

The Aftermath of War in “The End and the Beginning” by Wisława Szymborska

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.1951>

APA Citation: Piele, M. D. (2024). The Aftermath of War in “The End and the Beginning” by Wisława Szymborska. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*.6(4).500-508. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.1951>

Received:

26/10/2024

Accepted:

06/12/2024

Keywords:

Wisława Szymborska, memory studies, poetry, *The End and the Beginning*, war literature.

Abstract

This study is an analysis of the poem “The End and the Beginning” by Wisława Szymborska. It offers a cyclical perspective framed in an ethical dilemma that encourages readers to long reflection. Few other works have thoroughly examined the English version of this poem, so the present paper provides an analysis of meaning by looking at themes like collective guilt, forgetting, and renewal. Among the ruins, Szymborska explores how society chooses to “cleanse” its memories, preferring to forget rather than understand history. She highlights the conflict between remembering and forgetting, bemoaning humanity’s failure to break free from the cycle of conflict while paying tribute to those who persevere and keep trying. She captures the repetitive nature of destruction and reconstruction that defines human history. The conclusion suggests that genuine healing cannot take place unless the past is faced head-on and its history is responsibly assumed.

1. INTRODUCTION

World literature has very transparently conveyed all the suffering humanity has been subjected to throughout its existence, sometimes as if anticipating it. Wisława Szymborska is part of this literature. Many of her writings symbolize suffering, constructions and reconstructions of the world, presenting all its faces while making her readers question their own selves. Her poetry does not accept a reality beyond nature, which may be contrary to ethics, being sometimes devoid of any explanation (Aronowicz, 2023). She may be called the poet of a memory for which all humanity is responsible, as many of her poems are “miniature pictures, that present unique descriptions of reality with a particular focus on details” (Gicala, 2013, p. 61).

Wisława Szymborska was a very respected and very distinguished figure in literature, being called the “dama” of Polish lyrical literature (Kremer, 2021) and later the “Mozart of poetry” (Brehm, 2024). Szymborska was part of the same generation as the well-known Czesław Miłosz. Despite their different style of perception of existence, he admired her dedication to poetry, both being Nobel Prize winners (Carpenter, 1998). Nonetheless, both can be regarded as poets of reality, drawing from historical and everyday experiences for which rhythm and form are crucial (Wójcik, 2013). They “both spoke about the way 1944 had become an emotional memory for so many Poles” (Norris, 2020, p. 166). She was a teenager approaching adulthood during World War II, later becoming a child of socialist realism and other political waves. Therefore, “she is an involuntary witness of the Holocaust, the Stalinist occupation of Poland, and the eventual imposition of martial law in 1981. In her work, she simultaneously seeks the nature of philosophical truth and bears a devastating historical knowledge” (Parker & Willhardt, 2002, p. 315). Many times, she refers directly to violence, terrorist acts, and the

marginalized part of society, offering such a vivid and determined image of existence (Barlow & MacGregor, 2022).

Upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Szymborska declared:

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world", "ordinary life", "the ordinary course of events" ... But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world (Szymborska et al., 1997).

This reflection emphasizes the transformative power of poetry to disrupt our ordinary perceptions of the world. In everyday speech, phrases like "ordinary world" and "ordinary life" serve as shorthand for the predictable rhythms of existence, things we naturally take for granted. Poetry, on the other hand, challenges us to reevaluate all of these presumptions by highlighting the extraordinary in the everyday. She "writes often of these deep and populous silences of otherness, keeping her conversational style yet sometimes foregoing the lighthearted touch characteristic of her poetry, as her tone becomes deeply serious, as the stakes become impossibly high" (Santilli, 2005, p. 740).

"The End and the Beginning" is one of the poems that strongly reflects the value of the ordinary. First translated in English by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak, "The End and the Beginning" is a shattering image of the world. It appeared in 1993 in the volume of the same name, with a striking post-war vision. So much, Szymborska "experienced first-hand the dilemmas of a return to normal life after a catastrophe. In her acclaimed poem 'The End and the Beginning' (...) she draws a pointed, penetrating picture of post-war social conditions" (Centemeri et al., 2022, p.1).

