

# A surprising read and analysis of brueghel's two monkeys essay



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Szyborska's poem, "Brueghel's Two Monkeys," starts in an odd way. The reader is thrust straight into the scene of an exam, which at first seems all too familiar. However, Szyborska surprises the reader when the voice says what she dreams about as she takes the final exam, "two monkeys, chained to the floor." This is a very odd image and one that is not easily identifiable to the reader initially. The poem contains two meanings, first in the context of the 1956 workers' riots and student demonstrations that led to the crisis and compromise of October where Poland was taken over by Stalin.

These events provide a context for the reading of the poem as a reference to Stalinist oppression. Another meaning for the poem is that it is an ecphrastic poem, a poem about a painting. It stands to reason then that the poem is about the relationship between language and reality. The monkeys could convey signs of anxiety and strain in Szyborska's art; in that, they are a metaphor for whether or not a poet's meaning is expressed accurately. There seems to be multiple meanings articulated and supplemented to by the form and structure of the poem and this is the ground for the further study of, "Brueghel's Two Monkeys."

There are three stanzas in the poem; the first one is a quatrain, followed by a couplet and finally a cinquain. The first stanza starts off with iambic pentameter for the first two lines then descends into iambic dimeter for the last two. This perhaps is an expression of how the poem is descending into the world of the unreal: "two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill." This creates the dream world, and the feet of the poem help the reader fall into that world. There is an extra stress in the first line with the word "This."

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The poetist captures the attention of the reader with this stress and helps start the downward fall for the reader. All of the lines in the first stanza end with a feminine ending. This is done to show a female standpoint, this woman is taking her graduation exam, experiencing a rite of passage marking the transition from school to real life, and she is failing. Another interesting thing about the first stanza is one run on sentence where the only punctuation is a colon, interspersed commas and only one period. It creates urgency, to reach the end of the line and the stanza and dive into the depths of this dream world.

There is also a dual meaning here, with the descent into the Stalinist oppression being almost a parallel to the depths of the dream world. The second stanza is composed of only two lines, a couplet. However, these two lines may be the most important; even just looking at the poem from a distance makes ones eyes focus on these two lines because they are so different and central to the poem. There is no end rhyme again but the lines have masculine endings, which is in stark contrast to the feminine end rhyme used in the first stanza.

Perhaps this is trying to reinforce the importance of these two lines, further differentiating them from the rest of the poem. The reader has no need to look at the painting to see a simple assertion in the image of chained monkeys; we as a species have failed the test of history. The history here is in reference to the oppressions of Stalin and how we must have failed as a species to allow his kind of hurt, pain and anguish to go on. The lines only have a dimeter, two stressed syllables in each, which further reinforces the

important words, “ History,” “ Mankind,” “ stammer,” and “ hedge. These words ring because they all make the reader feel unsettled and uneasy.

None of these words have an especially positive connotation and lend to the tone of the poem. The tone in this case is ironic, with a special emphasis on being acerbic, sharp and bitter that she and all of us are failing this test.

There seems to be no order in the first two stanzas’, the end rhyme is nonsensical (however there is some consonant rhyme with “ exams” and “ flutters”) and the words flow in free verse. However, the final stanza seems to provide a sense that order is in fact achieved; it possesses an abbca end rhyme scheme and comes to an interesting end.

The first line is written in pentameter, to draw back upon the form of the first stanza to help bring together and incorporate this stanza. The next line has only a dimeter, which ties in the second stanza and then the similarities die there. The final three lines have the following meter, tetrameter, trimeter and then the last line is finally dimeter. This brings the poem to its fruition and it seems to be a very interesting choice for Szymborska to incorporate a meter that culminates in seemingly the simplest form. It is as almost as if to say that, “ the simplest things are often the truest,” a quote from Richard Bach.

The poet summons image of the painting of the monkeys and their personification as an analogue, to reinforce as well as distance her own allegorical point. There is a sharp contrast in this final stanza between the entrapment and freedom that goes back to the main meaning of the work, the relationship between reality and misleading utopianism of Stalinist

power. The poem's end rhyme helps reinforce this point, the first two stanzas' are free of it, and then it's reduced to a fantasy when the final stanza is almost imprisoned by the end rhyme.

The "clinking" of the chain is an interesting choice, it suggests that meaning and history are one continuous entity, rather than being starkly different as we're so used to feeling. This is closely related to the interpreted points of the poem, one that stresses the mark history has made upon this poetist and the people of her time and the other that makes you question the nature of literature and meaning. There is an integration of all the structure of the poem when you look at the "voice" of the poem.

In this poem the voice seems to come from a woman imprisoned by this test. As one proceeds through the poem however, it seems that the "voice" starts to come from our collective whole, mankind in general. When you read the words "stammer" and "hedge" you begin to feel that collective whole and you feel for this woman. She seems to know the answer to this test but is unable to say what she really means. The monkeys then provide a powerful double vision of what we deny and what we recognize about this life.

The monkeys are imprisoned by us and they are ourselves imprisoned, the judge jailed by her jailing in the end. The voice of this seemingly simple poem seems to beg for an answer, but it feels as if they do know the answer, as we all do in the end. Szymborska is saying that we are strong enough as individuals and as the whole to see beyond just the words of this poem, to completely find the answer to the nature of literature and meaning, of freedom and imprisonment, of reality and illusion in our own lives.