

Nissim Ezekiel was a professor of English at the University of Mumbai. He is one of the most noted Indian English poets; and is often mentioned as a "poet of the city". In this poem "Night of the Scorpion", Nissim Ezekiel poignantly describes a mother's selfless love for his children as she, despite having been bitten by a scorpion herself and narrowly escaping death, is grateful to god, that the scorpion had bitten her and spared her children.

### Summary

- "Night of the scorpion" is a poem that can be understood at two levels at one level, the poet describes how, on a rainy day the narrator's mother is bitten by a scorpion and what are the chain reactions to it. At another level, it depicts the India ethos and cultured richness through a simple incident and epitomizes the typical Indian motherhood which depicts sacrifice and affection.
- The narrator remembers the night when the scorpion had bitten his mother. The heavy rain had driven the scorpion to crawl under a sack of rice and unexpectedly had bitten his mother's toe; flashing its devilish tail and parting with its poison.
- The peasants or villagers came into their hut "like swarms of flies" to sympathize with the family. The neighbours buzzed the name of god hoping to paralyse the scorpion as they believed that if the mother moved the poison would spread. They searched for the scorpion with candles and lanterns. They clicked their tongues that the mother's sufferings may decrease "the misfortunes of her next birth". They also prayed that the sum of evil may be balanced in this unreal world against the sum of good that she had done. They prayed that the poison would purify her of her desires and ambitions.
- All the people sat around, the mother in the centre, while she continued to groan and twist with pain, on the mat.
- The narrators father who was normally a rationalist and a practical man, also gave in to the superstitious beliefs of the villagers and joined them in their cursing and praying then putting a mixture of powders and herbs on her toe, a little paraffin on the bite and lit it with a match - hoping to burn the poison away. The narrator saw his mother's toe on fire and must have felt afraid. A holy man, the priest, performed some rites' to probably tame the poison. Only after (20) twenty hours did the poison subside the mother was relieved of the pain, and thanked god that the scorpion bit her and spared her children.
- The poem thus brings out the mother's love and sacrificial thoughts - the maternal instinct, as well as beautifully describes the superstitions and ignorant practices followed by the villagers. The title of the poem thus is very deceptive, as it does not focus on the scorpion at all.

### IMAGERY

Poet communicates an experience. The poet's communication is received by our senses. The senses consist of seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling and touching. The poet has to create an image to stimulate any of these senses. This is called imagery. It can be defined as the representation of an experience through language.

Though visual imagery is most often used in poetry, an image may also represent a sound, a smell, a touch or a feeling or sensation. In this poem, the poet has made use of various types of imagery:

Visual imagery

- scorpion crawling beneath a sack of rice
- peasants came like swarms of flies

Smell imagery

- smell of candles
- smell of burning oil in the lanterns

Tactile experience

- scorpion biting the mother
- father pouring paraffin on the toe.

Internal sensation

- fear
- pain

Sound imagery

- buzzed the name of god a hundred times
- they clicked their tongues

Questions & Answers

Question (1): Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

I remember the night my mother. He risked the rain again.

- Who does "he" refer to?
- Why did he come inside the house? Where did he hide?
- Why does the poet refer to his tail as diabolic?

Answer: i) "He" refers to the scorpion.

ii) He came inside the house to seek protection and shelter from the rain. He hid himself beneath a sack of rice.

iii) The sting of the scorpion's tail caused much pain to the poet's mother. He is therefore calling its tail diabolic or devilish.

Question (2): Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

They clicked their tongues ..... be burned away tonight, they said

- Who are "they" in the above passage?
- What did "they" attribute the mother's suffering to?
- Why did "they" want him to sit still?

Answer: i) "They" in the above passage refers to the villages

ii) They attributed the mother's sufferings to her sins in some previous birth. They said that her present suffering would burn away her sins of her previous birth.

iii) They thought that the poison in the mother's blood moved swiftly as the scorpion moved. They, therefore wanted the scorpion to sit still.

Question (3): Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

May the poison purify your flesh.... the peace of understanding on each face.

i) How did the poison enter the mother's body?

ii) What good did the villagers hope that the poison would do?

iii) Explain the phrase: "peace of understanding"

Answer: i) The scorpion had stung the mother on her toe and thus the poison entered the mother's body.

ii) The villagers hoped that the poison would purify the mother's body of desire and her spirit of ambition.

iii) Although the villagers were sad to see the mother suffering, the understanding that it was doing some good to both her body and her spirit - brought peace on their faces.