2. THE AMNESIA OF A BEGINNING

In Szymborska's view, a beginning is an inevitable continuation rather than always a moment of triumph or renewal. Following destruction, there is pressure to rebuild, but this reconstruction is frequently hurried, dishonest, and leaves many ethical issues unresolved. Because of this, the beginning may appear devoid of true hope. It may be instead a self-defense mechanism of a society that shies away from facing its historical guilt. The first lines from "The End and the Beginning" indicate such a beginning:

*After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won't pick
themselves up, after all.*

Resilience, accountability, and the silent work necessary to repair a damaged world are all poignantly examined. The phrase "After every war" implies a sense of inevitability, as if war and its aftermath are recurring patterns in human history. From the very beginning, a quiet heroism is suggested in those who undertake this hard work, reminding readers that true courage often lies in the humble and tireless efforts of those who restore life after every devastation. The word "someone" is non-specific and emphasizes the fact that the burden of reconstruction usually falls on ordinary, nameless people. The reconstruction takes place both emotionally and physically. The "things" to be picked up could refer to more than just objects. They could also symbolize fractured communities, broken relationships, or displaced identities that all must be reassembled.

It can be linked to amnesia because it frequently appears to be “rushing forward” and lacks the depth of change. In contrast, the beginning is portrayed as a confrontation with humanity’s mistakes rather than the burial of the past. The first step is that there is someone who can help the world get back on its feet. Despite not being a historical figure or a film protagonist, he deserves recognition and admiration for the contributions he has made.

3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF A PROFOUND REPAIR

When fields enlivened and cultivated by humans become battlefields, reconstructions become long healing processes. In other words, reparations are a complex process of healing, both individual and collective, in which communities find meaning and individuals learn to live with hope again. However, these reconstructions offer a chance to turn suffering into a catalyst for solidarity and learning. Looking back, “war, violence, expulsions, and genocide ruined Poland materially, atomising Polish society and changing it substantially in the long term” (Saryusz-Wolska & Warneck, 2019, p. 30). The suffering experienced was major, historical, forever anchored in the memory of humanity. The lost lives could not be brought back, and getting a better-balanced society back on its feet was extremely difficult.

*Someone has to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the carts loaded with corpses
can get by.*

*Someone has to trudge
through sludge and ashes,
through the sofa springs,
the shards of glass,
the bloody rags.*

These lines offer both a lament for those consigned to the work of drawing up after violence and a contemplation on the burdens placed on ordinary people in the wake of catastrophe. The repetition of the words “someone has to” emphasizes the inevitability of this work. In Szymborska’s vision, “someone” is every man, as the philosopher and the scientist are alongside other people, not understanding reality differently in a world where not everything requires an explanation (Herman, 2022). It is not a heroic act, but a grim responsibility that falls upon one because there is simply no other option. There is a movement of the inanimate bodies, which gives an image that is as real and dark as possible. A chaos of objects also appears, which holds the traces of people’s previous lives: a sofa arch implies a house; shards of glass suggest broken windows or mirrors; bloody rags symbolize violent wounds.

*Someone has to lug the post
to prop the wall,
someone has to glaze the window,
set the door in its frame.*

This is where the covert work continues. Reconstruction does not seek recognition because it is a form of everyday bravery performed by those who are still able to restore and bring life back into its frame. It draws attention to the unvarnished, basic labor of diligent hands, without which the world could never be restored. Because it is so vivid in movement and emotion, the image that the poet was able to create on the readers’ retina speaks for itself. All of these “entail a forgetting of the trauma – that which is beyond words, that reminds us of the beyond of words, of what cannot be put into words; that which reminds us of the fragility

of our worlds, and challenges us to live with and alongside that fragility” (Edkins, 2016, p. 103).

4. THE EFFECT OF SELF-QUESTIONING

On a profoundly personal level, this poem serves as a mirror, a tool for introspection that calls on readers to examine their own moral stances and reconsider their role in the cycle of reconstruction. Unlike many other poems about war, the present one leads to introspection through the image of a habitual gesture stationary in people’s consciousness. The common man, whose hands restarted the world, deserves greatness in this situation, while the blame is shared. The current reader is the target of the self-questions that portray harsh realities. Because there is always a losing side and a side that supposedly gained something, the cruelty that remains is present on both sides, even if the war has succeeded in its objective. Whether a person becomes a sort of accomplice for the cancellation of an authentic beginning is one of the self-referential questions. The poet challenges her audience to consider how they relate to the history they are inspired by and the horrors occurring in their immediate surroundings. It makes reference to the potential apathy or shallowness that supports the continuation of injustice:

*No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
and it takes years.
All the cameras have gone
to other wars.*

The public cannot hear or see the conflict. Like many others, it appears to be a staged conflict in which man is oblivious to the tragedy taking place all around him. The tragedy would have been documented by “sound bites” and “photo opportunities”, but neither is present. Perhaps the suffering is overlooked when there are no heroes to bring in front and when the stories require too much work, while the photos are not the first piece of evidence. This emphasizes how shallow the present is. Even though it takes years for repairs, people don’t intervene. Cameras build an unfair hierarchy of significance. They have gone for the profitable, attractive stories, leaving behind the silent dramas of humanity. Ironically, in an information-rich world, injustice and malice continue to lurk in the background.

