

Meditation with a Cat – Lionell Abrahams

The cat inhabits this **moment** on the bed] → Enjambents (Runonline)

complete, nothing left over, nothing intended -

conscious of only sensation defined] →

by this moment on the bed.

Alongside, I simmer with thought,

intentions, memories, questions, ambitions] →

and concepts; the cat, time purpose, death.

The glory of the cat's nature] →

is her agile, replete] →

inhabitation of the moment.

She unfolds her curious elastic ease] →

through the rich space of the room,

tensed by suspicion,

sprung by the cunning lust to kill,

testing the limits of the moment,

the moment she, after all, is gaoled in.

And her motions, her motives] →

are less hers] →

than mine.

Perception and concept and design] →

are the space wherein I'm free.

About the poet

Lionel Abrahams (11 April 1928 – 31 May 2004) was a South African novelist, poet, editor, critic, essayist and publisher. He was born in Johannesburg, where he lived his entire life. He was born with cerebral palsy and had to use a wheelchair until 11 years of age.

Best known for his poetry, he was mentored by Herman Charles Bosman, and he and later edited seven volumes of Bosman's posthumously published works. Abrahams went on to become one of the most influential figures in South African literature in his own right, publishing numerous poems, essays, and two novels. Through Renoster Books, which he started in 1956, he published works by Oswald Mtshali and Mongane Wally Serote heralding the emergence of black poetry during the apartheid era.

In 1986, he married Jane Fox. That year, he was awarded honorary doctorates of literature by the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Natal.

Lionel Abrahams was born in Johannesburg in 1928 of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. He died in Johannesburg of kidney failure on May 30, 2004, at the age of 75. Abrahams suffered from Jewish torsion dystonia, a rare form of cerebral palsy that kept him confined to a wheelchair for the last decades of his life.

Abrahams is a poet who is difficult to label or categorize, although his work is characterized by intellectual integrity and a deep and often despairing compassion. During the 1960s, at the height of apartheid, his Renoster Press published Oswald Mtshali's *The Sound of a Cowhide Drum* and *Yakhal' Inkomo* by Mongane Wally Serote, two best-selling collections that heralded the vigorous emergence of black poetry in South Africa.

Educated at the Hope Home, Damelin College and Wits University, Abrahams was coached in writing by Herman Charles Bosman. He went on to edit several posthumous volumes of Bosman's work, as well as volumes of South African writing and Ruth Miller's collected poems. He has also edited and published two Johannesburg literary magazines and has been holding writing seminars for the last 20 years. He has been awarded honorary doctorates from Wits and Natal universities.

About his poetry

Abrahams's poems are keenly observant and always rigorously argued. He is predominantly a philosopher poet, which is not to say that his work lacks passion or sensuality but that the reader is left with a satisfied sense of being engaged in a debate where ideas dominate. He has a subtle mind and is possessed of a glittering wit and an eye for absurdity.

In his poetry he was able to look at the world and the many strange things going on in it with a great clarity of vision and he translated that vision into poetry that was clear and interesting to read. In contrast to his difficulty in speaking, his written word shone with great clarity, sometimes humorous and sometimes with an edge of anger.

Analysis

Summary

In the poem, Abrahams describes, with loving precision, the movements of the animal: 'She unfolds her curious elastic ease / through the rich space of the room, / tensed by suspicion, / sprung by the cunning lust to kill, / testing the limits of the moment...'

And then, a whiplash turnaround: '...the moment after all, is goaled in.' Goaled, because 'her motions, her motives / are less hers / than mine. / Perception and concept and design / are the space wherein I'm free.

The poem is full of the sunlight of a quiet afternoon rest on a sun-warmed bed. The poem is rich in observation of the peculiarities of cats, but in such a way that one feels one knows this particular cat.

It's the expression of an intense, almost swaggering poetic bravado: the cat only moves, dear reader, because I make her move for you. She is sensation alone, mechanical, goaled by my plans for her, by the moment of the poem. I might not be able to move my own body, but I can perceive and conceive and design her movement – and that's how I can be free. Somewhat reminiscent of Yeats' 'Lapis Lazuli'.