Question (4): Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

My father, sceptic, rationalist,.... upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.

i) Why did a "sceptic, rationalist" try every curse and blessing etc? What does it show?

ii) Why did the father pour a little paraffin and put a match to it?

Answer: i) Although the poet's father was a sceptic and rationalist, he was too grieved with the mother's situation to think practically. So, he tried whatever anyone around suggested to him which would help to relieve the mother's pain and suffering. It shows that during a crisis, human beings will do anything suggested to them, by others, to help them overcome the crisis.

ii) The father put a little paraffin upon the bitten toe and put a match to it (lit it) because it was thought that it would burn the poison of the wound.

Question (5): Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

I watched the flame feeding on my mother... it lost its sting.

i) Who is 'I' here?

ii) What does "the flame" remind the poet of?

iii) When did the mother find relief?

Answer: i) "I" here is the poet who is the narrator.

ii) "The flame" probably reminds the poet of the funeral or burning or cremation of a dead body according to funeral rites. In it, the dead body is consigned to flames. So the burning of the mother's toe, probably reminds the poet of that.

iii) After twenty hours of suffering in pain, the poison finally subsided, and the mother got relief.

Question (6): Examine the theme of the poem "Night of the Scorpion".

Answer: The theme of the poem is presented through an incident in which the poet's mother is bitten by a scorpion on rainy night. The villagers on hearing of this unfortunate event, come to see her, praying to god and giving all kinds of justifications for her suffering. With their prayers and words they try to console the victim. The victim's husband who is otherwise a sceptic and a rationalist also gives in to every curse and blessing.

The poem shows how when a critical situation arises, human beings are always willing to help one another. Common villagers show their simplicity and sympathy; though they are not of much help, and give in to superstitions and false beliefs, they try to help out. The father, though a sceptic and rationalist in normal circumstances, yet in this moment of crisis, he gives in to the villagers' advice.

The mother bears the pain and suffering for twenty hours, writhing in pain and when she recovers, she is thankful that she was bitten and not her children, bringing out the maternal love of a mother for her children

Question (7): Show the different qualities in the poet's father and mother that are brought out in the poem.

Answer: The father is logical and scientific in his thinking and does not believe in superstitions and blind beliefs. Yet when his wife is bitten by the scorpion he is anything but logical. He tries out every curse and blessing, every possible antidote. He summons the holy man to perform his rites and even pours paraffin on the bitten to and ignites it. The mother suffers the bite of the scorpion. She groans and moans on the mat twisting and turning in pain. As soon as the poison loses its effect she thanks god for sparing her children. She epitomizes motherhood and like a typical Indian mother is selfless in her love for her children.

Question (8): "After twenty hours  
It lost its sting"

a) Explain 'It lost is sting'

The poison stopped spreading and the pain reduced in the mother's toe.

b) How did the villagers see something positive in the scorpion's attack?

Answer: The peasants believed that the suffering would cleanse some of her sins of the poet birth or of the next birth. With her suffering the balance of evil in this world would be reduced. It would cleanse her soul and kill the spirit of desire which is the root cause of suffering in the world.

Question (1): What had driven the scorpion to the poet's home?

1. Fear
2. Rain
3. Sun
4. Poison

Ans: 2 Question (2): Why did he return to the rain outside

1. He could see in the lightening
2. He was chased away
3. He liked the rain
4. He stang and went away

Ans: 4 Question (3): What did the villagers do when they heard of the scorpion sting?

1. They were indifferent
2. They visited the temple
3. They flocked to the poet's house
4. They went in search of the scorpion

Ans: 3 Question (4): The peasants came like swarms of flies. The figure of speech is

1. Metaphor
2. Simile
3. Personification
4. Alliteration

Ans: 2 Question (5): The sting of the scorpion is

1. painful and can cause death
2. a blessing of God
3. a sin of previous birth
4. momentary and requires no medication

Ans: 1 Question (6): What assessment of the father's character have you made by reading the poem?

1. He is detached and cruel
2. He is harsh but effective
3. He is concerned but helpless
4. He is a holy man and very pious

Ans: 3 Question (7): A sceptic is a person who

1. doubts everything
2. believes everything

3. always thinks of God

4. removes curses

Ans: 1 Question (8): The mother thanks God because the scorpion

1. stung her

2. spared her children

3. went away

4. did not poison her

Ans: 2