

Cyclops

You, going along the path,
mosquito-doped, with no moon, the flashlight
a single orange eye

unable to see what is beyond
the capsule of your dim
sight, what shape

contracts to a heart
with terror, bumps
among the leaves, what makes
a bristling noise like a fur throat
Is it true you do not wish to hurt them?

Is it true you have no fear?
Take off your shoes then,
let your eyes go bare,
swim in their darkness as in a river

do not disguise
yourself in armour.

They watch you from hiding:
you are a chemical
smell, a cold fire, you are
giant and indefinable

In their monstrous night
thick with possible claws
where danger is not knowing,
you are the hugest monster.

Margaret Atwood

Analysis ~ Cyclops by Margaret Atwood

Overview

Cyclops, like the two other poems included here, is an exploration of the tension between humanity and the natural world. The setting is “small” and familiar to anyone who has been camping: a lone human walking through the woods at night, encased in a small “capsule” of meagre light, surrounded beyond that by the walls of trees and darkness. We come to the poem with the expectation that the “terror” will be human terror, the dread of the vastness of nature from which we get the word “panic”. However, the poem quickly inverts this expectation, attributing the fear to nature, the cause of the fear to humanity.

Form

The poem is loosely constructed, a direct address to a second person, perhaps the reader. The eight stanzas of unrhymed free verse vary in length, and rhythm. Atwood is liberal with trochaic meter, which gives the piece a slightly explosive feeling when it’s read aloud. The tone, which I will examine in more detail below, is menacing and dark, thanks to strategic word choice and an abrupt, challenging quality to the voice of the poet.

Allusions

The first and only literary allusion is in the title, Cyclops. A race of one-eyed giants from Greco-Roman mythology, Cyclopes were conceived as creatures who worked with their hands, “builders”, most notably of walls, but also of labyrinths. That, and the limited vision you might expect from a being with only one eye, make them an apt symbol for mankind in Atwood’s poem, which explores the tension between the natural world and humans, builders of cities and

creators of technology, but due to the narrowness of their single-eyed (ie. single-minded) vision, destroyers, also. I'd like to extend this idea quite far in a classroom, considering in what ways human progress can be viewed as throwing up barriers (walls) and creating confusion and chaos (labyrinths).

Word Choice and Tone

The poem is given a sense of immediacy by dropping that second person pronoun right at the front and by following it with the participle phrase "going along the path". The use of an -ing form here situates the reader directly in the present of the poem, so that the rest of the descriptive passages feel closer and more real. There is a sense of the familiar and comfortable in the use of prosaic expressions like the vernacular "mosquito-doped" and the very ordinary "flashlight". This, too, draws the reader into the scene...*I recognize this, I've been here*. This feeling of comfort is important as it makes more dramatic the subtle disruption of our assumptions that it is we who are in danger, nature the source of the danger.

In referring to the dome of light from the flashlight as a "capsule", Atwood brings in a sense of the man-made, the buffering zone between people and their environment provided by technology that is not necessarily a warm, cradling space that a word such as "aura" might have evoked. I like her use of "contracts" in line 7 as the verb form is a novel way to describe the tightening of apprehension in the body, while CON-tract (noun) is suggestive of relationship and obligation in our interactions with nature. The use of enjambment here delays the knowledge that it is this shape in the woods that feels the terror. The "shape" just beyond our sight makes a "bristling noise like a fur throat" which is a beautiful simile, conjuring ominous wildlife, sharp teeth and claws, but again, this is quickly subverted by the next line: *Is it true you do not wish to hurt them?*

In the following lines, the poet issues a challenge to strip away the protective armour of civilization, voiced in imperative grammar.

Take off your shoes then,
let your eyes go bare,
swim in their darkness as in a river

do not disguise
yourself in armour.

The word “disguise” implies that there is a real connection to our environment that is hampered by the accoutrements of our technology, the walls and labyrinths that block and misdirect what should be an instinctive relationship.

Metaphor

The seventh stanza begins with the most striking metaphor in the poem: *You are a chemical smell / a cold fire*. The implicit comparison reduces the person to the antithesis of what is natural, to the synthetic, or chemical. “Cold fire” acknowledges a life-force but one without warmth. There is a corresponding coldness and hardness to the alliteration of the “C” sound.

Icelandic Hurricane

by Tomas Tranströmer

No earth tremor, but a skyquake. Turner could have painted it, secured by ropes. A single mitten whirled past right now, several miles from its hand. Facing the storm I am heading for that house on the other side of the field. I flutter in the hurricane. I am being x-rayed, my skeleton hands in its application for discharge. Panic grows while I tack about, I am wrecked, I am wrecked and on dry land! How heavy it is, all that I suddenly have to carry, how heavy it is for the butterfly to tow a barge! There at last. A final bout of wrestling with the door. And now inside. Behind the huge window-pane. What a strange and magnificent invention glass is—to be close without being stricken. . . Outside a horde of transparent splinters of gigantic shapes rush across the lava plain. But I flutter no more. I sit behind the glass, still, my own portrait.

The Prelude (Boat Stealing Episode)

by William Wordsworth

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little Boat tied to a Willow-tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on,
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
(Proud of his skill) to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin Pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the Water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy Steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head.—I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim Shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living Thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the Covert of the Willow-tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my Bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar Shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or Sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty Forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.