

The cyclist poem

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“ The Cyclist” poetry commentary “ The Cyclist” is a poem by Louis MacNeice which romanticizes the fleeting joys of childhood. These joys are emphasised through imagery of summer – be it activities, food, the beach, a bicycle ride, various techniques such as juxtaposition and enjambment are used to evoke fond memories from the reader. MacNeice’s poem is set in the southwest of England, on a hill with a chalk horse carved into it. It is during the height of summer, when the grasshoppers are buzzing and the children are playing outside. The character is a boy or a group of boys, and they are riding bicycles down a hill near to the chalk horse.

The structure of the poem is quite disjointed, with only five sentences throughout three stanzas. Enjambment is used extensively to further reinforce the idea of a out of breath child, as by not ending each line with a full stop the poet is enticing the reader to continue and hear what this breathless child has to say. The use of time in “ The Cyclist” is used to reinforce the notion that the pleasures of summer are temporary. In the first stanza, for example, on line 7, “ but these five minutes” is a reference to both the comparatively short time of childhood and the rapid rush down the hill during summer.

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Time is again mentioned in line 24 (“ For ten seconds more”) to remind the reader that time is ever-present, and that ageing is impossible to avoid for a child as adulthood draws every closer (emphasised in the decrease of time from five minutes to ten seconds). In general, the speaker in “ The Cyclist” appears to be speaking as a child; he overuses and ‘ accidentally’ mixes up

words. For instance, on line 4 the speaker says “ In the heat of the handlebars he grasps the summer”. This is plainly a child’s error, and it makes no sense as it is – it should be ‘ heat of the summer he grasps the handlebars’.

Another example of this is during the last stanza, where the speaker is describing various ways to enjoy the summer, he states “ chase it with butterfly nets or strike [...] little red ball or gulp [...] cream /Or drink” (lines 18-20). This overuse of “ or” again shows the flustered excitement when a child is overloaded with activities; they can’t possibly even speak fast enough to experience them all over the course of one short summer. The experiences which are breathlessly listed are all typical summertime activities, such as catching butterflies, playing cricket, eating summer fruits with cream or enjoying a cool drink in the shade. All of these activities are typically not long-lasting: butterflies slip out of nets, breath cannot be held underwater for long, and food and drink generally do not last long with hungry children around. Therefore, MacNeice is reinforcing the idea that childhood and summertime are fleeting joys which can only be carelessly enjoyed for a so long, and they should be savoured. There is interesting juxtaposition and repetition in the last four lines: repetition of “ calmly” and juxtaposition between calm/stillness and movement.

The last four lines also describe the feeling of peace while you coast along on a bike with no need to pedal after having sped down a hill. “ For ten seconds more can move as the horse in the chalk” means he can be still while still ‘ galloping’ (as the horse carved into the hill is galloping, and yet cannot move). “ Calmly regardless of tenses and final clauses” – again grammar is

mentioned which refers to the “ forgotten sentence” of school. The final line, “ Calmly unendingly moves. ”, is a reference to the horse carved into the hillside.

This idea is strengthened in the first line, with “ unpassing horse”. “ unpassing” gives the idea that while the horse is constantly moving, it never actually moves. The fact that the poem both begins and ends with reference to this horse shows that it is one of main ideas of the poem. And so the horse remains there, seemingly for all eternity, fixed in its graceful stride, calmly, unendingly moving. Further juxtaposition can also be found in the opposites of “ Left-right-left”, which comes in as the poem approaches its end.

It shows the child slowing down and needing to pedal to keep moving, as “ Left-right-left” is the motion needed to turn the pedals one full circle. “ And reaching the valley the boy must pedal again” (line 22) shows that the joys of summer are brief, and they only come once the ‘ hill’ (seasons) has done a full cycle and the cyclist has returned himself to the crest of the hill. Water is a symbol which is heavily used in the second stanza and the beginning of the third stanza. It is used to show the innocence of childhood; the purity before the child becomes ‘ polluted’ by reality and is forced to ‘ pedal’ back up the hill of life.

The second stanza begins with imagery of a meadow which quickly transforms into an ocean: “ The grass boils with grasshoppers, a pebble /Scutters from under the wheel”. The wonderfully poetic language assists in the seamless transition from meadow to ocean: the rolling grass hills are likened the boiling waves (heated by the sun), and the pebbles are compared with crabs, scuttering away to escape the bike’s wheel. The “ boys
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riding their heat-wave” creates a picture of a surfer, “ feet on a narrow plank and hair thrown back”.

The narrow plank creates ambiguity, as the reader is not sure if the poet is referring to a surfboard or the pedals on a bike. The “ spattered white” countryside spoken about on the previous line draws parallels between white caps on the ocean, the boys (whose skin colour would stand out against the green or blue) and the white chalk horses carved into the hills. The “ heat-wave” is a play on words by MacNeice, as the real meaning is a period of exceptionally hot weather which usually occurs in summer. In this context though, it has a double meaning of figuratively ‘ surfing’ on the ‘ wave’ while ‘ riding’ the wave on a bicycle.

This water imagery then flows over into the next stanza, pulling the reader forward in the current of the poem, as it depicts the cyclist with a “ surf of dust” (line 17) beneath him, more like a wave than a cloud of dust. The continuation of the sentence into the next stanza is another way MacNeice draws the reader onwards. The animals referred to throughout the poem are all typical summer creatures: grasshoppers chirping on a hot summer’s day, dragonflies suspended in the haze, horses running free over the hills, butterflies floating back and forth, crabs scuttling along a beach.

These symbols reinforce MacNeice’s image of a perfect summertime. The poem as a whole – but especially the first stanza – likens life to a text or piece of writing, combined with the fleeting exhilaration of childhood: “ Between the horizon’s brackets”, with the “ main sentence” of adult life to be “ picked up later”. The use of grammatical terms such as “ brackets”, “ parenthesis” and “ tenses and final clauses” reminds the reader that school

andeducationis always in the back of a child’s mind, not wanting for the summer to end.

Through the use of poetic techniques such as juxtaposition and enjambment, MacNeice has created parallels between the joys of childhood and the fun of whizzing down a hill on a bicycle. Water imagery, the majority of which is found in the second paragraph, is used to show that summer enjoyment is not only limited to the meadows of southwest England, but can be enjoyed by the beach or surfing in the ocean. In “ The Cyclist” Louis MacNeice seeks to make an initially light-hearted statement about the fun in being a child which slowly shifts into a more contemplative, melodramatic declaration of the inevitability of ageing and the passage of time.