

# GCSE Grade 1 – 9 Edexcel

## Poetry Revision Guide:

### Conflict

You will be tested on your understanding of poetry in Paper 2 section B of the English Literature Paper.

#### Tips for revision

1. Select about 4 to 5 quotes from each poem which will allow you to comment on CONTEXT, FORM AND STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE and revise them so that you know them off by heart.
2. Write summaries of what each poem is about in your own words
3. Create revision posters for each of the poems highlighting the key features
4. Match-up poems according to CONTEXT, FORM AND STRUCTURE and/or LANGUAGE
5. Have a go at answering exam questions on the poems (there are some in this guide)
6. Have a look at the unknown poems at the back of this guide, annotate them then compare two of them.

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## Glossary of useful poetic terms

**Alliteration:** the repetition of the same consonant sounds at anyplace, but often at the beginning of words.

She sells sea-shells by the sea-shore

**Assonance:** the repetition or a pattern of the same vowel sounds

Moses supposes his toeses are roses

**Caesura:** a pause or breathing space in the middle of a line of a poem

**Couplet:** a pair of lines that are the same length and (usually) rhyme and form a complete thought

**Enjambement:** a line ending in which the sense continues, with no punctuation, into the following line or stanza

**Hyperbole:** a figure of speech in which deliberate exaggeration is used for emphasis

**Imagery:** the use of pictures, figures of speech and description to evoke ideas, feelings, objects

**Juxtaposition:** a figure of speech in which unassociated ideas, words or phrases are placed next to one another, creating an effect or surprise

**Litotes:** a figure of speech in which a positive is stated by negating its opposite

No small victory

**Metaphor:** a figure of speech in which two things are compared, usually by saying one thing is another

All the world's a stage

**Onomatopoeia:** a figure of speech in which words are used to imitate sounds.

Buzz, Hiss, Splat, Tick-Tock

**Pathetic Fallacy:** when nature is used to represent human emotion

**Personification:** a figure of speech in which non-human things are given human attributes

The sky is crying

**Plosive sounds:** the sounds formed when the passage of air is fully blocked (p, b, d, t)

**Refrain:** a phrase, line or group of lines that is repeated throughout a poem, usually after every stanza

**Simile:** a figure of speech in which two things are compared using the word *like* or *as*

**Stanza:** two or more lines of poetry that together form one of the divisions of a poem

## 'Poppies' - Jane Weir

In 'Poppies', Weir is comparing the tranquillity of nature with the carnage of war. The poem shows how the soldiers sacrificed their life to "ransom" the hills of France; thus showing how France's freedom was paid by the blood of these young men.

Poppies are used as a symbol of both war and sacrifice. The effect of this is to help the reader remember the people who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. Furthermore, the presence of poppies gives the poem multiple meanings and methods of interpretation. Poppies can be seen to symbolise death, eternal sleep or remembrance. All three of these can be applied to the poem.

The poem expresses the feelings a mother has about the death of her son in a war far away.

The form of the poem appears to be strong and regular. This shows that the narrator is trying to hold in the emotions that have been stirred up by the sight of poppies.

The structure of the poem however shows that there is a lot of emotion beneath the surface: the length of the stanzas and the lines begins to change more strongly.

Time goes backwards and forwards between when he was a child, when he left for war and when she is actually telling the story

The poem also creates several layers of language:

- It uses literal images (e.g. poppies, blazer) to express strong detailed memories that have not faded with time.
- Similes and metaphors to express deep emotions, such as "gelled blackthorns", "released a song bird" and "like a treasure chest", "like a wishbone"
- Finally it uses symbols, particularly the dove and the poppies to show how general meanings shared by us all can also contain deeply personal feelings as well.

### Subject matter

The poem is set in the present day but reaches right back to the beginning of the Poppy Day tradition. Armistice Sunday began as a way of marking the end of the First World War in 1918. It was set up so people could remember the hundreds and thousands of ordinary men who had been killed in the First World War. Today, the event is used to remember soldiers of all wars who have died since then.