The title

The title indicates that this poem is about someone in deep thought (meditating), with a cat.

Line analysis

Lines 1-4: This serves as an introduction to the poem. The cat is described in the moment. The poet makes use of enjambments to create movement, but also uses repetition ('moment on the bed') to complete the circle.

Lines 5-7: In these lines the poet introduces the speaker. He makes it a very personal poem by introducing 'I'. Again he makes use of the enjambment. He also shows that he is thinking, not only about the cat but also about the purpose of things and death. It shows that this poem is not just about a cat, but about something deeper.

Lines 8-10: He describes the glory of the cat, using enjambments and placing emphasis on the moment, by repeating it.

Lines 11-15: Again he describes the cat. The movements are vividly described. Again he uses enjambments and repetition.

Lines 16-18: In these lines the mood changes as the focus turns from the cat to the poet. He indicates that he is in charge of the cat's movements.

Lines 19-20: The poet reveals something about himself in these lines. He indicates that when he is writing he feels free.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel_Abrahams

The following has been compiled and added by Imbila:

MEDITATION WITH A CAT - QUESTIONS

Read all the notes on the web page about the relevant poem.

Answer these following questions.

QUESTIONS:

1. Re-write the first four lines of the poem in your own words. 2
2. Explain the meaning of 'simmer with thought'. 2
3. What is the purpose of the semi-colon in line 7? 1
4. In line 8 – 10 the cat's nature is described as agile and replete (full after a meal) meaning as lazily lying around.
Describe the contrast with lines 13 – 14. 2
5. Explain the metaphor in line 11. 2
6. Explain the meaning of the word 'gaoled' in line 16. Use it in context of the poem. 2
7. The tone throughout the poem is more relaxed but becomes more serious in the last two lines. What is the poet implying in these lines? (Refer to the information you have about the poet). 2
8. Describe the situation you imagine from reading the title of the poem. 2
9. This poem's structure is classified as 'free verse'.
Give two reasons for this classification. 2
10. Give a short description of the cat's movements. 3

TOTAL 20

MEDITATION WITH A CAT - QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

1. Re-write the first four lines of the poem in your own words. 2

The cat lies on the bed next to the speaker, repeating 'nothing' means that the cat is just lying there, not worried about anything or intending to do anything.

2. Explain the meaning of 'simmer with thought'. 2

The speaker personally thinks about different things in life as well as death.

3. What is the purpose of the semi-colon in line 7? 1

It indicates that different thoughts would follow.

4. In line 8 – 10 the cat's nature is described as agile and replete (full after a meal) meaning as lazily lying around. Describe the contrast with lines 13 – 14. 2

Here the cat suddenly moves almost ready to look for something to kill.

5. Explain the metaphor in line 11. 2

The cat is compared to and described as a piece of elastic being stretched out

6. Explain the meaning of the word 'gaoled' in line 16. Use it in context of the poem. 2

'Gaoled' means to be jailed in. The cat is lying on the bed with the speaker and it is not always easy to keep a cat in a space where they are not comfortable.

7. The tone throughout the poem is more relaxed but becomes more serious in the last two lines. What is the poet implying in these lines? (Refer to the information you have about the poet). 2

The poet suffers from a muscular disease and therefore spends a lot of time on the bed, as his muscles just get uncontrolled spasms. He is dependent on other people to help him, and so now the cat is also restricted to the bed and doesn't have the freedom to go and do what it wants to.

8. Describe the situation you imagine from reading the title of the poem. 2

Meditation means deep in thought and 'with' indicates that both him and the cat are just thinking deep thoughts.

9. This poem's structure is classified as 'free verse'.
Give two reasons for this classification. 2

Any two:

Verse lines of various lengths, no definite rhyme scheme, no stanzas, just one long poem.

10. Give a short description of the cat's movements. 3

The cat moves slowly and unfolds like an elastic, then it she sprung to notice something, so she is now tense ready to kill. There is also mention of being cunning which means she is clever in her approach to things.

TOTAL 20