

John kinsella: the crest

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



Humankind's threat to the earth and the natural world has been a common theme of writing since the industrial revolution and underpins *The Crest*. Kinsella's forboding poem presents a powerful analogy with man's pastoral development and its intrusion into the natural world. Kinsella's message is made clearly and strongly in the first few lines; "that at high speed this rise moving away from town can so much epitomise the age".

Here the truck represents the current age of mankind, moving away from the safety and security of town, traveling too fast, going up the rise and approaching the crest of the hill over which unknown danger waits. Like the truck, humankind is overloaded and travelling too fast to avoid disaster. The words, "high speed" establish tension and apprehensiveness, and also illustrate mankind's inability or unwillingness to slow down. The danger of driving an overloaded truck too fast over a blind crest is paralleled with the way in which man is moving.

The phrase, "the limit reached just before the crest", suggests that we live in an unsustainable way and that we have reached the limit of this way of living. The 'crest' can be paralleled with the incapability of mankind to see beyond the future, beyond their immediate concerns of material life, moving at a speed that is too fast, driven by greed and money. This sense of something awful to come is powerfully emphasised by the description of the road and the truck approaching the crest at high speed. The tension builds as the tone quickly becomes foreboding, dark and morbid.

The theme and expectance of death is introduced through the personification of the road, as the truck is "narrowing down to a bottleneck, a noose of gravel shouldering the long thin black neck". Kinsella's diction "narrowing"

delineates strain and the tone and road is presented as a person being hung, through the use of the words “noose” and “black neck”. Even the word “black” is morbid, omen-like, once again symbolising death. The language and the setting establish a feeling of perturbation, death, and tragedy.

The road changes, becoming dangerous before it reaches the crest, suggesting a likely accident for the truck as it approaches at high speed. This is analogous and a metaphor for the reality of life, symbolic of the problems and dangers that humanity is faced with as we approach an indefinite calamity. Food shortage, environmental destruction, animal extinction and global warming are paralleled by the dangerous piece of road before the crest. The morbid description of the setting and the tone prepare the reader for death itself; a tragedy likely to happen.

The metaphor of the road as a long thin black neck threatened by the noose of gravel reinforced by establishing the truck as being cold, dangerous and almost out of control - as an analogy with our unsustainable ways of living. It is described as “full to the gunwales with tractor parts”. This indicates that the truck is overwhelmed with a weight that poses a threat. The significance here is the fact that it is full with “tractor parts”. This is again a metaphor reinforcing and emphasizing man’s intrusion on natural life, as tractor parts are used to demolish the natural landscape.

It is another symbol of man’s assault on nature, another factor (along with the dangerous road) contributing toward a likely tragedy. References to hard, cold metal machinery with Kinsella’s focus on trucks, prime movers loaded to the limit with tractor parts and the road, suggest a view of how we have developed. The cold, detached language reflects a concern with human

kind's way of living. The description of the "asphalt contracting after intense summer" contributes to the sense of foreboding. The word "contracting" suggests that it is cold, perhaps winter, which is the season of decay and death, before plants bloom again in spring.

Kinsella's diction in "contracting" also epitomizes strain and pressure, adding tension. As the truck approaches the crest, we are prepared for the impending doom by suggestions for its possible cause as being, "slipshod movement, fatigue or surprise or early morning sun in the eyes". The repetition of 'or' and the rhyming of 'surprise' and 'eyes' adds spotlights the implied causes and their significance which is seen later on, causing the tipping point. This emphasizes that the way in which we are damaging the natural world can so suddenly lead to disaster.

There are, however, places where Kinsella tightens his focus on how disaster is lived out in personal ways, by highlighting what a calamity can do to people, families. This technique is used to evoke affective responses in the reader – to make a connection. The crest is described to be an "undoer of families", illustrating the effects of the accidents it can cause on them and which readers can relate to in a personal way. There is also a type of contrast used by saying how our uncritical enjoyment of the country views we have from the road can be ended, over the crest.

The rural landscape and countryside is beautiful with its natural features; hills rolling out into the distance. What lies on the other side of the crest is not beautiful at all. The severity of man's intrusion and unnatural development is global. It occurs across the same different continents from which the trucks come. A vacuum flask is described as "forcing together

iconic auto-manufacturers of different continents”, suggesting on a literary level that a truck, with the need to be refilled at a roadhouse “ forces” trucks of different brands of different countries (Mac, Kenworth, Isuzu, Mercedes) to one stop, a roadhouse.

The action here is widened to the idea that many different, if not all, continents are man-pped and pose the same dangers, when one truck is headed towards the crest at high speed, it is just a matter of time before the rest do as well. The reference to a bird wandering around his or her partner, crushed by a truck on the road is sad and highlights an unnatural death. The body of the twenty-eight parrot is described as “ crushed”. This is very significant as it denotes the idea that it did not die peacefully and gracefully as a bird should die at the end of its natural cycle- but killed, presumably, by the truck.

This is symbolic of the effect that humanity’s intrusion has on the environment and the natural world. It disrupts the natural cycle, the way things should be. The bird is described to have died “ so early in the morning, in the cold the fog not yet lifted” which further establishes the idea of a premature death- one that should not have happened. The death of a parrot and the apparent grief of its partner are almost inconsequential and represent the lack of care we have for what we are doing to the natural world.

This contrasts with the truck driver, “ hyping up the flesh” with a coffee to charge down the road, completely unaware of a crushed twenty-eight but to likely meet the same fate. The tone of the poem changes and there is a full stop for the first time and the second sentence begins, almost as if to bring

the reader back to reality, or to change perspective. This brings the poem down from a wider and more distant perspective to a personal one by introducing a “she” wondering about “how he’s getting the kids ready for school”.

This shows the ways in which the larger message of the poem is lived in more personal ways, making it more relevant to the reader. The woman, whose relation to the truck driver is unknown, presumably the woman in the roadhouse who has just served him his coffee, is either wondering how her husband, or the truck driver, is getting his kids ready for school since he is working so early in the morning as he drives down the road, almost ending his ‘cycle’ away from town and back. The truck driver unknowingly is approaching what lies over the crest, presumably death.

He “approaches town, crest, apex”. The order of these places is significant in proving that an apex, the point of calamity is what lies over the crest. On the literary level, the truck driver dies becoming one of the many “crosses on a roadside”. The theme of the natural cycle of life reappears as the driver dies before he has completed his journey, his cycle, away from town and back again, highlighting the likely impact that modern development will have on ourselves beyond the crest, at the apex.

We have been destroying the natural world and the animals but it is our own fate that lies at the point of calamity. The impact of humanity’s development on the natural world is a powerful theme throughout *The Crest*. The road and the truck, loaded to the gunwales, charging along at high-speed, forms a powerful symbol for man’s uncontrolled progress that threatens nature and, perhaps even humanity itself. The poem’s morbid, forboding tone suggests

Kinsella's concern with, not only pastoral development, but also the road down which we are heading and what may lie beyond the crest for humanity.