

'*The Night of the Scorpion*' is an eight [stanza](#) poem, each stanza of which contains between three and eighteen lines. This is one of Ezekiel's first poems, it was first anthologized in *Collected Poems* (1952-1988) The poem is [free verse](#), meaning it does not contain a [rhyme scheme](#). This choice adds to the seriousness of the poem's [subject](#) matter and the deadly nature of the story Ezekiel tells. It is a **dramatic irony**, which refers to a situation where the [audience](#), such as that of a movie or play, knows more about what's going on on-screen or stage than the characters do.

## ***Analysis of Night of the Scorpion***

*I remember the night my mother  
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.*

This poem begins at the beginning, with the speaker starting the story of how his mother was stung by a scorpion, without using unnecessary phrasing or extra words, but gets right to the point. He describes how the scorpion had been driven inside by "steady rain" and has decided to hide beneath a "sack of rice." This first stanza is only four lines, a choice Ezekiel makes to urge the story forward. A quick succession of stanzas allows for the poem to flow faster.

*Parting with his poison - flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room -  
he risked the rain again.*

The second stanza proceeds in the same way, but this time with only three lines. In this stanza, Ezekiel's speaker describes the actions of the scorpion. He portrays the creature as being purposefully diabolical, a thought that will directly relate to the beliefs and actions of those that attend the speaker's mother. The scorpion moves quickly before anyone can do anything, he "part[s] with his poison..." and runs back outside, to risk the weather again.

*The peasants came like swarms of flies  
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times  
to paralyze the Evil One.*

Throughout this piece Ezekiel makes a number of language choices that continue to reference the movements and parts of different insects. These descriptors are very prevalent in the third stanza. He describes the actions of the peasants as being like swarms of flies, they "buzzed" God's name in a hope to paralyze the "Evil One."

The image that Ezekiel creates here is clear, the reader can easily visualize a swarm of people coming down on the speaker's mother, all with good intentions, but perhaps so numerous that no one can do anything that would help. They are all devoted to the same purpose, praying in the hope of saving the mother. They believe that she has been inflicted by the Evil One, or the devil, and pray in an effort to drive him out. *The peasants came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times.*

*With candles and with lanterns  
throwing giant scorpion shadows  
on the mud-baked walls  
they searched for him: he was not found.  
They clicked their tongues.  
With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.*

The fourth stanza contains seven lines and describes the hunt that the peasants embark on in an effort to find the scorpion. They search with both candles and lanterns, which throw shadows on the wall in the shape of a scorpion. This image of the scorpion still being in the room (only in the form of shadow) helps set the scene for the next lines as the peasants struggle to help the mother. The shadow is representative of their primitive fears, that something Evil is lurking just where they cannot see it.

This fourth stanza continues, and the search for the scorpion has failed, they do not know, as the reader does, that the scorpion fled the house at the beginning of the poem. This puts the reader in a position above those in the poem, he/she has a greater knowledge of the situation than those experiencing it. A technique that, on stage, or within [drama](#), is known as [dramatic irony](#). *The peasants say that, With every movement that the scorpion made his / poison moved in Mother's blood...*

This gives the reader the sense that they believe if they are able to capture and kill the scorpion the mother will be cured. A simple, primitive belief, that the reader would very well know to be unfounded. Once again elevating the reader's position above that of the peasants.

*May he sit still, they said  
May the sins of your previous birth  
be burned away tonight, they said.  
May your suffering decrease  
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of all evil  
balanced in this unreal world*

The fifth paragraph, also seven lines, holds the poem's momentum steady. The peasants wish the scorpion to be stilled, but offer a bit of consolation for the mother. They, deep in their superstitions, say to the mother that the poison will burn away the sins of her previous birth, and decrease the suffering of her next. This is a reference to the traditional Hindu belief of reincarnation. Due to their lowly social status it was believed that the mother must have committed some kind of grievous sin to be condemned to this life, and that perhaps this suffering she is going through will improve her chances of being reincarnated into a higher position in her next life.

