

The Night of the Scorpion

Nissim Ezekiel

The Night of the Scorpion is a eight stanza poem, each stanza of which contains between three and eighteen lines. This is one of Ezekiel's first poems, it was first anthologized in *Collected Poems* (1952-1988) The poem is [free verse](#), meaning it does not contain a rhyme scheme. This choice adds to the seriousness of the [poem subject](#) matter and deadly nature of the story Ezekiel tells.

The Night of the Scorpion is the story of one night in which the mother of the [speaker](#) is stung by a poisonous scorpion. She suffers for twenty hours while peasants, holy men, and her husband attempt to heal her. They try curses, blessings, prayers, herbs, and all forms of ancient medicine that are not practiced in most of the modern world. Their efforts are in vain. A sense of otherworldliness is created by the beliefs and practices of these peasants in [comparison](#) to the world in which the reader is existing, a barrier is put up. This barrier is torn down as the poem concludes and the reader realizes how similar they are to the characters in the poem, united by their common humanity. Find the full text of the poem [here](#).

This poem begins at the beginning, with the speaker starting the story of how his mother was stung by a scorpion. Ezekiel does not use unnecessary phrasing or extra words, he gets right to the point. He describes how the scorpion had been driven inside by “steady rain” and has decided to hide beneath a “sack of rice.” This first stanza is only four lines, a choice Ezekiel makes to urge the story forward. A quick succession of stanzas allows for the poem to flow faster. The second stanza proceeds in the same way, but this time with only three lines.

In this stanza Ezekiel's speaker describes the actions of the scorpion. He portrays the creature as being purposefully diabolical, a thought that will directly relate to the beliefs and actions of those that attend the speaker's mother. The scorpion moves quickly before anyone can do anything, he “part[s] with his poison...” and runs back outside, to risk the weather again.

Throughout this piece Ezekiel makes a number of language choices that continue to reference the movements and parts of different insects. These descriptors are very

prevalent in the third stanza. He describes the actions of the peasants as being like swarms of flies, they “buzzed” God’s name in a hope to paralyze the “Evil One.”

The image that Ezekiel creates here is clear, the reader can easily visualize a swarm of people coming down on the speaker’s mother, all with good intentions, but perhaps so numerous that no one can do anything that would help. They are all devoted to the same purpose, praying in the hope of saving the mother. They believe that she has been inflicted by the Evil One, or the devil, and pray in an effort to drive him out.

*The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times*

The fourth stanza contains seven lines and describes the hunt that the peasants embark on in an effort to find the scorpion. They search with both candles and lanterns, which throw shadows on the wall in the shape of a scorpion. This image of the scorpion still being in the room (only in the form of shadow) helps set the scene for the next lines as the peasants struggle to help the mother. The shadow is representative of their primitive fears, that something Evil is lurking just where they cannot see it.

This fourth stanza continues, and the search for the scorpion has failed, they do not know, as the reader does, that the scorpion fled the house at the beginning of the poem. This puts the reader in a position above those in the poem, he/she has a greater knowledge of the situation than those experiencing it. A technique that, on stage, or within drama, is known as [dramatic irony](#).

The peasants say that,

**With every movement that the scorpion made his / poison moved in
Mother’s blood...**

This gives the reader the sense that they believe if they are able to capture and kill the scorpion the mother will be cured. A simple, primitive belief, that the reader would very well know to be unfounded. Once again elevating the reader’s position above that of the peasants.

The fifth paragraph, also seven lines, holds the poem’s momentum steady. The peasants wish the scorpion to be stilled, but offer a bit of consolation for the mother.

They, deep in their superstitions, say to the mother that the poison will burn away the sins of her previous birth, and decrease the suffering of her next. This is a reference to the traditional Hindu belief of reincarnation. Due to their lowly social status it was believed that the mother must have committed some kind of grievous sin to be condemned to this life, and that perhaps this suffering she is going through will improve her chances of being reincarnated into a higher position in her next life.

This stanza continues into the next in which the speaker continues relaying the words of the peasants. They wish that the pain the mother is experiencing will purify her flesh,

of desire, and your spirit ambition,

The peasants have given up their search for the scorpion and are now sitting around the mother with her at the center of a circle. The speaker describes each peasant as wearing a face that is peaceful with understanding. The next two lines allow for quick progression of time. Ezekiel lists a number of developments and additions to the story. All of the following are added to the situation:

More candles, more lanterns, more neighbors, / more insects, and the endless rain.

The mother is “twisting” on the floor, “groaning” into the mat. It can be assumed that quite a large crowd has gathered around the mother. Many there to help, and probably some there just to observe. At this point in the story the father is introduced into the poem. He is described as being a very sensible man, rational, and a sceptic. Most likely doubtful of the beliefs of the peasants. At this moment though he is desperate. Ezekiel’s speaker describes his father as trying

every curse and blessing, / powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.

His father has forgotten his reason and is trying everything he can think of in an effort to save his wife. While the reader may have felt some distance from the characters at this point, the father’s desperation feels real and acute. A man hopeful beyond reason that a curse or blessing will save his wife. He even goes so far as to burn paraffin on her toe. The speaker watches the flames it creates “feeding” on his mother. Just as the poison is moving through her body, so is the flame consuming her skin. The reader

is then informed that all of this has been going on twenty hours. A truly painful and horrific death.

Throughout this poem a number of different remedies are tried in an attempt to save the mother, from what the reader can infer, none of them help. Some of these practices will surely seem absurd to a modern reader. These references to older medicinal practices put distance between the reader and the speaker, especially in the final line of the seventh stanza in which a

holy man perform[s] his rites to tame the poison with an /
incantation.

After this distance is in place, Ezekiel swiftly breaks down the barrier to show how truly similar the reader is, no matter where he/she is from, to the characters in the poem. They are all human and are united by the final stanza.

My mother only said / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And
spared my children.

While once again the scorpion is spoken about as if it chose to kill the mother, the mother's dedication and pure love for her children breaches the gap between the characters in the poem and any reader. All can empathize with the love felt for a child, mother or father. This woman, although distant, living in a different time and place, is just as human and real as anyone reading the poem.

About Nissim Ezekiel

[Nassim Ezekial](#) was born in Bombay in 1924 as part of Bombay's Jewish community. He attended Wilson College in Mumbai and received a BA in Literature. After graduating he taught English literature, and continued his studies at Birkbeck College, London where he studied Philosophy. He was married, and published his first collection of poetry in in 1952, *The Bad Day*. Another book, *The Dead Man*, was published in 1960. His career also included working in the publication industry, as a

critic at *The Names of India* and editor of *Poetry India*. He also held a number of professorial positions at the University of Leeds and University of Pondicherry. He would receive the Padmashri award by the President of India in 1988. He died in January of 2004 at 79 years old.