Where I come from

Elizabeth Brewster

People are made of places. They carry with them
hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace
or the cool eyes of sea-gazers. Atmosphere of cities
how different drops from them, like the smell of smog
or the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring, 5
nature tidily plotted in little squares
with a fountain in the centre; museum smell,
art also tidily plotted with a guidebook;
or the smell of work, glue factories maybe,
chromium-plated offices; smell of subways 10
crowded at rush hours.

Where I come from, people
carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods;
blueberry patches in the burned-out bush;
wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint, 15
with yards where hens and chickens circle about,
clucking aimlessly; battered schoolhouses
behind which violets grow. Spring and winter
are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

A door in the mind blows open, and there blows 20
a frosty wind from fields of snow.

Biographical Information

- Elizabeth Brewster was born in 1922 in the small lumber town of Chipman, New Brunswick, Canada.
- As a young poet in the 1940s, Elizabeth Brewster wrote in an almost desperate attempt to order the chaos of her own psyche.
- Most of Brewster's early poetry was based on rural and small-town rather than urban experience and that it was mainly traditional in form. The bulk of her poems centre around trees, oceans, cabins and childhood recollections, lulling the reader into a state of rustic complacency.

Summary

The key idea of the poem seems to be that a person's character is always formed at least in part by the place where he or she is born – "People are made of places". Wherever you go in life you will carry with you memories and echoes of your birthplace, whether it is a city, as in the first stanza, or the quiet Canadian countryside where Elizabeth herself was born – "Where I come from, people carry woods in their minds" – and certainly the picture she draws in the second stanza does seem at first to be idyllic and wonderful, strongly contrasting with the city images in the first stanza.

This idea shows us that who we are is shaped by where we were born and where we grew up, but this is not the end of the shaping process, as the first line suggests 'People are made of places', you are shaped as much by where you were born and grew up as the places that you go to after your childhood, the things that you experience in other places, the things that you see.

Stanza 1

- This stanza deals with the organized and fast paced life of the city. In the city everything is precise and controlled; everything runs like clockwork.

- Line 1-3: The first two lines of the poem summarise the main theme of the poem perfectly. ‘People are made of places.’ As the theme suggests people will never be able to forget their past, or where they came from. People will always be able to tell where you come from ‘They carry with them hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace or the cool eyes of sea-gazers.’

- Line 3-4: ‘Atmosphere of cities how different drops from them’ The author is trying to show that the atmosphere of the place you live in can affect the way that you live, throughout the year as nature progresses through its seasons, atmospherically city life changes greatly.

Stanza 1

- Line 4-5: ‘Like the smell of smog or the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring’, smog telling us about a typical winters day with density of the air being greater and the water vapor blinding our site, ‘the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring’ this tells us how the flowers of spring are starting to blossom, not fully produced and grown the smell of the tulips can not yet be appreciated fully and with the combined smells of the city one could think that they are smelling the tulips when actually the city life prevents the scent of the tulip to a high degree.

- Line 6-7: The idea of the city being organized and tidily planned out is introduced in these lines, ‘nature tidily plotted in little squares with a fountain in the center’, telling us that within the city life, nature still exists in public parks, which have been plotted around the city in small areas to provide the reassurance of sanity within the community, that nature still exists within the city environment but is scarce and nature cannot go about its business how intended to because of the interruptions of city life and pollution.

Stanza 1

- Line 7-8: ‘museum smell, art also tidily plotted with a guidebook’. This compares the tidily plotted countryside to tidily plotted art in an art museum, with a guidebook. The guide book can be a metaphor for life, we try to control everything, to guide ourselves through life instead of taking one step at a time.

- Line 9-10: ‘the smell of work, glue factories maybe, chromium-plated offices’, the city is full of skyscraping office buildings built of steel and other sharp precise materials to give a uniform look and feel to the atmosphere, also with great complexes comes great amounts of pollution, which Elizabeth is relating to with ‘the smell of work, glue factories maybe’.

- Line 10-11: In the end of the stanza ‘smell of subways crowded at rush hours’, this shows the congestion that is caused by overpopulation of the city. It also shows how rushed life in the city is. Also it shows that at the end of the day, no matter where you come from, if you work in chromium plated offices or glue factories, everyone has the same goal and that is to get home.