This stanza continues into the next in which the speaker continues relaying the words of the peasants. They wish that the pain the mother is experiencing will purify her flesh,

*against the sum of good  
become diminished by your pain.  
May the poison purify your flesh,*

*of desire, and your spirit of ambition,  
they said, and they sat around  
on the floor with my mother in the centre,  
the peace of understanding on each face.  
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,  
more insects, and the endless rain.  
My mother twisted through and through,  
groaning on a mat.*

The peasants have given up their search for the scorpion and are now sitting around the mother with her at the center of a circle. The speaker describes each peasant as wearing a face that is peaceful with understanding. The next two lines allow for quick progression of time. Ezekiel lists a number of developments and additions to the story. All of the following are added to the situation: *More candles, more lanterns, more neighbors, / more insects, and the endless rain.*

The mother is “twisting” on the floor, “groaning” into the mat. It can be assumed that quite a large crowd has gathered around the mother. Many there to help, and probably some there just to observe.

*My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
trying every curse and blessing,  
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.  
He even poured a little paraffin  
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.  
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.  
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation.  
After twenty hours  
it lost its sting.*

At this point in the story the father is introduced into the poem. He is described as being a very sensible man, rational, and a sceptic. Most likely doubtful of the beliefs of the peasants. At this moment though he is desperate. Ezekiel’s speaker describes his father as trying *every curse and blessing, / powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.*

His father has forgotten his reason and is trying everything he can think of in an effort to save his wife. While the reader may have felt some distance from the characters at this point, the father’s desperation feels real and acute. A man hopeful beyond reason that a curse or blessing will save his wife. He even goes so far as to burn paraffin on her toe. The speaker watches the flames it creates “feeding” on his mother. Just as the poison is moving through her body, so is the flame consuming her skin. The reader is then informed that all of this has been going on twenty hours. A truly painful and horrific death.

Throughout this poem a number of different remedies are tried in an attempt to save the mother, from what the reader can infer, none of them help. Some of these practices will surely seem [absurd](#) to a modern reader. These references to older medicinal practices put distance between the reader and the speaker, especially in the final line of the seventh stanza in which a holy man perform[s] his rites to tame the poison with an / incantation.

After this distance is in place, Ezekiel swiftly breaks down the barrier to show how truly similar the reader is, no matter where he/she is from, to the characters in the poem. They are all human and are united by the final stanza.

*My mother only said / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children.*

While once again the scorpion is spoken about as if it chose to kill the mother, the mother's dedication and pure love for her children breaches the gap between the characters in the poem and any reader. All can empathize with the love felt for a child, mother or father. This woman, although distant, living in a different time and place, is just as human and real as anyone reading the poem.

### **Structure of a poem**

Night of the Scorpion is a free verse poem with **8 stanzas** and a total of 47 lines. There is no set rhyme scheme. The meter is mixed. The poem follows the narrative style of storytelling where an incident is narrated in a free verse having no fixed rhyme scheme.

The poem is enriched using various figures of speech such as Alliteration, Antithesis, Hyperbole, Inversion, Metaphor, Onomatopoeia, Oxymoron, Repetition, Simile, and Transferred Epithet. An example of Personification from the poem is "I watched the flame feeding on my mother" as the flame is given the human quality of 'feeding'.

### **Theme**

The poem depicts the supernatural elements that the villagers strongly believe. We come across some irrational beliefs that are prevalent in rural society, such as the movement of the scorpion would speed up the movement of the poison in the body of his mother. It also highlights the villagers' concern about even a small incident like a scorpion bite in the neighbourhood. It also shows the affection that a mother has for her children and the pain that she suffers in silence as it ensures the safety of her children.

The poem portrays many beliefs prevalent in the philosophy of India. The 'karma' theory is one of the dominant ideologies of Indian philosophy, believing that rewards or punishments inflicted on an individual are the results of his own 'karma' or deeds. The villagers in the poem believe that the mother suffered because of the scorpion bite because of the sins of her past birth, or maybe the next birth reduced her suffering. They also feel that the sum of goodwill balance her suffering against that of the sum of evil.

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

In the poem, the Indian philosophy of purification in suffering is underlined. The villagers say that the victim's suffering will purify her of her bodily desires and ambitions that are material. This will bring her soul close to that of the all-powerful God.

