

Powerlessness in War

by Matthew Harvey

War is a terrible situation that can affect anyone without discrimination. Kate Daniels wrote "War Photograph" to bring attention to a photograph that displays a naked girl running in the middle of a war. The speaker of the poem is an American who is viewing the photograph. Daniels captures the photograph in detail using various poetic elements while directly being inclusive of the audience for emotional appeal. Daniels's utilization of repetition, imagery, irony, metaphor, and enjambment conveys the idea that when someone is in danger a distance away, feelings of powerlessness and grief ensue within the person who wants to help.

Throughout "War Photograph," repetition amplifies the theme and helps reveal the tone of the poem. One predominant example is the use of the word "running," which occurs a total of six times in the poem and highlights the idea that the naked, helpless child is running towards safety and will never make it there. The repeated use of "running" creates a sense of despair and weakness. An additional example of repetition occurs when Daniels writes, "For how can she know" (line 21). She proceeds to ask, "How can she know / what we really are?" (31-32). Daniels promotes the idea that the child and the audience are separate and are powerless in helping one another. The tone that Daniels conveys is melancholic disappointment. Daniels appears to be disappointed with the situation, and she is upset about her inability to help the girl.

The poem's ironic and metaphorical imagery paints the landscape of atrocities that are occurring around the girl. The second stanza contains an example of powerful imagery. Daniels expresses the following: "And she is also running from the gods / who have changed the sky to fire / and puddled the earth with skin and blood" (13-15). This imagery gives the audience a clear mental image of the fire and the gory environment full of death. Without this strong imagery, the theme would not reach the audience as easily or at all. An example of irony within these lines is

“And she is also running from the gods” (Daniels 13). Readers more than likely, depending on their culture, would not think that the girl would be running from gods. Many cultures around the world see deities as a symbol of peace and safety. The reader may not think that the gods would cause death and destruction on this scale. However, one should acknowledge that the girl may see the gods as unleashing wrath when unhappy. Daniels is trying to convey that perspective as well. The "gods" also serve as a subtle metaphor for the military of the invading country. An invading military fits the context of the destruction the gods are causing. This example of imagery, combined with its underlying imagery and metaphor, furthers an aspect of the theme by providing a clear image of the dangerous landscape and calling attention to the child's suffering to the point of running away from the gods.

"War Photograph" is a free-verse poem with no consistent meter and is feature-rich with enjambment that emphasizes the theme that Daniels is trying to convey. An important example occurs near the end of stanza two where Daniels writes, "After the shutter of the camera / clicks. She's running to us" (26-27). Because the line utilizes enjambment after "camera," the deeper meaning of the girl running can essentially “click” into the reader's mind. The girl begging for a safe place is an idea imparted by “she’s running to us” (Daniels 27). She is in danger, and this purposely targets the reader's emotional state. The very last line of "War Photograph" seeks to accomplish the same goal: "From the distance, we look / so terribly human" (Daniels 33-34). One line underscores the distance between the reader and the girl, while the other points out the distance and war exposing our brittle human nature. This nature is the observer’s lack of power to help those who truly need it.

Kate Daniels puts forth the idea that feelings of weakness and sorrow follow when a person cannot save someone due to distance. The poem appeals to the audience’s emotions by

emphasizing the tragic situation the girl is going through. Daniels achieves this with the creative use of repetition, imagery, irony, metaphor, and enjambment respectively. Daniels's artistic use of poetic elements and the emphasis on the tragedy of the girl create a work that truly captures the horrors and emotional repercussions of war.

Works Cited

Daniels, Kate. "War Photograph." *A Chorus for Peace: A Global Anthology of Poetry by Women*, edited by Marilyn Arnold, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, and Kristen Tracy, University of Iowa Press, 2002.