### Form and Structure

The poem appears to have a strong, regular sense of form. There are four clear stanzas, the first and last with six lines, the second with 11 and the third 12.

On closer inspection, however, we can see a great deal of movement within this outwardly regular form. 19 lines out of 35 have breaks in the middle of the lines - marked by commas or more strongly by full-stops. These breaks are called caesuras.

This careful variation in form suggests the inner emotion of a narrator who is trying to remain calm and composed but is breaking with sadness inside.

The biggest movement in the poem, however, is in the narrative structure – how the story is told. The time sequence keeps changing along with her emotions. It goes from "Three days before" (line 1) to "Before you left" (line 3) to "After you'd gone" (line 23) to "later" (line 25) and the present in "this is where it has led me" on line 26.

It ends with her suspended, on the hill, between the present and the past.

## Language and Imagery

### **Sound**

Like the form, the sounds of the poem are restrained. Rhyme would seem inappropriately lively.

### **Language**

The colour and texture of the poppies is expressed through powerful language in the first stanza. The detailed description of the blazer is emphasised through alliteration on "bias binding... blazer". We feel the closeness between mother and child the moment she kneels to pin the poppy to the lapel. In words such as "spasms", "disrupting" and "blockade" however, she may be also recalling the violence of his death.

### **Imagery**

This sense of her blocking out the memory of his violent death with a sweeter, purer memory is sustained in the second stanza: "Sellotape bandaged around my hand". This image carries echoes of battlefield injury as well as cleaning the cat hairs off the blazer. The contrast between the death in battle and the domestic happiness (the boy has been cuddling his cat) is powerful.

### **Metaphor and symbolism**

In the third stanza, the language becomes metaphorical and symbolic. The door to the house is the door to the world. The song-bird is a metaphor for the mother setting the child free. This then changes into the dove, the symbol of peace – but here the peace the son has found is only the peace of death.

### Attitudes, themes and ideas

The poem is about the nature of grief. The mother is speaking directly to her son but a son who shifts in time. There is:

- The son leaving home for school on his own for the first time.
- The son who has just been killed.
- Beneath the surface the son dying violently in a field hospital in Afghanistan.

It is as if all these different versions of her son fixed exist together inside her. When the poem reaches a moment in the present (line 26) she is vulnerable, without protection. The final lines then go back to the past tense "I traced...".

It is as if the present holds too much pain and her memories can only be expressed if distanced in imagery held safely in the past.

Examples of language techniques used in 'Poppies':

**Personification:** "the spiteful rattle where the masked machine guns play"

**Metaphor:** "liquid tune" and "shrapnel's son"

# Exposure

## Language

Owen's choice of words in *Exposure* powerfully, but simply, describes the extremes to which he and his men were exposed for two days. The poem is dominated by words from the semantic field of the weather, most of which are qualified by terms with negative associations:

- 'iced east winds' l.1
- 'mad gusts' l.6
- 'rain soaks' l.12
- 'clouds sag stormy' l.12
- 'Dawn massing in the east' l.13
- 'ranks of grey' (cloud) l.14
- 'air .. black with snow' l.17
- 'flowing flakes' (snow) l.18
- 'the wind's nonchalance' l.19
- 'Pale flakes ' (snow) l.21
- 'snow-dazed' l.22
- 'frost' l.36
- 'ice' l.39

## Alliteration and personification

Owen heightens our awareness of the conditions under which the men suffer by his use of alliteration, further emphasised by his personification of the elements.

The east **winds** are merciless and icy. The sibilant 's's combined with hard consonants 'd' and 't' create a cutting, bitter edge to the elements which 'knife' the men, leaving us in no doubt about the pain they intentionally inflict l.1. In l.6 the gusts of wind are personified as mad, their auditory quality conveyed by the short 'g' sound of 'tugging on the wire', suggesting the catching action. The wind is also human in its indifference, its 'nonchalance' in the face of suffering l.19.