Stanza 2

- The second stanza introduces an idea change in the poem. The focus of the poem now shifts more to country and rural life; similar to that in which Brewster herself grew up in.

- Line 12-13: These lines provide us with key details in which we can relate to Brewster's childhood, 'Where I come from, people carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods'. Coming from New Brunswick, Canada, is 80% forested and so the forest or 'woods' will always be in the peoples minds as it is the centre of the little community.

- Line 14: People here care about things that people in the city would laugh at, like 'blueberry patches in the burned-out bush'. To the people in the community this is relatively significant as it is the growing of something new where before there was nothing.

Stanza 2

- Life 15: ‘wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint’. This is in direct contrast to the first stanza where everything is new and attractive. The old farmhouses are there solely to serve a purpose and until they stop serving that purpose they will be kept, regardless of looks.

- Line 16-17: Brewster portrays a farming life with the ideas of chickens and hens kept in yards, generally used to provide a source of food in the form of eggs, or literally speaking the chickens themselves. Also the chickens and hens being kept in yards, shows us that in the country there is the room to spare to be able to keep these chickens and hens, whereas in conjunction with the first stanza, the chickens would not be kept as there is no room nor is there any need to keeping the chickens and hens.

- Line 17-18: ‘The battered schoolhouse’ again places emphasis on it being an old building remaining only for practical purposes and not being replaced by a more attractive building. ‘behind which violets grow’ just backs up the earlier line of ‘blueberry's growing in the burnt out bush’, it shows how nature can create a picture of beauty anywhere, out of anything.

Stanza 2

- Line 18-19: ‘Spring and winter are the mind’s chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.’ Spring and winter are two opposing seasons and winter could therefore represent the cold city life and spring the colorful country life. ‘Ice and breaking of ice’ refers to something in the mind that is broken when one makes the transition from the city to the country.

- Line 20-21: ‘A door in the mind blows open, and there blows a frosty wind from fields of snow.’ The last two lines are puzzling. The door blowing open is just another gateway opening in the mind to the memories that she holds of her childhood. The second half these lines ‘and there blows a frosty wind from fields of snow.’ is there to give a feel to the picture that she has been describing and it gives the reader a cold feeling. The frosty wind from the fields of snow is relevant because in Canada the winter is very frosty with a lot of snow and wind.

Another idea to ponder on the last two lines of the poem.

The "door" could be the memory opening in a blast of nostalgia, but the association of winter and the "frosty wind" suggest something less pleasant, like a realisation that the past, her place, is not so good after all. This is supported by the content of the second stanza, where things may seem superficially attractive in a rustic way, but are “burned out”, “old, in need of paint”, where the chickins cluck “aimlessly” and buildings are “battered”. So the suggestion is that it is easy to remember formative places all to positively, but their legacy can be negative; a “frosty wind” in the mind?

Structure

- The Poem is set out into three stanzas, the last being a rhyming couplet, with the words ‘blow’ and ‘snows’.

- If you look at the poem at the end of the first stanza, the last line finishes as a half line. The first line of the second stanza then starts halfway down the line. The reason Elizabeth has done this is because she would like to start the second stanza at the same place that she finished the first stanza; so she has the same line of thought, but it is like she has jumped locations. She finishes the first stanza with ‘subways crowded at rush hours’ and starts the second stanza with ‘Where I come from’. This is to show a distinct change between the two stanza with the first being city life and the second being country life.

Structure

- If you look at the lines in the poem every single line with the exception of 5 out of the 21 lines has some sort of a comma, full stop, colon or semi-colon splitting the lines into two sections. This technique used is a great way to show the reader that the poem is meant to be read slow and appreciatively, taking in what is being said and thinking about it more, and not meant to be quickly read and feeling bewildered afterwards when you are confused about the poem to which you have just rushed.

- Apart from the previously mentioned no other apparent structure can be found, so it is more contemporary and free versed poetry, done to provide uniqueness with the poem and also this allows Elizabeth to get her ideas and points across as there is next to no boundaries which allows her to use any form of poetry language that she wants to, getting the reader thinking more about the poem and its content rather than what words rhyme with what and so on.

Questions

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