

# Acrobat by wisława szymborska essay



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The poem, *Acrobat*, by Wislawa Szymborska, speaks literally of an acrobat and the logic-defying stunts he performs to his audience. Figuratively, the poem speaks of our mortality, reminding us of the brevity of life, and thus reinforcing the need to take advantage of what little time we have and the need to use this time wisely. Through the focused example of an acrobat, a performer, Szymborska shows us that not everything lasts and that expectations often lead to disappointment as things are inevitably not always as we would have thought. The poem contains four stanzas which seem to accumulate weight throughout the poem: the first and second being of six lines and the third stanza consisting of eight.

However this accumulation is quickly thrown off its tracks as the last stanza contains a suitably striking set of two lines. This particular structure consistently reflects the underlying themes of the poem. On a literal level we see suspense and tension build up “in the hush that follows the drum roll’s silence”, as the acrobat prepares for his performance. Up until the last stanza the tension continues to be built upon as the acrobat “waits to pounce in flight” and “cunningly weaves” his body into an impressive array of entertaining movements, it would appear even the “air” is “startled” by his agility and skill.

Yet just as quickly as it begun, the performance is drawn to a halt and the acrobat becomes just another man again. All the glamour of the show evaporates and just as the tone of the last line implies, the audience is left disappointed with its brevity, it “passed” by so quickly they barely had a chance to take it all in. The brevity of the last stanza therefore echoes the poem’s literal meaning. On a figurative level we understand that our

expectations are not always fulfilled: The audience, represented in the speaker's voice, is amazed and dazzled by the display. This awe is built upon from the start of the poem as the stanzas grow in weight and intensity and the acrobat's movements seem to be defy our imagination as he moves " more swiftly than than his body's weight, which one again again is late for its own fall".

The repetition of certain words such as " though", " than" and " again" serve to establish a rhythm, like the beating of a heart or an echo. This intensifies the suspense being built and consequently heightens the leap of style from the bulk of the poem to the last two lines, which, commonly of Szymborska's works, are used as a partial reversal of the poem's leading idea. The awe the audience experiences during the show is put into question at the end, just as our lives our put into question in our death. Life, like the performance is dazzling and overwhelming in its intensity yet at the end we our inevitably left disappointed. Our expectations not met, we are overcome with a fear, a sense that we did not appreciate life to its fullest extent and that it was too short for us to be able to take it all in properly. This is not the first time Szymborska draws a parallel between life and a show and we are reminded of her poem " Life While You Wait" which equally expresses the idea that life is a play and we the mere performers who, in the words of Shakespeare, " strut(.

. ) and fret(.. our hour upon the stage and then [are] heard no more". One of the most prominent themes of the poem ' Acrobat' is the idea of our mortality and imperfections.

Whereas the first stanza promotes a glorified image of the acrobat, the second (and third) gave a deeper insight and reveal the imperfections that the acrobat is liable of. The very word ‘acrobat’, showcased in the title of the poem, demands a certain respect and reverence: he possesses a skill that we perhaps do not, he can move his body with such “ease” and “agility” that he garners our respect and admiration. Yet, in the second stanza, Szymborska allows us to see that he is “crippled”, he is not representative of the overvalued image we have of him, but is in fact wanting in certain aspects. Neither bird nor angel as we would like to imagine, he is “missing wings”, “shamefully unfeathered” he performs for us, living for the appeasement for others instead of himself which we have seen is a characteristic deemed disrespectful in our eyes.

Szymborska promotes the thinking that life is too short to be lived for someone else’s happiness at the possible sacrifice of our own and therefore the acrobat is somewhat devalued in this sense. We are reminded of our mortality, the fact that we ourselves are not blessed with wings; we are not immortal and, just like the acrobat, we have knowable flaws and sometimes perhaps overestimate ourselves in thinking we are immune of such mortal traits. Here the repetition of “missing” is resonant of an echo which reflects both the hollowness the acrobat feels at being “solo”, alone in his way of being, as well as the hollowness of ourselves as those who take life for granted and don’t appreciate it to its utmost degree. The acrobat may be “solo” and “crippled” as a result of his flaws but his “missing wings” are only considered a flaw because we deem them so. We also come to learn that the apparent ease and effortlessness of the acrobat’s movements are in fact

meticulously “calculated” and “arduous” in their carrying out. Szymborska’s rhetorical questions in the third stanza such as “do you know, do you see” seem to be attacking the reader/audience, suggesting our ignorance prevents us from seeing the effort and strain the acrobat’s profession demands of him.

We take him for granted just as we take life for granted. The acrobat “works to seize the swaying world”; he makes an effort to understand and to enjoy the world we live in that is unmistakably transitory, the same world that is often taken for granted. He “stretch[es] out the arms he has conceived”: it is the muscles, a product of his own labour, that enable him to grasp the trapeze, to seize the moment and, in the view of the author, this is “beautiful beyond belief”. Once again the acrobat is glorified in our eyes and his flaws seem admirable, his mortality and vulnerability only make him all the more reputable. The oxymorons in “arduous ease”, “watchful agility” and “calculated inspiration” highlight this difference between the acrobat himself and the proposed opinion of him: society underestimates man in thinking his actions and success stem from an “ease”, “agility” and mere spontaneous “inspiration” yet in truth they stem from “arduous”, “watchful” and “calculated” “vigilance”. Nothing in life is easy and we have to work hard to achieve something worthwhile but at the same time we have to allow for an appreciation of the wonder that life itself is and not be blinded or burdened by our own preoccupations.

In conclusion, through an appropriate structure mirroring the poem’s leading idea, and through an abundance of meticulously placed literary devices and an apposite vocabulary, Szymborska successfully conveys the underlying

theme that is captured so well in the last line of the poem: We must learn to appreciate “ this passing at this very passing moment that just passed”, we should value each moment of our lives because before we know it they are gone. Just as the acrobat leaps from “ trapeze to trapeze” we move from moment to moment, situation to situation and in order to die without regret we need to live recognizing the value of each of these moments. By giving an insight into the life of an acrobat, Szymborska manages to make a reflection on the human condition, suggesting we take advantage of our lives and of each other. She forces us to confront our mortality and realise that our time on earth is limited and should therefore be appreciated fully.

Life is a book and those who do not travel only ever read a page.