In much fiction, the coming of **dawn** is a motif for the arrival of hope. Here however, 'Dawn' only brings another day of 'poignant misery' l.11. It is personified as a weary female war commander, 'massing her melancholy army' l.13, the alliteration creating a sense of oppression. The 'army' of **clouds** is like German army uniforms and German tanks: 'grey', 'stormy' and lined up in 'rank upon shivering rank', ready to attack.

Owen demonstrates how even the **snow-flakes** appear to make conscious decisions about where they will settle / whom they will attack - they 'flock, pause and renew' l.18 their advance. The flakes have fingers which feel for the faces of the men l.21. Collectively, the wintry elements are as much an enemy on the attack as are the Germans.

As with the opening of the poem, in lines 12-14 Owen again combines sibilance with hard consonants to create a desolate atmosphere, with 'lasts', 'soaks', 'clouds sag stormy', 'massing', 'east', 'attacks', 'ranks' and 'shivering'. This continues in the next stanza as:

**Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.** l.16

and the air 'shudders' with 'snow' l.17. Both are 'deadly'.

Owen juxtaposes the sibilance of the bullets with the light yet lethal 'f' sound of the flakes of snow in stanzas four and five. Though gentle, the penetrating cold of the snow sends the men into dazed reveries that also torment them – 'Shutters and doors all closed: on us' l.29 – where Owen re-employs the 'harsh sibilance' technique.

## Assonance

Owen frequently uses assonance to emphasise the mood of the narrative. In l.11-12, the long 'oh' of 'grow', 'only know' and 'soaks' draws out the painful process of the day's awakening. The same long sounds in l.26 'Slowly', 'ghosts', 'home' and 'glozed' convey the extended effort required by snow-numbered spirits to engage with a world beyond their current environment, such slow reactions being typical of the onset of hypothermia. The effort wasn't worth it – everything was 'closed' l.29.

By contrast, Owen links positive words by an expansive long 'l' sound in 'kind fires' l.31, 'smile' and 'child' l.32, for which the men 'lie' in their defence l.34.

## Tone

Like so many of the later poems, Owen's tone in this poem is one of helplessness and despair. Suffering appears to be pointless.

Owen presents us with a picture of communal endurance and courage. He is one with his men: 'our brains ache' l.1, 'we keep awake' l.2, 'we cringe in holes' l.22. He also shares in his comrades' dream of home and spirit of self-sacrifice: 'not loath, we lie out here' l.34.

Yet he also questions what on earth they are achieving: 'What are we doing here?' l.10, 'Is it that we are dying?' l.25. Nothing is being achieved by the men's sacrifice, 'Nothing happens.' l.5,15,20,40.

## Investigating language and tone in *Exposure*

- Owen describes the weather as the enemy in *Exposure*. Make a list of the words and phrases Owen uses about the weather in *Exposure* which are linked directly to war.
- How does Owen use the contrast between cold and warmth to create the pity of war in this poem?

## Structure and Form

Each of Owen's eight stanzas ends with a short half line. In the first, third, fourth and final verses Owen creates the burden: 'But nothing happens'. Each of the short, last lines in the remaining stanzas has a story of its own to tell. When written or read out these lines read:

- 'What are we doing here?'
- 'Is it that we are dying?'
- 'We turn back to our dying.'
- 'For love of God is dying.'

The first question is answered by the second, which prompts the action of the third. The penultimate verse ends poignantly and perhaps ambiguously. Here on the field of battle the men make Christ-like sacrifices for those they love. Yet Owen suggests the love of God *for* them, and their faith *in* God, seems to have died.

## Rhyme

Owen's use of pararhyme is clearly developed in *Exposure*. The sounds create discord and challenge our expectation, yet Owen uses a regular pattern of abba, which creates the sense of stasis. Nothing changes in the rhyming pattern, nothing happens on the front. The whole military effort is anti – climactic.

