

The Conscript of Christ

A Close Reading of “The Conscript”

By Joselyn Yang

In the Italian sonnet “The Conscript” by Wilfrid Gibson, the author explores the ease with which mankind can often dissociate themselves with the suffering of others so long as their own wellbeing is not at risk. The poet employs the use of vivid imagery, sharp juxtaposition, and haunting diction to capitalize upon the shockingly cold indifference with which human beings can regard each other.

The poem’s title, “The Conscript,” indicates the setting: young men who have been drafted to fight in the war are undergoing medical examinations to determine their physical and mental competency. In a sharp juxtaposition to the intensity and magnitude of the life-altering process, the examiners are described as being “Indifferent, flippant, earnest” (Gibson 1). The choice of diction in the asyndeton indicates the examiners’ detachment and the lack of emotion—the event is clearly not important or momentous enough to warrant an active presence. The commas between the adjectives and omission of conjunctions seem to suggest how the examiners view the process—it is repetitive, monotonous, and similar to the format of continuous notes that a researcher would take while observing a specimen. The word “but” (1) indicates that above all else, they are simply “bored” (1). In the second line, the

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nameless and faceless examiners are given a collective title, “The doctors” (2). In describing them as such, the doctors’ collective anonymity constructs an additional barrier of indifference between them and the soldiers whose fates they are essentially sealing. Furthermore, the doctors are described as “[sitting] in the glare of electric light” (2) which bolsters the tone of clinical and emotionless sterility and again conjures the image of scientists’ detached observation of a specimen. In describing the young men as an “endless stream” (3), it is evident that the doctors have dehumanized these potential soldiers; they have been reduced to “naked white / Bodies” (3-4) as opposed to living, breathing human beings. The word “naked” (3) places a heavy emphasis on this objectification— the men are quite literally stripped of their humanity. To the “Indifferent, flippant” (1) doctors, they are nothing more than bodies who will dispense bullets or retain them.

As the focus of the poem shifts from the doctors to the potential soldiers, the poet utilizes irony in describing their conscription into the war as a “hasty award” (4). The choice of the adjective “hasty” (4) serves, once again, to imply the utter disregard of the doctors—they not only devalue the young men as “Bodies” (4), but also are so “bored” (1) and eager to be finished that they do their work hastily and carelessly. The “award” (4) they have so flippantly bestowed upon the young men is, at best, “life or death” (5). The author insinuates that death, while perhaps not as desirable as life, provides a sense of certainty and absolute closure. On the other hand, the looming threat of “maybe...living death” (5) proves to be an infinitely more sinister destiny. The ambiguity of the word “maybe” (5) juxtaposes the certainty of life or death; the murky unclarity of such a fate reflects the paradoxical phrase “living death” (5), insinuating that this state rests somewhere between life and

death—a “No Man’s Land” of its own accord. However, the possible horrors of “living death” (5) are provided by the poet: “mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a darkened brain” (6). The sole use of body parts to describe the fate of the men implies that war, beginning with the cold indifference of the doctors and ending with the loss of lives, the mutilation of bodies, and the destruction of peace, reduces humans to bodies—bodies in infantries, bodies in combat, and bodies in graves. A semicolon draws the focus of the scene back to a single, simple image — “the chairman...[whose] monocle falls again” (7). The imagery depicted seems to be a commentary on the continual and seemingly perpetual blindness of those in superior stations — like that of the doctors—to the suffering of the common man. The loftiness and security their titles, such as “the chairman” (7), elevate them and their wellbeing. Even though their bodies and lives are equally as mortal as those who are sent to the battlefield, they have the autonomy to “[pronounce] each doom with easy indifferent breath” (8). To them, sending a living, breathing man to his death and to his inevitable suffering is as easy as breathing.

The poem undergoes a sudden shift with the words “Then suddenly” (9) which introduces a change in perspective with the pronoun “I.” The first-person speaker says, “I shudder” (9), as he takes in the sight before him: a young man. The young man is depicted standing “before them” (10); the impersonal and collective pronoun serves as yet another reminder of the impersonal doctors. The speaker describes him as standing “wearily” (10); the diction implies that the young man has already endured something that has left him exhausted and jaded, which is ironic as he has not even stepped foot onto the battlefield yet. Regardless, the young man appears to the speaker as being “cadaverous as one already dead” (11). The paradoxical

contrast of the young man standing upright while appearing deceased appears to be a reference to “the living dead” (5) described in the first stanza. As a result, it is evident that the young man is aware of the atrocities the future has fated him to endure, and his outward appearance is already reflective of this premonition. In sharp juxtaposition to the speaker’s cognizance of this reality, a semicolon followed by the phrase “But still” (12) indicates the others – the doctors – in the room are unmoved by the sight before them. In this way, the poem loosely resembles the general structure of a typical Italian sonnet in that the problem – the doctors’ lack of acknowledgement or care for the soldiers’ fates – is presented in the first stanza while a quasi-solution is introduced in the second stanza with the speaker’s visceral awareness of the young man – abated, unfortunately, by the doctors’ aloof apathy. It is, however, important to note the anonymity of the speaker’s identity; it is uncertain whether the speaker is one of the doctors himself, whose emotional capabilities cause him to feel a separation from the other doctors, and consequently, he refers to them as “The doctors” (2) and “them” (10). It is equally likely that the speaker is a potential soldier himself who perhaps sees his own fate projected upon the young man before him. Regardless, the climax of the poem is encapsulated in the poignant image the young man creates. His outstretched arms and “drooping thorn-crowned head” (13-14) are a clear allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on a wooden cross. The implications of the allusion are straightforward – the young man represents the sacrifice that thousands upon thousands of others like him will have to make for the greater good of their nation. However, further meaning can be drawn; like Jesus, these young men have been chosen by their own people from their own nation to die and not be spared like Barnabas. With “nail-marks” (15) already “growing in his feet

and hands” (15), the destiny of this young man and others like him are inescapably sealed by the stamp with which the doctors declare his competency to fight— his competency to suffer, to die.

Wilfrid Gibson’s “The Conscript” illuminates a facet of mankind which is often disregarded and dismissed— the horrifying ease with which human beings can subject other humans to death and lifelong pain. The existence of social hierarchies often erases the guilt of those “higher” in rank or standing and deceives them into living behind an ignorant facade of innocence in which they fail to recognize that war does not kill people— people do.

WORKS CITED

Gibson, Wilfrid. "The Conscript." *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. Ed. George Walter. New York: Penguin, 2006. 27. Print.