

Horses by edwin muir essay sample



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It is said that one should forget the past and live in the present. However, Edwin Muir's 'Horses' is a poem of past memories only. The interesting part is that it deals with many conflicts and issues which are prevalent even today. It is thus a bridge between the past and present and is expressed in the form of a piece of literature. Muir himself said that in writing about horses in this poem, he was reflecting his childhood view of his father's plough horses, which must have seemed huge, powerful and mysterious to a boy of four or five.

Some of his poems, including 'Horses', have a close equivalent in passages from his autobiography, suggesting that seeing these horses reminded him of certain events. The poem begins with the poet transcending reality and reminiscing of one of his childhood memories. In this case it is one of when he as a child, watched a team of horses ploughing the stubble back into the field, during a rainy day which got progressively stormier. In the first two verses, the poet gives the reader a meaningful hint into what the circumstances of his times were.

This was most probably, the hardships of a period of war. The few references Muir makes to an army such as in cases where the horses "marched" and the word "conquering" further strengthen this issue of war. "Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill" This line brings up another issue which is plaguing the third world as we know it. In the same verse he refers to a "childish hour" in which he also compares the horses' hooves to pistons in an ancient mill. This refers to how child labour in factories was existent even then and how these dark memories were etched in his mind.

We can suggest these memories to be dark not only by his imagination but by the “fearful” way he sees these images of the past. Under the “great hulks” of these creatures he sees is however another truth. The way these symbols of “power” trod, allows the reader to infer another thought. Muir talks about the “ritual” of trodding hooves turning the field beneath to brown. This can relate to the nuclear tests taking place, the desire for power and how it would destroy the earth just as the horses’ trodding was literally destroying the earth underneath.

The line, “Gleamed with a cruel apocalyptic light,” has an even greater significance when he talks as if an apocalyptic war has taken place and the world has come to an end. In Muir’s time, this could obviously refer to the World War or perhaps a civil war and maybe future wars as well. The manner in which the poet expresses great anguish at the fact that this anger and blind hatred has left nothing in its wake, throws light on where the world is headed.

The third verse also suggests subjugation of the powerful and privileged over the Underprivileged. The “conquering hooves” show the might of the powerful class who dominate the suppressed and force them into subservience. Muir is depicting the power struggle and hegemony that will always be prevalent in the world despite opposing views of Charles Edward Markham. The latter, states in his poem, ‘Man with the Hoe’, after the “Silence of centuries”, how the oppressed took back their power and rose till there was no class hierarchy.

The sudden shift of feeling expressed towards the horses between verses three and six can illustrate the conflict between good and evil in the world today. The angelic appearance described as “ seraphim of gold” soon morphs into a “ mysterious fire” (generally a symbol of Hell where the Devil resides) and further into shining “ apocalyptic light. ” Not only the horses turning into darker images but the night becoming stormier only suggest how the world today is progressing into darkness.

Ah, now it fades! it fades! ” At this point, Muir comes back to reality. We get a lucid glimpse of the depth of his feelings about much of what happened should never have and his regret. He wants those memories back when he says “ I must pine... ” hoping, in my perspective, to change the past. Muir now seems to be in a state of possible turmoil and confusion. At one point, he refers to these memories as “ dreadful and fearful” while in the same verse he calls them “ bright.

Ultimately however, it seems that the past has been greater than the present; at least it still has an overwhelming effect on the poet’s mind. It is said “ When you are thrown from the horse, the best thing you can do is to get back on as soon as possible”. Returning to the ‘ scene of crime’ can help resolve issues and this is exactly what Muir is doing through the course of the poem. The closing paragraph of the poem is very powerful in how it expresses his mixed feelings towards the Horses. Through these animals, he has given light to different issues that disturbed him as a child.