The action is all in the rhymes:

- 'knife us' / 'nervous' l.1,4: The attack of the wind may mask the attack of the human enemy, causing fear
- 'silent' / 'salient' l.2,3: The sleepless anxiety caused by the utter quiet of the night makes the men forget the important features of the battle field
- Wire/war l.2/l.3 Owen pulls together the minutiae of conflict - the barbed 'wire' l.6 with the collective noun 'war' l.9 which consolidates the whole horror

- Brambles/rumbles l.7/l.8 Owen takes his image from nature but succeeds in showing us the barbs on the wire. Again a small detail is set against the distant booming of artillery fire
- Dawn is seen to 'grow' and also become 'grey' l.11,14 and in an almost comic rhyme her 'clouds sag stormy' l.12 which constitute her melancholy 'army' l.13.
- 'Silence' l.16 half rhymes with good effect with 'nonchalance' l.19 and emphasises the carelessness of nature
- Snow feels the 'faces' l.21 and from this Owen makes the transition to dreams of warmth and an English late Spring as 'snow dazed' men become 'sun dozed' where the blackbird 'fusses' l. 24
- The fires of home are 'glazed' l.26, a mixture of the words 'glazed' and 'glowed' but only lead onto doors that 'close'. These fires 'burn' but not for the men who were 'born' to die.

Finally the collective pronoun 'us' become the eyes of 'ice' l.36,39. Notice a half pun within this line: the 'eyes are ice' which almost sounds as if each was interchangeable - a symbol of the nihilism of death where everything becomes nothing. The onomatopoeic 'crisp' and 'grasp' of lines 37 and 38 tell of the final actions of the weather and of the burial party.

### **Rhythm**

Within each stanza, four lengthy lines set the scene and tell what story there is to tell. Often they are hexameters but Owen frequently adds extra syllables or whole metrical feet, and does not use a consistent metre, perhaps representing how snow-dazed minds struggle to stay orderly.

One short line punctuates the narrative with the reality: 'but nothing happens' l.5. This serves as a contrast to the huge events which are to do with 'dying': the death of men, of hope, of belief and of the love of God

## **'The Class Game' by Mary Casey**

The poem considers the differences in social class and attitudes arising from this difference. This is portrayed by the vocabulary and poetic devices used in the poem. In particular, the reader experiences the reaction of narrator on being judged by how they speak.

### **Structure**

1<sup>st</sup> person perspective – dramatic monologue exploring the working class persona's thoughts and feelings about being judged on the way they speak and their social background. The persona is from a working class background 'we live in a corpy' whereas the listener is from a middle class background 'pretty little semi' (see the link here to 'Parades End').

The poet decided to write the poem as one long stanza to indicate the feelings of frustration and anger experienced by the persona (see 'Half Caste'). The title suggests that the division in social class is not to be taken seriously and the persona systematically attacks middle class prejudice towards the working class.

The rhythm and rhyme of the poem could suggest the light-heartedness linking with the notion of a game. However, the fact that the poet introduces internal half-rhyme at the beginning of the poem 'nose/clothes', 'Tara/Ma' and rhyming couplets as the poem progresses 'card/yard', 'mother/brother' emphasises the narrator's mounting anger towards the unfair treatment of the working class.

The short line lengths speed up the ending of the poem to indicate the narrator's contempt at the prejudice experienced. The exclamation mark in 'Well, Mate!' enhances the defiant tone which concludes with the final line 'And I am proud of the class that I come from.'

### **Language**

The poet uses contrasting language to highlight the differences in social class 'bread pudding/wet nelly', 'stomach/belly' between working class narrator and middle class reader. Dialect and colloquialism are used throughout the poem in order to make the reader 'wince' with such phrases as 'Say toilet instead of bog when I want to pee'. At the end of the poem the narrator deliberately increases their use in order to challenge and defy the reader's prejudice.

