

A litany in time of plague



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A Litany in Time of Plague Thomas Nashe's poem, "A Litany in Time of Plague" is one that must be closely looked at to be fully appreciated. This meaningful poem is concerned with death and is a stand out work due to its structure, word choice, and what it means to relay to the reader. The poem also has characteristics that make it unique. Both the structure and word choice that Nashe uses, help to set this poem apart from other works from this time. The poem is made up of six stanzas, each adhering to the rhyme scheme of A-A-B-B-C-C-D.

This implemented rhyme scheme makes it so that when the poem is read, it possesses a smooth flowing movement. Within the poem, each stanza keeps the same two ending lines, "I am sick I must die/God have mercy on us!" It could be determined that every stanza must come to the same end much like every human life must meet the same fate—a driving theme of the poem. The poem contains precise and yet very simple language compared to some other works that appeared at this time.

This choice in language can be attributed to the desire for common understanding. All those hearing this work after its release could easily interpret and understand the subject matter which is quite fitting seeing as though the subject matter applied to all. Also, the poem contains lines of solid thoughts which could be seen as being more accessible to readers, there isn't much room for misinterpretation or anything that could be seen as a significant source of confusion.

Overall, the poem comes off as very straightforward. The ingenious duality of the poem is something that can be easily overlooked. Nashe crafts his work

to be both a litany type, prayer as the title states, and a rich poem. Although litanies tend to be a tedious recital of religious leaders using verses as cues for the people to respond with the appropriate response, Nashe's own litany deserts the dry qualities of the conventional litany through its use of precise and cunning detail put forth before the repeating lines.

The fifth and sixth lines of each stanza are where both the collision and fusion of litany and poem occur. The sixth line of each stanza must remain entirely the same throughout the work so that it is coupled with the last line of the stanza and remains the tenant of the litany, however the fifth line is crafted so that even while it changes in every stanza it concludes with an ending rhyme that meets the sixth line, thus forming a couplet.

This structure technique gives the poem a distinct quality. There are certain people and things contained in the poem that add to the validity of what the speaker says and serve as exemplary references to the idea of certain lines. First, a plague is brought up in the second stanza and although it is not mentioned what specific plague it might be, plagues were prevalent in England as late as the rule of King James and people that were alive during Nashe's time were hugely affected by them.

Helen of Troy is brought up in the following stanza that deals with beauty and is an excellent reference to be used for she was known for her exceptional beauty. Like Helen of Troy, the Trojan warrior Hector is used in the fourth stanza for his quality of strength. The body of the poem—that is everything but the first and last stanzas—supports the idea that when facing

death, every single person is on a common plane no matter who they might be or what they might possess.

The beginning of the second stanza addresses those that are wealthy with the lines “ Rich men, trust not in wealth,/Gold cannot buy you health;” and this shows that no matter how much money one may have, it will do no good in stalling death. The third stanza contains the couplet “ Beauty is but a flower/Which wrinkles will devour:” and the lines “ Queens have died young and fair,/Dust hath closed Helen’s eye. ” which serve as a reminder to those that are beautiful that beauty is a fleeting quality in this life and that beautiful figures have come and gone without their beauty being a factor in the equation of death.

The fourth stanza follows to deliver a message to those that might consider themselves brave, strong, or fearless with the lines “ Strength stoops unto the grave,/Worms feed on Hector brave;/Swords may not fight with fate,” these lines show that like beauty, strength has no hand in death and even the greatest and strongest warriors meet their end. Finally, the fifth stanza brings up those that are clever with “ Wit with his wantonness/Tasteth death’s bitterness;” stating that no one is capable of tricking or persuading fate.

The body truly hammers the idea that although individuals may possess certain qualities that set them apart from others in this life it is of no overall significance. Although the poem could initially be seen as having a somewhat morbid and morose tone to it, the last stanza is one that provides a sort of relief and does a lot of explaining as to what should be learned or

taken from the poem. In the lines “ Heaven is our heritage/Earth but a player’s stage;/Mount we unto the sky” the speaker explains that our lives on this Earth are insignificant compared to what lies after.

These lines also help to alleviate the darker previous tone (especially the last two stanzas mentioning decaying dead bodies and “ Hell’s executioner”) by showing that death is not something to be feared and that leaving this play of a life is only natural, for Heaven is where one belongs. The poem resolves with an acceptance of death, forever applicable to all seeing as though death is a natural part of life. Nashe creates an exceptional poem with the structure he utilizes and is precise in the poem so that the speaker directly shows the reader the purpose and manner of death.