

To a small boy who died in Diepkloof Reformatory

by Alan Paton

Small offender, small innocent child
With no conception or comprehension
Of the vast machinery set in motion
By your trivial transgression,
Of judges, magistrates, and lawyers,
Psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors
Principals, police, and sociologists,
Kept moving and alive by your delinquency,
This day, and under the shining sun
Do I commit your body to the earth
Oh child, oh lost and lonely one.

Clerks are moved to action by your dying;
Your documents, all neatly put together,
Are transferred from the living to the dead,
Here is the document of birth
Saying that you were born and where and when,
But giving no hint of joy or sorrow,
Or if the sun shone, or if the rain was falling,
Or what bird flew singing over the roof
Where your mother travailed. And here your name
Meaning in white man's tongue, he is arrived,
But to what end or purpose is not said.

Here is the last certificate of Death;
Forestalling authority he sets you free,
You that did once arrive have now departed
And are now enfolded in the sole embrace
Of kindness that earth ever gave to you.
So negligent in life, in death belatedly
She pours her generous abundance on you
And rains her bounty on the quivering wood
And swaddles you about, where neither hail nor tempest,
Neither wind nor snow nor any heat of sun
Shall now offend you, and the thin cold spears
Of the Highveld rain that once so pierced you
In falling on your grave shall press you closer
To the deep repentant heart.

Here is the warrant of committal,
For this offence, oh small and lonely one,
For this offence in whose commission
Millions of men are in complicity
You are committed. So do I commit you,
Your frail body to the waiting ground,
Your dust to the dust of the veld, –
Fly home-bound soul to the great Judge-President
Who unencumbered by the pressing need
To give society protection, may pass on you
The sentence of indeterminate compassion.

Glossary:

Conception – The process of visualising or thinking something out.

Trivial – of little importance or significance.

Transgression - sin or crime.

Magistrate – a public officer that oversees the upkeep of law.

Psychologist – A doctor that deals with the processes, motives, reactions and nature of the human mind.

Psychiatrist – A doctor that deals with the treatment of mental or nervous disorders.

Sociologist – one who studies the behaviour and customs of a group of people and/or the organisation and growth of human society.

Delinquency – fault, misdeed, petty law-breaking, especially of a minor.

Clerk – person tasked with administration in an organisation.

Travail – suffering the pains of childbirth.

Forestalling – prevention or obstruction by being the first to act.

Bounty – generosity.

Swaddle – wind a cloth tightly round something.

Tempest – violent storm.

Repentant – feeling sorry for previous sins or faults with the intention of changing.

Warrant – document of authorisation.

Committal – act of committing; the act of placing a corpse in a grave or crematory oven.

Commission – act of committing; entrusting authority to another to act on ones behalf as well as the price charged for this service.

Complicity – state of being an accomplice in some wrongful action.

Unencumbered – not burdened or obstructed.

Indeterminate – not fixed or definite.

Pathos – evoking pity.

Satirical – attacking any wickedness, folly or abuse through mockery or sarcasm.

Resigned – accepting without complaint; submissive.

Alliteration – the use of words in sequence that all begin with the same letter.

Onomatopoeia – the use of words in sequence that all have similar vowel sounds.

Belatedly – postponed.

Lamentation – expression of deep grief.

Summary:

The poem is a serious meditation on the seemingly insignificant life of a small offender. The poet directly addresses the small boy as though he feels that he has to account to the boy for the way in which those of authority have treated him. Continual reference to the boy heightens the reader's awareness of his absence and so heightens the feelings of pathos. The boy's death is also blamed, in part, on society.

Tone:

- . Regretful
- . Satirical
- . Resigned

Interpretation:

Key:

Green- important connotation.

Yellow- alliteration, onomatopoeia

Blue- imbalance.

Title:

The title is suggestive of an ode (a poem of praise). This is ironic as the poem is actually a combination of a protest poem and an elegy (mourning poem). This contributes to the satirical tone of the poem.