Rhetorical questions are used to involve and unsettle the reader. The questions are confrontational and the repetition ensures that the reader has to think about the issues raised. The change from 'How' to 'Why do you care...' increases the attack by becoming more direct.

The poet uses imagery to convey the contrast between the two classes: 'my hands are stained with toil' suggesting hard work contrasting with the 'soft lily-white' hands of the middle class. The simile 'stick in your gullet like a sour plum' shows that the narrator is fully aware of the adverse reaction of the middle class readers when they hear her dialect and colloquialisms.

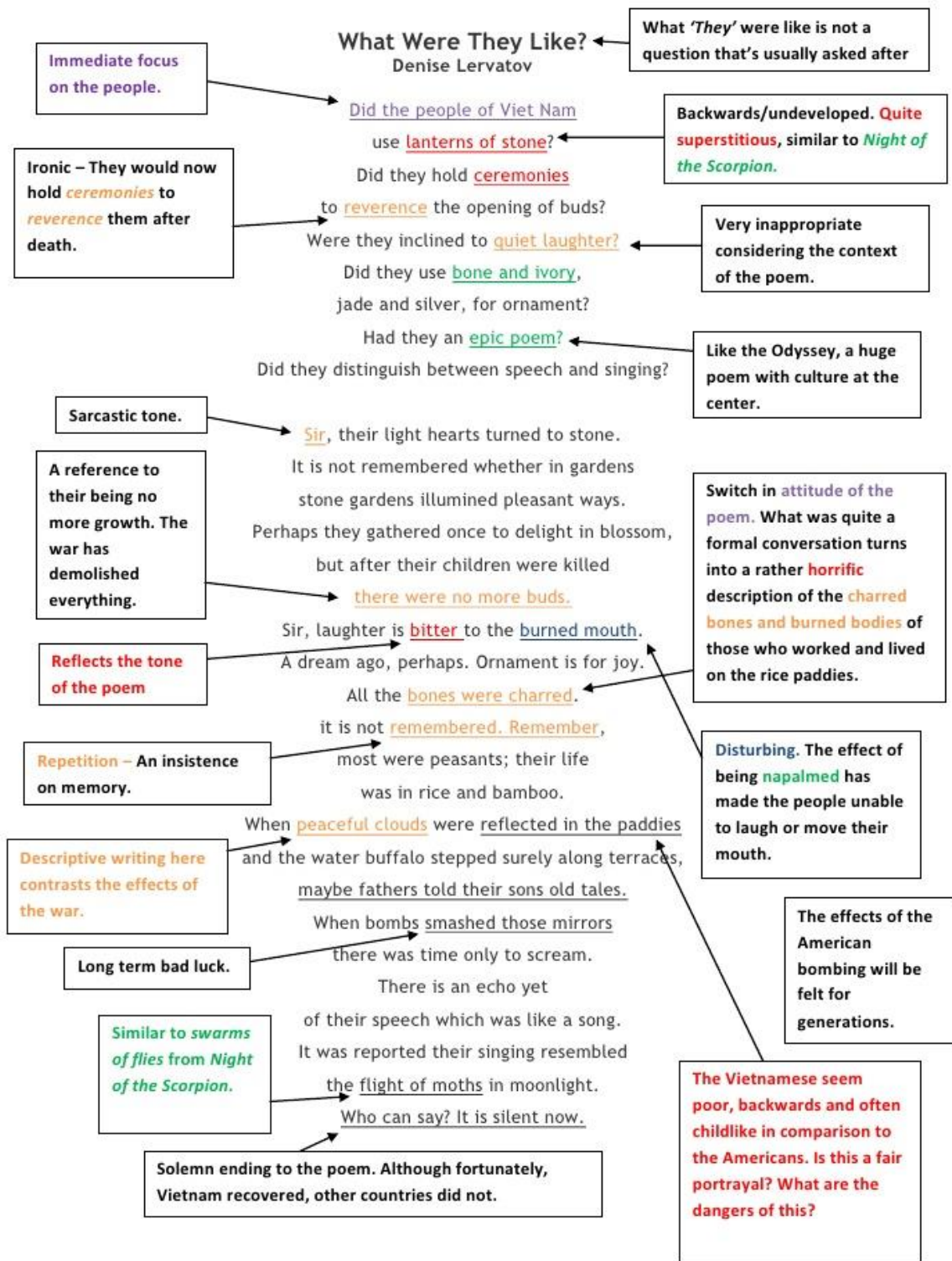


## What were the like? Denise Levertov

### Context:

Denise Levertov was born in England in 1923 and went to live in the USA in 1946, where she died in 1997. As a child, she observed her mother and father help Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution. During the Second World War she was a nurse, experiencing the bombing of London and its effects on civilians. In the USA she taught Literature and was active in the protest movement against America's involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s. After the Second World War, Vietnam had declared their independence from the French Empire. America feared Vietnam would become a Communist country and so they supported anti-communist leaders in South Vietnam and gave them money to fight the communist North Vietnamese. After an American ship was attacked, the US sent American troops to fight in Vietnam. 'These wars, whether in Asia or in Latin America or wherever they erupt, are wars of national liberation, in which people are fighting for self-determination against America's puppet governments, America's CIA and its "advisers", America's napalm, America's giant corporations, even when American troops are not involved... Anyone who works to end the war in Vietnam but does nothing to stop the political and racial oppression that is happening around us simply does not understand where it's at.' *Denise Levertov speaking at an anti-war rally, 15 April 1970, University of Massachusetts*

