

A Welcoming Party

Background:

In 1945 as the war was drawing to an end, Montague was a sixteen year old student in boarding school in Armagh. He and the other students were brought to the cinema, where, as well as films, newsreels were shown. Montague recalls seeing a newsreel of the liberation of the concentration camps. It is easy to imagine how horrifying such a sight must have been for the boys and what a lasting impact it would have made on them. There is a Pathé newsreel of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on you tube which I feel captures much of what is dealt with in this poem. Viewer discretion is advised: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KCKagd6Ihk>



Summary and analysis:

Title:

The title of the poem suggests a happy occasion, perhaps one in which an important person is greeted on arrival at an event. However, the German words in italics underneath change the mood immediately and cause us to wonder who is asking, 'How was this possible?' and why.

Stanza One :

The word 'That' to describe the 'final newsreel of the war' immediately focuses our attention on the importance of the film. It is not simply 'a' newsreel but is one that has remained with the poet to this day. Many of the films of the liberation of the camps show the survivors walking towards the cameramen and to the boys walking into the cinema it must have appeared as if these emaciated men, women and children were walking out of the screen towards them. The impression they make is so strong and the poet becomes so immersed in the images he is seeing that it is almost as if he is part of the film. The survivors are described as 'almost shades', or ghosts. (In a 1945 radio report on the liberation of a concentration camp, Richard Dimbleby describes the scene in a similar way, saying that the people walking towards the British troops were more like ghosts

than living men and women.¹⁾

The final line of the stanza is particularly powerful. Heel clicking was a form of salute in the German army and the noise was achieved by the heels of the soldier's boots snapping together as he stood to attention. In this case, however, the heels click because the people are reduced so emaciated that if their limbs touch their bones click much as a skeleton's might. The word 'clicking' is onomatopoeic, further bringing to life the horror of this image. By bringing the two ideas together, Montague reminds us that it was the ruthless efficiency of a well-trained army that created this suffering and death.

Stanza Two :

The second stanza is even more horrifically realistic than the first. People, dead and dying, are lying together in heaps and, just as insects emerge from eggs laid in decaying flesh, so do the hands and legs of those still strong enough to move. The word 'insectlike' captures both the dehumanising effect that the camps have had on these people and the terrible emaciation which leaves their limbs looking like the stick-thin legs of insects.

The moaning and wailing of the people in their agony and desperation is a terrible 'ululation'. The sound is not particularly loud: it is described as 'shy', almost as if these weak and defeated people have lost all hope that they will be heard and are afraid to ask for help. The poet is struck by the fact that children of his own age, who should be reciting verbs in school are instead merely conjugating the verb 'to die': I die, you die, he dies...'

Stanza Three:

This stanza opens with an oxymoron² describing a child who 'clamoured mutely' for affection. It is heart-breaking that all the child wants is love and the description of the child's mouth – it is 'like a burnt glove' – brings to mind both the leathery texture of skin shrunk over bones and the crematoriums where so many other camp inmates were burned. Other survivors hold up hands as they beg for nothing but kindness and compassion, which Montague calls 'the small change of our souls'. It is not a lot to ask.



¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/holocaust/5115.shtml>

² A figure of speech in which two contradictory words are used together

Stanza Four:

As the poet watches the film, the line between the newsreel and the reality of his own life becomes increasingly blurred. Earlier he imagined that the figures on the screen were walking out to meet him and his fellow classmates at the entrance to the cinema, now he seems to believe that they are smiling at the boys as 'protectors'. He is still bemused by what he sees and wonders how such skeletal figures can live. He is aware that he and his friends have nothing to give but their 'parochial brand of innocence'. In the face of such horror, he feels helpless.

Stanza Five:

Montague comments on the fact that being Irish during World War Two meant being at the edge of the events that took place without actually being involved. Ireland was neutral during the war and it was a 'drama of unevent' compared to what was happening elsewhere. However, Montague points out that human compassion can fail in Ireland just as easily as it can elsewhere. He may be commenting on the Irish response to the horror of the concentration camps or he may be pointing out that we are also capable of inflicting terrible suffering on our own people. The question 'How was this possible?' is answered to an extent here. Evil is not limited to any particular country or any particular time.

Stanza Six:

In the final stanza, the poet reflects on the lasting impact of that 'long dead Sunday in Armagh'. It was then that he realised for the first time what 'total war' means: innocent men, women and children suffer and die. This is an important moment for the young poet. It is likely that the war footage he would have seen up to this point would have been British newsreels telling of exciting Allied victories abroad – all stirring stuff for a teenage boy. The 'final' film, however, is a shocking and sobering insight into what war really means. The young Montague's frustration is evident as he belts a football through the air in an effort to vent his feelings. There is a hint of bitterness in his mentioning the fact that his school is a Christian one. Despite the teachings of the church on loving and helping your fellow man, Montague and his fellow students are powerless to do anything to help children their own age who are struggling desperately to live.

Themes: Man's inhumanity to man, cruelty and suffering, and coming of age.