

critical analysis tom lux

Literature



Tom Lux's "The People of the Other Village" was written shortly after the first Iraq war and gained popularity after the 9/11 attacks. The poem's voice comes from an indifferent narrator whose unnamed village is at war with the people of an "other" unnamed village. The exact reason that started this war is unclear; however, as the war escalates, the battle tactics evolve and are depicted in an alternating line structure that mimics the back and forth nature of reciprocal violence.

Ultimately, the author presents a poem that comments on human nature without committing to a judgment of that nature through subject matter, structure, and narrative voice. The poem's title bleeds directly into the first line, "The People of the Other Village / hate the people of this village" (Lux 1) Thus begins the alternating structure of the poem. Already, the only difference shown between these two villages is the word "other" and the word "this." By being vague, the author shows humans as basically the same except for the differences that the narrator applies to the two villages.

The location and ethnicity of both sets of villagers is also purposefully ambiguous so that this commentary on human nature can apply to all peoples in almost any time period. The reason for the war is never stated. The narrator implies that they attacked the other village first because of the oppression and violence he believes the other village "would" enact upon his people. Throughout the entire poem, the lines alternate between what the speaker's village does to the other village and what the other village does back.

For example, "They peel the larynx from one of our brothers' throats. / We devein one of their sisters" (Lux 9-10) Even the refrain of the poem, "We do

this, they do that," is repeated and inverted as the author states, " They do this, we do that" (Lux 8, 15, and 23). This alternating structure helps impart the reciprocal and childlike nature of the back and forth violence while the narrator's voice remains indifferent. The poem's speaker nonchalantly discusses the violence that these villages visit upon one another which adds a strange sort of humor to the poem.

" The quicksand pits they built were good. / Our amputation teams were better" (Lux 11-12). This lack of emotion implies that this behavior has become like second nature to the speaker. In fact, the only emotion that seems evident in the poem is that small bit of pride until we arrive at the last two lines, " Ten thousand (10, 000) years, Ten thousand / (10, 000) brutal, beautiful years" (Lux 24-25). There is a strange pairing of the numeric and written period of time and the words brutal and beautiful. We can assume that the speaker finds both beauty and brutality in this war because of the pride shown earlier.

However, there is a literary convention being employed here. Elizabeth Carter was known for describing nature in her poetry as both terrible and awe inspiring. Other poets have described beauty in horrible images, such as Emily Dickenson's flies on a pile of feces and Hopkin's gasoline in a water puddle. This beauty and brutality is the dichotomy that the author is implying. After all, it was during the first Iraq war that the iconic images of the burning oilfields at sunset were first popularized by the media.

Also, the vast majority of technological advances have been made due to warfare, and also with all of the horror of warfare, concepts such as honor, brotherhood, and bravery are produced. Perhaps the numeric and written

version of 10, 000 years possesses a double meaning as well. We know that civilization is said to have first begun 10, 000 years ago. With the rise of agriculture came the rise of populations, which gave rise to surplus population, wealth, poverty, power structures and politics, and finally armies and warfare.

However, the repetition of this number emphasizes that humankind's violence has been and forever shall be a reality of the human condition. It also reiterates that, like the villagers, there is actually no difference between the numeric and written meaning behind the number; they are, in fact, the same. Like the time period and the violence, the subject matter mimics the structure and evolves throughout the poem. At first, the violence is simple and is not elegant; people are stapling and nailing objects to others heads.

Then there is an advance in warfare. Animal training is made evident by the training of rats and birds to poison and bomb the enemy. This indicates that warfare is evolving for this village. After all, advanced civilizations in history have used animals in war. B. F Skinner, the psychologist, trained birds, homing pigeons, to drop bombs on troops in WW I, and the Romans, Celts, and many others have used dogs in war for thousands of years. Then, after every refrain of, " We do this, they do that," another evolution takes place.

We now see the villagers using attacks and torture techniques that require some level of medical knowledge and influence. For example, " deveining" requires a civilization to at least know of the vascular system and to have instruments capable of removing veins. The " exploding ambassador's of peace" implies that explosive technology has been achieved. Later, after

another refrain, the attacks include cultural and economic warfare as sheep importation, literature, and religion become the avenues of violence.

Ultimately, the narrator never makes a direct statement on how he feels about this war; it has become second, or human, nature to him. One could argue that this poem represents the author's criticism of war, but then, why does he choose the words "brutal and beautiful." The answer is simply that Tom Lux is not judging human nature, but he is defining it for the reader. Since or beginning, we commit visceral acts of violence upon one another which has evolved our technology from stone tools to nuclear energy and space travel. This is our nature and it is unlikely to change for another 10,000 ten-thousand years.