

Destructive Forces of Man

by Jackson Piet

Humanity has been the dominant group on Earth for thousands of years, but humans are also the most destructive force on the planet. In “To Vermin,” the poet attempts to shed light on this idea by comparing humanity to that which civilization itself has deemed repulsive and damaging. Ledo Ivo’s use of tone, irony, overstatement, alliteration, and graphic imagery in “To Vermin” enforces his suggestion that, due to the destructive nature of man, humans are lesser than even vermin.

Throughout the poem, the poet expresses a bitter but laudatory and motivational tone, notably through diction, that resembles pre-battle speech. Ivo uses words such as “salute” (line 1), “honor” (10), “bow, respectfully” (15), and “admirable” (37) when describing the vermin. These words of praise speak highly of the vermin. When referring to humanity, however, the speaker seems to be more bitter, saying “ordinary people” (Ivo 12) and “devour the wind and the palace, / demolish the structures of rot” (34-35). These words all carry negative connotations, and the contrast in word choice when referencing the vermin and humanity creates a partition between the different emotions the poet has: admiration for the vermin and a distaste for humanity. Ivo also says to the vermin, “We must devour the wind and palace, / demolish the structures of rot, / change the face of the world” (34-36). This battle cry further suggests that the speaker believes that humanity has devastated the planet and has no ability for corrective action. The vermin, however, as harmful as they may be, do have the ability to correct humanity’s faults.

In addition to his tone through diction, Ido utilizes a sense of irony with overstatement sprinkled throughout the poem. The first eleven stanzas of “To Vermin” are those of admiration. Ido speaks of “salut[ing]” (1), “spar[ing] no applause” (7), and “offer[ing] [his] respects” (31) to the vermin. While speaking his praise, Ivo continues his thoughts by following with negative descriptions such as “ruins / the most precious grain.” (2-3), “for the silverfish, taking their time / in book, without ever learning the Latin for life” (8-9), and “to the engineer of decay, / the earthworm” (32-33). Honoring such vile pests creates a sense of contrast between how humanity feels and how the speaker regards the vermin as greater. These ironic statements and hyperboles, such as “the king who chews up even the dreams / and tears of citizens” (Ivo 17-18) and “the earthworm, who swallows man” (33), address just how negatively the speaker views humanity by essentially stating that the vermin may be bad, but at least they deserve praise; humanity does not.

Alliterative sound also helps create a sense of division between the vermin and humans. In the third stanza, Ivo mentions that the silverfish are not “learning the Latin for life” (9). He also uses alliteration with phrases such as “Woodworm and white ant” (Ivo 19), “nibble the nuts” (26), and “the hare hidden in the hedge” (28). This wordplay when describing the vermin creates a sense of vocal harmony when read aloud; however, no such harmony is used when referencing humanity. These vermin show beauty, while humans do not.

Ledo Ivo further expounds on the senses by adding graphic imagery throughout “To Vermin.” He is very vivid when describing the acts of vermin, writing that “larva does not rest / even in the most crystalline waters” (5-6), “the cockroach / who, in the dim night, gnashes” (11), and “To rapacious insects, / to the plagues that lay waste to crops and livestock” (22-23). Here, the poet creates a vibrant picture of the damaging acts of these vermin. These terrible

acts, however, will still “correct for the error of men” (Ivo 39). This imagery sets a scene of disturbance that Ivo uses to support his view of how harmful humanity actually is.

Using these literary devices, Ivo displays his true distaste for humanity. While the message of this poem is unknown until the last stanza, the poet uses graphic imagery to dramatize how awful vermin are. After reading the final line, the usage of tone, irony, overstatement, and alliteration comes together to tie into the concept behind the poem. Ivo reveals to the reader that what humanity sees as vile is nowhere near as destructive and damaging as humanity itself.

Works Cited

Ivo, Lêdo. "To Vermin." Translated by Andrew Gebhardt, *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2021, www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/156073/to-vermin.