**Structure:** the poem is written as a *series of questions and answers* amongst 2 people; an **innocent questioner** and a **speaker who 'knows all'**. Similar to the way a historian may interview a war survivor. This creates a portrait of a *gentle, simple peasant people, living a dignified if humble life amid the paddy fields.*



## CATRIN BY GILLIAN CLARKE

This intensely personal poem is a mother's reflection upon the changing relationship with her daughter. It does not shy away from talking about the tensions that can arise from time to time but at the same time affirms the permanence of unconditional maternal love. This is also a poem that simultaneously celebrates the individuality of mother and daughter and their shared characteristics.

The two-part structure of this poem deftly signals the separation that occurs after the severing of the umbilical chord "the tight / Red rope of love" (lines 7-8). The structure of the poem also shares one of the features of the Petrarchan sonnet, although it is not a sonnet in form. This feature is a clear break between the two sections. The first verse paragraph is largely descriptive, whilst the second (not lacking descriptive detail in itself) has a more reflective tone and explores the implications of what has been established earlier in the poem.

The recurrent "I" and "you" throughout the poem help to frame the poem very clearly in terms of a relationship that changes and yet does not change.

The poem opens with a mild-toned reminiscence that seems quite ordinary. Clarke presents the reader with the sorts of detail that could easily attach to any number of ordinary experiences: "The people and cars taking / Turn at the traffic lights." (lines 4-6). The very ordinariness of the scene is, however, that which provides a perfect introduction to the extraordinary nature of what erupts into the "hot, white / Room" (lines 2-3) of the hospital. The birth of the child is presented in very strong terms. Sound and sense fuse to emphasise the physical strain of childbirth and the idea of two strong personalities at loggerheads:

'I can remember you, our first  
Fierce confrontation, the tight  
Red rope of love which we both  
Fought over'. (lines 6-9)

