to the embittered oxymoron which ends the poem on a suitably confusing statement of futility:

"fruitless fruits"

By the time we reach this climax we cannot help but be impressed by MacCaig's ability to write with changing rhythm and flow, as though revisiting the experience on the bus home, at his desk later, in his bed before a disturbed sleep. No form but free verse could have so effectively freed the poet from the need to tightly construct his poem to the detriment of the effectiveness of the ideas he so aptly conveys.