

Louis Macneice
Prayer before birth
More challenging questions!

Worksheet by:
Keith Tankard
Knowledge4Africa.com

1. Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the club-footed ghoul come near me.
 - What do all those creatures have in common? Why should the child be afraid of them? (4)

2. I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.
 - Why does the poet refer to the "tall walls", the "black racks", the "wise lies" and the "blood baths"? (4)

3. provide me
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light
in the back of my mind to guide me.
 - What do the images presented in this stanza tell us about the modern world as the poet portrays it? (4)

4. forgive me
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,
my life when they murder by means of my
hands, my death when they live me.
 - Explain the "sins" mentioned here. Why should the child feel responsible for them if he doesn't actually commit them? (4)

5. rehearse me
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
old men lecture me.
 - What is the overriding image used here? Why would the child need help with the part that he plays? (4)

6. I am not yet born; O hear me,
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God
come near me.
 - Why should this stanza be so short when compared to the other stanzas? (4)

7. O fill me
With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.

- What is the common theme with all the wishes contained in this stanza? (4)

8. Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me.

- In the last line, the child says, "Otherwise kill me". What is this act of killing called? (1)
- Comment on this final stanza as a suitable climax to the poem. (4)

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