Line:

1. The speaker addresses the child. he is described as small which may make reference to both his height and the seriousness of his crime. 'Offender' is contrasted with 'innocent' suggesting the false impression given of the boy in society.
2. The child has, and possibly could never have, understood...
3. the massive effect that his petty law breaking would have. 'Machinery' suggests that the authorities are not human and hence uncaring and impersonal.
4. 'Trivial' reinforces the child's innocence and mocks authority.
5. Those in different fields of authority.
6. Legal authority.
7. Medical authority.
8. Domestic/ social authority.
9. Authorities are paid to deal with transgressors. Suggests that authorities are a parasite – feeding off the misfortune of others.
10. 'Shining sun' is evidence of fair weather and suggests that life is now "brighter" or better for the child. This is ironic as the child is dead. This suggests the poor treatment of the boy in life, as death is more pleasant.
11. The child is being buried. That the child's death is brought up so soon after line9 suggests that his death was the fault of the authorities, hence their description as parasites. (see line 9)
12. A lamentation.

13. The first three words of the line lead us to believe that the clerks are emotionally moved by the child's death, as we would expect of a human being, instead we see that they are simply moved to action. This shows the indifference of authority.

14–16. Unemotional acts of clerks.

17–21. All details recorded are impersonal and factual. Nothing else is seen as important.

22. The child's name in English means "he has arrived".

23. The child's destiny in life is not specified in his name. This makes us think of the future that the child could have had and causes us to question whether it was the child's destiny to die so young, which in turn causes feelings of bitterness toward the authorities who are blamed for his death.

24. Death is personified.

25. The boy dies before a judgment can be passed on him as an adult. Death frees the boy from the hardship and suffering of his life.

26. 'Arrive' is a play on the boy's name (see line 22) and strengthens the reference to him. 'Arrived' is also contrasted with 'departed' which suggests balance. (His sufferings in life are going to be balanced by the peace and serenity of his death.)

27. The boy is covered with soil as he is buried. 'Embrace' suggests love which stands in contrast to his treatment when he was alive.

28. 'Kindness' is also in contrast to his life. Earth is personified as motherly and caring.

29. Earth (society, authorities) showed no kindness to the boy in life and now seeks to make up for it in death.

30. Imagery of soil filling the grave.

31. Imagery continued. Soil falls like rain on the wood of the boy's coffin.

32. 'Swaddles' is often used to refer to the wrapping of a baby in cloth at birth. This is ironic as it occurs at the child's death, which again refers to the boy receiving that which was due to him in life, only in death.

33. Harsh forces of nature.

34. Forces of nature can no longer affect him. 'Offend' links back to 'small offender' (see line 1) which suggests that the offender (child) was himself offended in life. 'Spears' suggests that the rain is lethal.

35. 'Pierced' is a continuation of the spear imagery. The effect of the rain on the boy is no longer negative. Earth attempts to make up for lost blessings by allowing the rain to have a positive effect on the boy in death. Again reference is made to the boy finally receiving that which he ought to have received whilst living.

36. Imagery. The boy's coffin will sink deeper into the earth if the ground is soft and wet.

37. Again we see that Earth is sorry for neglecting the boy. Earth stands in contrast to the authorities who are not sorry at all.

38. The documents committing the boy to the institution.
39. Reminder of mourning and lamentation.
40. The judgement of the offense was supported, commenced and demanded by society.
41. Society is also to blame for the child's death and yet they are not brought to justice.
42. The boy was committed to the reformatory and, consequent to his poor treatment, he must now be committed to the earth.
43. 'Frail' suggests the boy's vulnerability. 'Waiting' suggests the earth's eagerness to grant its bountifulness to the boy, which it neglected to do during his time alive.
44. The boy's body returns to nature.
45. 'Fly' suggests freedom. The soul of the boy is finally returning to his true, eternal home with God.
46. God is not pressured by society...
47. to protect them from the frail offender. These words are said in mocking to emphasise society's lack of compassion.
48. God will pass a judgement that is founded on never- ending mercy (God is forgiving and caring), unlike society.

Alliteration, Onomatopoeia:

The repeated 'o' sound slows the pace and suggests mourning and lamentation.

Imbalance:

Child:

'small'

human

alone

Authority:

'vast'

machine

'Millions of men',

'judges, magistrates, and lawyers

Psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors

Principles, police, and sociologists,'