

Assembly Line

by Shu Ting (translated by Carolyn Kizer)
Semester VI (CBCS): World Literatures

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In time's assembly line
Night presses against night.
We come off the factory night-shift
In line as we march towards home.
Over our heads in a row
The assembly line of stars
Stretches across the sky.
Beside us, little trees
Stand numb in assembly lines.

The stars must be exhausted
After thousands of years
Of journeys which never change.
The little trees are all sick,
Choked on smog and monotony,
Stripped of their color and shape.
It's not hard to feel for them;
We share the same temp and rhythm.

Yes, I'm numb to my own existence
As if, like the trees and stars
--perhaps just out of habit
--perhaps just out of sorrow,
I'm unable to show concern
For my own manufactured fate.

Shu Ting, born in 1952 was exiled by the Chinese government due to her writings to live in a remote village. She was part of the seven members of the group called the Misty poets in China who wrote against the repression of culture, politics, arts, society under the leadership of Mao Zedong's government in China. For that she was often punished by the Chinese government. The imagery of this poem shows how China was when this poem was written. It is a poem of resistance and protest against the repression of artists in 1970s China. Most of China's population back then were factory workers so this poem is about how they were feeling doing the same thing every day. The poem almost makes them seem like they were treated as slaves, which is what they could have been feeling. Since this poem was written during a revolution, the purpose was to describe the social structure in China.

Shu Ting uses the extended metaphor of an assembly line process that most factories use. The assembly line metaphor describes a highly mechanical and brainwashed way of living people had under the Communist government. This is one of the essential poetic devices used in the poem. Shu Ting compares human beings to machine-made products in a factory using the assembly-line production system. This can be seen through, "In time's assembly line/ Night presses against night./

We come off the factory night-shift/ In line as we march towards home,” and “I’m unable to show concern/ For my own manufactured fate.”

There was no possibility of individual growth, change, or ideas. Shu Ting extends this metaphor to suggest that just like human beings, even natural elements such as “stars” and “trees” have become increasingly mechanical and monotonous. She sees all these elements as identical to each other – the sickly trees seem to stand in rows, the stars remain unchanged and monochrome, and also seem to be lined up in a row one after the other, like assemblers in a factory. The speaker, who returns from the factory night-shift, finds everything around her to be just like the workers, mirroring their monotonous, dull existence. She concludes by evoking sympathy for her own state as well as for her fellow workers, which heightens bittersweet feelings of numbness and emptiness that surrounds her being. Nature reflects the speaker’s own terrible existence, that is why the stars, trees, nights, all look and feel dull, dying and lifeless.

The last stanza shows the author is losing hope. He says “Yes, I’m numb to my own existence.” This means that he has given up on life. He no longer cares about his fate. He has accepted his miserable existence. He also says “I’m unable to show concern/ For my own manufactured fate.” This shows he has no more regard for his future.