

Analysis of 'The Reservist' by Boey Kim Cheng

Background

Boey Kim Cheng is a Singapore born Australian poet. Though he now lives in Australia, the influences that have shaped his poetry can be traced to his northern Asian descent and his Straits Chinese heritage. His decision to migrate to Australia was influenced by his unhappiness with the prevailing political and cultural atmosphere in Singapore. In this poem, he mocks the practice of military training that all able bodied men in Singapore have to undergo compulsorily. For two years they have to in active service, after which till the age of forty, they are recalled for annual training. Those who shirk this compulsory training can be tried by a military court and punished.

Metaphorical Inference

This poem is rich in metaphors. This, along with the rhythmic force of his lyrics, persuades the reader to believe strongly in Boey's recurring themes. Assuming the persona and voice of a soldier who is in reserve, the poet shows the repetitive nature of military training and its purposelessness. The reservist is too old, too out of shape ("tuck the pot bellies") to be of any great use. But under threat of court-martial, all report for duty on the stipulated date. In the amused and self-deprecatory tone of the narrator, the poet mocks the army and its routine. But the poem ends on a note of hope; something new and promising could emerge out of this pointless exercise.

Summary

Using words that denote medieval warfare (joust, fanfare, clarion) the poet announces the arrival of the call letter to all the members of the reserve regiment to attend the annual training camp. This exercise is, according to him, as purposeless as Don Quixote titling at the windmills imagining it to be an enemy. Most of the reservists realize they are out of shape as they struggle into their mothballed uniforms. Once they arrive at their camp they are issued state of the art weapons that were part of their kit when they were in active service. The reservists then start mindlessly following the instructions marching all the same trails that they covered last year. There is a disconnect between what they wish to do and what they actually do as though the entire exercise had been dreamed up somebody as a fantasy. Shedding the amused tones of irony and sarcasm, the poet suggests that to the surprise of the reservists, something positive could come out of the annual joust. Though there is a touch of Sisyphean purposelessness to the whole thing, the men may discover new trails that will take them to a fresh dawn of hope.

Analysis

Stanza 1

The poet chooses words connected to medieval warfare in the opening stanza. War and martial training is seen as an anachronism, out of sync with the modern world. The men are equally antiquated; they are well past their prime, their mothballed uniforms barely fit them and they are already battle weary fighting the battle of daily existence. All that is modern about them are just their shiny new weapons which were part of their kit while in active service.

Stanza 2

There is a brain numbing sameness about their training; they trudge along the same trails, the same forests greet them until they are too weary for life's real battles. They seem to be strapped into their roles by someone else leaving them powerless to escape.

Stanza 3

Is this the only outcome of this training, this call to arms? No, they may do surprisingly well with their success being reflected by the new medals on their chests. But there is no escaping the sheer waste of effort. War games are monotonous and the lord or the ruler who dreamed this up may fall asleep due to the monotony. Hopefully the trails they march along will lead them to a new

daybreak.

Overall Impression

Boey Kim Cheng disapproved of most of the policies of the rulers of Singapore. A pacifist by nature, Boey Kim Cheng finds the annual military training a waste of time and effort. The men are unfit for war, the training regimen is outdated and the monotony is killing. Yet every year, this exercise is undertaken.

An Analysis of the Poem Reservist Written by Boey Kim Cheng

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The Reservist by Boey Kim Cheng, who is a Singaporean poet who migrated to Australia (Poon, 2009), is a ballad that has the characteristics of a free verse in terms of its form, structure, rhyme scheme, and rhythm. War is the theme of the poem as indicated by certain war-related phrases, such as “report for service”; “We will keep charging”; “long years of braving the same horrors”, especially “As clarion notes” which directly connotes is a war trumpet. Other war-themed words used in the poem are “battle-weary”, “command” “joust”, and “weapons”.

From the opening stanza, a mix of martial language and physical reality of the irregular soldiers is exhibited. The martial language includes “court-martial fanfare”, “call to arms”, while physical reality of the irregular soldiers includes “grunts”, “pot bellies”, and “creaking bones”, indicate age of the soldiers. Aside from the soldiers who are not sound fit to fight, “rusty armour” implies that they have been doing this for some time, which also refers to the repetitiveness and monotony of war. Along with the comic contrast given by the “sleek weapons” are the ironies from “battle-weary knights”, “the annual joust”, and “the tilting ‘at the old windmills”.

In the second stanza, a figure of speech used connects closely to the poem’s intention and feeling. Through the alliteration of “m” and repetition of “same” in lines 14, 15 and 30 and “again” in lines 11 and 17, monotony is shown. The alliteration of the letter “m” is contained in the quote “masked threats and monsters armed with the same roar” of lines 21 to 22. The monotony of war is shown by lines that feel monotonous, such as “We will keep charging up the same hills, plod through the same forests”. This reference to the situation’s monotony strengthens the intention of the poet to portray war.

More serious in mood, the second stanza suggests that the reservists have no control and are ‘like children placed/ on carousels’, the fairground simile expanded with military exercises described as an “expensive fantasyland”. The reference to “tedious rituals” and those in command as “monsters” clearly shows the impatience of the narrator.

It is up to the reader to decide whether the narrator’s appearance in the final stanza as one of the medaled “unlikely heroes” and discovering “daybreak” and “open sea”. There is also a good effect of the connection of the poem with ancient Greek myth. In lines 30 and 31 which say “We will march the same paths until they break onto new trails, our lives stumbling”, the feeling of fear is evident along with the monotonous and tiresome lives of soldiers.

Assuming the voice and persona of a part-time soldier, the poet has the objective of showing the repetitive nature of war. In the entire poem, there is a self-deprecating and amused tone of the narrator, the army, and the routines. However, the poem ended with a tinge of optimistic tone, indicating that something worthwhile will be achieved ultimately, although it could also be interpreted as a final joke. Generally, the poem successfully created a feeling of fear, monotony, and age that prevailed in the tone.