5. THE COLLECTIVE GUILT

Collective guilt refers to the shared responsibility of a community for actions or inactions that have contributed to serious evil in the world. In “The End and the Beginning”, Szymborska touches on this concept by showing how, after the end of a war, the destruction is “cleaned up”, the ruins are hidden, and people begin to rebuild without dwelling too much on past atrocities. The widespread sense of guilt is maintained by the rapid forgetting and recurrence of the main human conflict as well as the contemporary shallowness of the suffering of others, which results in catastrophes.

*The bridges need to be rebuilt,
the railroad stations, too.
Shirtsleeves will be rolled
to shreds.*

The connections between the past, present, and future are represented by bridges and railroads. The power of reconstruction, which is portrayed as crucial, emerges in contrast to the damages and the suffering. Restoring the world requires more than just collective memory; facts must also be included. The shirtsleeves rolled up symbolize the fortitude and strength of

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those working on reconstruction despite exhaustion or peril. They also suggest that the effort required to restore the past or build a new future is not an easy or temporary thing. It takes an unwavering and intense commitment.

*Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
Someone else listens, nodding
his unshattered head.*

*But others are bound to be bustling nearby
who'll find all that
a little boring.*

It's the world in motion, with those who still remember, who listen, or those who are bored, serving as a signal of attention drawn to the readers to honor history and collective memory. Regardless of people's beliefs, past or present moments, Wisława Szymborska involves everyone in creating meaning (Biele, 2013). Holding a broom would suggest a wish to honor something significant, whether positive or negative, or to keep the memory “clean”. Yet the listener is unscathed, perhaps untouched or unaffected by any memory the other holds. Boredom is a silent critique of how society views memory: in a world where novelty and future are valued more and more, the past is becoming less and less appealing. Memory is portrayed in this way as a solitary activity, with those who reminisce frequently doing so alone and being overshadowed by the noisy demands of the present. This contrast illustrates how people are affected differently by human sequences.

In order to genuinely honor the losses of the past, the poem urges readers to acknowledge and accept a shared moral obligation to remember. History is seen by the poet as a hostile force to man and a major source of evil, claiming victim after victim (Carpenter, 1997). At the same time, the poet also speaks of erasing the war from memory, an idea that suggests a desire to leave the suffering behind, even if this means ignoring the obvious responsibility. In this context, collective guilt also becomes a guilt for forgetting, for the lack of reflection on the horrors. The lyrics' resigned tone, however, conveys a profound irony. The moral ruins are still buried, and the physical reconstruction is merely a cover-up. Szymborska seems to suggest that everyone bears some blame for the devastation, but that people are more focused on “repairing” the outward look of their towns and cities than confronting their own guilt.

*From time to time someone still must
dig up a rusted argument
from underneath a bush
and haul it off to the dump.*

The phrase “rusted argument” conjures up the idea of the erosion produced not only by time, but also by man in his time. The corrosive effect has become a nature of unresolved things. In the poet's lyrical world, the impossibility of a truly authentic human experience of the world is highlighted, approaches being only attempts, nature speaking a language of its own (Górska, 2023). A layer of symbolism is added by the use of “under the bush”, suggesting that these antiquated arguments are deliberately hidden from view. This suggests that unresolved issues do not always disappear with time.

6. THE MEMORY AND THE FORGETTING

Through her vivid imagery and philosophical reflections, Szymborska underscores the importance of consciously navigating the space between memory and forgetting. Forgetting

becomes sometimes an imperative for life to move forward (Rieff, 2016). It serves as a reminder that although forgetting can let life continue, remembering guarantees that the difficult lessons learned from the past will live on. In this way, the poem serves as both a reflection on the cyclical nature of human conflict and a plea for attention in how humanity approaches the past.

*Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last nothing less than nothing.*

There is a gradual erosion in reality, suggesting an inclination from those who “knew” to those who “knew a little”, then “less”, and finally “nothing less than nothing”. This progressive descent from knowledge to ignorance reveals a deeply moving, perhaps even sombre, meditation on how easily understanding can slip away over time, and how strongly it can mould itself from person to person. In this passage, we also identify a state of non-knowing, in which what was once known is not only forgotten but has not been known or has become non-existent to consciousness. The verb’s repetition leads us to the poet’s famous line, “I don’t know”, which implies that there is room for everyone, opening up a world meant to be known, both inside and outside of humans (Colonia-Willner, 2024, p. 27). It might also be a semblance of goodness that still causes people to question what is best and worst in the world, but all of this is still present and bubbling under the influence of foreign norms and directives that are cut off from human love.

*Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.*

There are multiple ways to interpret this. We are told not to lose sight of the other side of the war, of those with the blade of grass playfully between their teeth, of those who see with their eyes covered and hear with their ears plugged. The fight against the notion that one man has the right to take advantage of what another man stands for is also highlighted. From the plan against humanity to the deeds, then to the victory celebration, man is caught in a multivalent nature. Celebration and ignorance, however, are the strongest evidence, the most tragic depictions – when the victory of evil tramples everything man could have done in its path. At the same time, the grass serves as a sort of veil, covering what lies beneath, implying that the act of lying down is also a symbolic way of hiding or ignoring deeper truths. The “cornstalk” from “his teeth” gives us an almost rustic image, evoking someone who is not just lazy, but is intentionally relaxed, unfazed by life’s demands. Finally, the expression “gawking at clouds” expresses an additional measure of disengagement: to look up at the sky and lose yourself in something as mysterious and unimaginable as the clouds. In the context of being in the grass that “covers up / the causes and effects”, this upward gaze seems more likely to be a metaphor for deliberate ignoring or avoiding reality than for self-indulgence or some kind of childish wonder. “Gawking” also implies a certain forgetfulness, as if this person is happy to float through life without interacting with the complexities that lie beneath the surface.

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However, in the end, we can interpret all of this as a ray of hope and a small amount of positivity. It is also revealing an orientation towards the vagabond, indifferent, careless man. We are told to put a little faith in him, the indifferent man who looks out from the grass, calmly, having the peace of the simple existence. This ending can be compared to the poem “A Letter West” (1946), whose landscape is equally vivid, but on the theme of emigrants. However, in that poem “thing happens at a construction site, where joyful creation will begin. A playful and aggressive gesture sent to Western doubters successfully exorcises any attachment to the tragic past” (Ligeza, 2019, p. 24). It is Szymborska’s way of not leaving her readers in the shadow of what has already been done, but of highlighting the power of rebirth even from the ashes, among the dead crumbs. For those who survive, war leaves behind routine but essential tasks. As a result, the beginning is constructed far away from the cameras that have moved on to another conflict. Additionally, since there are few and inconsequential hands resettling the remains—those with no social power—the beginning may represent the recurrence of errors.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

When it comes to literary analysis, the subjectivity of interpretation is always a risk because the way a text is interpreted is frequently influenced by personal voices. Another limitation might be the lack of a structural analysis of the text, as the current work focuses on the interpretative aspect of meaning and its literary significance. Also, the poem’s original language is Polish, and the present analysis was based on its English version. This process of linguistic transfer can subtly introduce natural transformations into the text, as translation is not just a mechanical transposition. Although the present English version is a valuable one, the limitation of the translation should be considered.

8. CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR BALANCE

The poem’s glaring simplicity highlights how important and often disregarded the tasks of healing and restoration are. The tendency of society to ignore or undervalue the contributions of those who carry out the invisible labour of restoration is also called into question. Her verse is free from life subjugated to criticism, yet sensitive through its questioning style. Her reading takes the outline of the vulnerable man, who at night struggles with his existence and puts on the stage of the imaginary a complex spectacle, full of earth, both mud and heavenly bodies. Szymborska celebrates the smallest details of the living world to raise questions about human existence, validating the significance of the individual, the private and the particular (Kostkowska, 2004).

Although there are many elements of war (ruins, rubble), Szymborska does not explicitly name an event, thus suggesting a timeless cyclicality. This leaves room for interpretations about other types of “endings” and “beginnings” – whether they be apocalyptic, cultural, or personal, are thus left open. Szymborska’s call for balance is a plea for mindfulness in how we interact with the past. It urges us to remember responsibly, to ensure that memory is used constructively. This means recognizing that memory must serve as a tool for progress, not a chain that inhibit it. In the end, the balance between memory and forgetting is about maintaining a healthy relationship with history.

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