

Bruce weigl's burning
shit at an khe: people
are products of their
environments



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The environment people are put in often dictates their actions and reactions, which in turn shape who they are. Additionally, when a person is constantly degraded by their surroundings, it has a large, sweeping impact on their formation as a person. Bruce Weigl's poem " Burning Shit at An Khe" is a manifestation of this concept of how people are products of their environments. Through diction, tone, and mood, Weigl conveys the message that it is not what a person does, rather how things are done unto them, that defines who they are.

Weigl utilizes very strong word choice in this poem to really help to get his message across. The proof is right there in the title- " Burning SHIT at An Khe"- which leaves the reader automatically with a feeling about the tone of the poem. Weigl's strong diction doesn't stop there, though. He uses his vocabulary, even the smallest words, to twist and turn the reader's thoughts into this mass that doubles back on itself and produces a hatred for the war and a sadness for the speaker.

In lines three through five, Weigl says " eventually/ You had to do something/ Because it just kept piling up. Not only does his use of the word " had" imply that the action necessary was more forceful than voluntary, but his vagueness with the words " it just kept piling up" is so nonspecific that it alludes to not only the excrement in the camp toilets (the literal meaning), but the burdens of the war as well. Even though the men could literally burn the shit away and sort of clear that mess, the burdens were never burned away.

They were constantly carried around in minds and knapsacks and in stress. Additionally, Weigl's diction returns when he says in line 20, " And gagged the whole heart of myself. The decision to use " whole heart" really clenches the emotions and thoughts behind this literal burning shit. It leaves the reader wondering: what are the incinerated masses of crap representative of? " Whole heart" implies that it not only gagged the speaker in his stomach and throat, but somewhere deep inside of him as well, a part of his soul. This misery is so pungent and tangible, just like the stewing sewage, that it not only physically affects the men, but it corrupts and contorts their thoughts as well.

Even though Weigl's diction really resonates throughout the entire poem, the last six lines bring the entire thing together to convey that the poem was not to be taken literally, that this horrendous job of clearing mass amounts of waste was a direct degradation of these poor soldiers. Beginning with line 52, " Only now I can't fly/ I lay down in it/ And finger paint the words of who I am/Across my chest/ Until I'm covered and there's only one smell,/ One word. " Weigl forces the pieces of the poem to connect here.

By having the speaker getting stuck in this rut fill of muck, Weigl paints the picture of a person drowning in the shit of themselves and everyone around them, and the shit is what becomes them. Tone is another large component to portraying Weigl's message in the poem. The tones of hopelessness and resentment are prominent throughout " Burning Shit at An Khe. " Weigl tries to make the point that out at war, even though men were supposed to act as a unit, as a team, there were often times a very limited number of people to turn to.

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Line 23 makes this point clearly: " But when my turn came again/ There was no one. " The speaker couldn't pay someone to do his literal dirty work this time, and he was left alone to work it out for himself. The struggle and the burden brought on by having no one to look to was an immense one to bear. Multiple very subtle, little lines in this poem convey this idea of hopelessness and abandonment. For example, as something as simple as the soldier's match is a metaphor for there being nobody and no hope left. Line 42 states " I tried to light a match/ It died. Not only is this line interesting in this context (to burn the shit) but additionally, it is quite possible that the match is a representation for all of the soldiers that fell around the speaker.

Whenever he tried to make contact with someone, they fell away. The speaker's resentment seeps through the seams of the poem in lines forty four through fifty one. " And it all came down on me, the stink/ And the heat and the worthlessness/ Until I slipped and climbed/ Out of that hole and ran/ Past the olive drab/ Tents and trucks and clothes and everything/ Green as far from the shit/ As the fading light allowed. The complete breakdown of the soldier is evident when the speaker says that the " worthlessness" came down upon him. He ran away from the pain and the stink and the everything, past anything green that represented the army and what it had done to him. Lastly, the mood of the poem really sets the stage for the appearance of the author's message.

Diction, tone, and mood all go hand in hand, which is why diction is as crucial to mood as to the message itself. The mood of this poem is quite honestly depressing. The opening lines of the poem start off with this sadness. Into that pit/ I had to climb down. " " Going down" is literal and metaphorical. <https://assignbuster.com/bruce-weigls-burning-shit-at-an-khe-people-are-products-of-their-environments/>

When a mood goes down, it typically becomes sad. The speaker was going down to burn actual crap, which couldn't have been much of a mood lifter, anyhow. Even further into the poem, line thirty five states " But we flipped the coin and I lost/ And climbed down into my fellow soldiers'/ Shit an began to sink and didn't stop. " Not only was this soldier forced to literally wallow in his own shit as well as the waste of the soldiers around him, but it was because he lost a coin flip.

Was the coin flip literal though, or does it call back to a darker time, like when the soldier was first called into war? Regardless of that debate, the whole situation is depressing, disgusting, and horrifying, and it calls out to the hearts and stomachs of the reader. The sadness emanating from these hard-to-read fifty seven lines stitches the pieces of the poem together, coming to the forefront with diction and tone, to restate Weigl's message that it is really what people are dropped into that define who they are.

Bruce Weigl's " Burning Shit at An Khe" is a prime example of how diction, tone, and mood form the quilt of the author's story. Throughout the interwoven lines and heartbreaking, gut-wrenching details of this encounter, Weigl proves that when people are forced into a certain environment, it has an incredible impact on their personal development. Overall, Weigl breaks down the composition of a " worthless" piece of shit, and describes how it lends itself back to its environment.