

Tich Miller by Wendy Cope

Tich Miller wore glasses
with elastoplast-pink frames
and had one foot three sizes larger than the other.

When they picked teams for outdoor games
she and I were always the last two
left standing by the wire-mesh fence.

We avoided one another's eyes
stooping, perhaps, to re-tie a shoe-lace
or affecting interest in the flight

of some fortunate bird, and pretended
not to hear the urgent conference:
'Have Tubby!' 'No, no, have Tich!'

Usually they chose me, the lesser dud
and she lolloped, unselected,
to the back of the other team.

At eleven we went to different schools.
In time I learned to get my own back,
sneering at hockey players who couldn't spell.

Tich died when she was twelve.

Analysis

This poem deals with the cruelty of schoolchildren and the way in which young people can feel isolated from their peers.

The opening lines introduce Tich immediately. The use of her name, as opposed to simply calling her 'A girl in my class' makes us feel connected with the subject of the poem and brings a note of reality to the topic. We know the girl's name, and this brings her to life for us, in a way. She is not just a statistic or an anonymous sufferer of bullying or isolation: she is a real girl.



Tich is described as wearing glasses in a sickly colour of pink: the colour of elastoplast. There is nothing attractive about this image and we may well wonder at this stage about the poet's intentions. Is she setting out to mock Tich? She is not, although others do. Tich's unfortunate appearance is highlighted again in the third line when we learn that one of her feet was three sizes larger than the other. There is something almost humorous about this image, but not quite. The poet's language is simple and stark and we are faced with the tragicomedy of a young girl who is almost clownish, but whose plight arouses our sympathy rather than our laughter. The simplicity of the language throughout the poem reflects the simplicity of the language and thought process of young children, while also forcing us to face the issues being dealt with. There is no flowery language, no euphemisms to hide the harsh reality.

In the second stanza, the poet links herself to Tich. When it came time to choose team members for games, the poet and Tich were always left until last. The mention of the 'wire-mesh fence' makes us think of prison, or a cage. The pair are trapped in their bodies and trapped in their shared plight. They cannot escape the embarrassment which befalls them week in, week out. The use of the word 'always' suggests that this ritual humiliation was a common occurrence.

Although Tich and the poet were united in their distress, they were not closer because of it. They avoided making eye-contact with one another and pretended to tie a shoelace which did not need to be re-tied rather than talk to one another. Perhaps they wanted to avoid facing the fact that they were both rejected by their classmates, or perhaps they did not want to be seen to be connected in any way.

The poet says that another avoidance tactic was to pretend to be interested in the flight of a bird overhead. The bird is described as 'fortunate'. It can fly away; it can escape any tormentors. The girls cannot. Also, the bird is graceful, unlike Tich and the poet. By looking at the bird, they can also fool themselves and others into believing that they can't hear the 'urgent conference' of the other girls deciding which of the pair is the lesser of two evils. Neither is wanted, but one must be chosen. We learn for the first time that the poet was a fat child: the others call her 'Tubby'. Nobody seems to want either and they argue amongst themselves, within earshot of the rejected girls.

The poet tells us that 'usually' she was chosen: not because she was wanted, but because she was not quite as bad as Tich. The word 'usually' again reinforces the idea that this humiliation was ongoing during the girls' early schooldays. Tich, being the last one left,

had no choice but to 'lollop' to the back of the other team, even though they had not selected her. She had to join their team simply by dint of being the final girl left. The onomatopoeic word 'lolloped' suggests Tich's graceless way of moving. Again, it might be humorous in another context, but it is not here. We can visualise her slow progress to the back of the group all too clearly and imagine the tortuous slowness of her gait. It does not require a lot of imagination to picture the expressions on the other girls' faces as they watched her ungainly run.

For the poet, things changed. She moved on to a different secondary school and she learned to use her academic ability to get her own revenge on the sporty types who had sneered at her in earlier days. It is interesting to note that the poet found a different way to bully, but did not learn that mockery is cruel and should be avoided. Like so many people who are picked on, she found her own way to do that to others.

There is a complete stop and a break before the last line, which stands alone. This adds dramatic effect and makes us concentrate on what is about to be said. What follows is a simple statement. 'Tich died when she was twelve.' There is no comment on this but we are struck by the fact that although the poet found her own way to cope, Tich never did. Her short life ended without her ever managing to be respected or liked by the other girls. The simplicity of the final line adds to the sadness. Just as Tich could not avoid her fate, we cannot avoid the tragedy of this ending. There is no attempt to soften the blow or to make sense of what happened. The fact that the last line stands alone symbolises Tich's standing alone, unwanted and unselected to the end of her brief, lonely life.

Themes:

Alienation – Neither Tich nor Tubby fits in and they are isolated from their classmates as a result of their physical shortcomings. Though they are both made miserable by the situation, they are not united in their sadness. They are even alienated from one another.

Childhood / schooldays / difficulties of being young - Tich and Tubby's experience is one which is, unfortunately, shared by many schoolchildren. The other girls are cruel, albeit unwittingly. They want the best team members, but they don't consider the hurt caused by their behaviour.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Youth
- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue
- ✓ A person