The alliterated f's and t's create both tension and a sense of clinical precision. The umbilicus is the locus of both attachment and challenge. Clarke's choice of the word "rope" suggests both a tug-of-war but also the tug of love. The choice of the adjective "red" is not only visually accurate in its context but reinforces the biological blood link between mother and child. The individual voices of mother and child are brilliantly presented by Clarke in her image of the mother's words colouring the white tiles of the hospital room, almost as a child might colour squares in a book, but with the clear sense that the language of the mother may well be colourful because of the pain she is experiencing. The words "wild" and "tender" (line 14) emphasise the mixture of experiences as a mother gives birth. There is an extraordinary self-awareness on the part of the mother but this is at least matched by the awareness of the child's otherness and individuality. This idea is reinforced through Clarke's choice of language in lines 15-17. The "I" and "you" that characterises the presentation of the relationship up to this point modulates into "our", "we" and "ourselves". However, mother and child are united in their "struggle to become / Separate." The word "separate" that begins line 16 is followed by a full stop, leaving the next sentence as a concerted statement of individuality. The neat choice of the plural reflexive pronoun that concludes the first part of the poem paves the way for Clarke to explore the paradoxical nature of the mother-daughter relationship that is characterised by mixture of affinity and conflict.

The beauty of this second section lies, though, in the reality that her daughter's defiance is for the poet an affirmative manifestation of her very being and a reminder that as a baby she seemed to hold on defiantly to life. The mother never forgets her attachment to the child: "that old rope" is actually ageless; it is both real and metaphorical. All the nuances of feeling a mother has for her child are wonderfully clinched in the conclusion of this beautiful poem. The metaphor of "the heart's pool" and the idea of the umbilicus being that which signals attachment, inescapable responsibility, and the reality that the story of a mother and daughter's life is patterned by "love and conflict". Part of what makes this poem so successful is the direct

simplicity of its language that is rooted in everyday language, something that is admirably suited to the task of charting the extraordinary miracle of birth and the growth of families that occurs as routinely as the procession of traffic but is also cosmic in its significance as that very procession continues, oblivious to the event.

## **Analysis**

The poem begins with the poet's voice speaking to a child. The poem highlights the differences between mother and child and the common problems parents have with their children.

The second and third lines create a sense of an uncomfortable atmosphere, with the 'hot, white room' making the place seem clinically white, as she gazes outside watching cars pass.

The description of the room adds to the intense, angry atmosphere. Clarke looks out of the window, rather than at her daughter, almost avoiding her gaze as she knows this may weaken her resolve and allow her daughter to do what she wants.

The 'remembered' is in the past tense throughout, making it seem as though the person she is talking to is gone, or has changed completely.

There is a memory of 'our first fierce confrontation' and a metaphor of 'the tight red rope of love which we both fought over' making her seem tied to her daughter by an invisible rope of love, which is red to express the colour of the heart, or the sense of anger which love can cause.

The sense of an emotionless location is continued with 'a square environmental bank, disinfected of paintings or toys' making the place seem love-less and unpleasant.

Clarke talks of writing over the walls her words, almost as if she does this literally (for real) or she does it in an imaginary manner, writing the words that express her emotions and feelings for her daughter. The use of oxymoron, 'wild, tender circles' emphasises the contrasts in emotions that the relationship can bring, with 'wild' and 'tender' seemingly opposites, and yet there are both feelings in their relationship.

This is continued with the idea that they wanted to be 'two' together or to be two separate people as well: 'to be ourselves'.

The second stanza begins in stalemate. 'neither won nor lost the struggle' and the metaphor of a fish tank is used, 'clouded with feelings'. It is as if they are trapped in a claustrophobic place, surrounded by 'feelings', rather than the water of the tank, drowning them both, overwhelming them.

The image of Catrin, the daughter, is one of strength, so much so that Clarke has to fight her off. She looks powerful, 'with your straight, strong, long brown hair and your rosy, defiant glare', making her seem the one in control.

The image of the rope is brought in again, with the idea of the daughter tightening it 'about my life, trailing love and conflict' so the rope metaphorically is a tie between the two of them that, despite their differences, seems to bring them closer. Despite their intense feelings, they can't escape from each other.

The argument is about whether the daughter can stay outside in the dark skating for 'one more hour'.

## A Poison Tree by William Blake

*A Poison Tree* is a short and deceptively simple poem about repressing anger and the consequences of doing so. The speaker tells of how they fail to communicate their wrath to their foe and how this continues to grow until it develops into poisonous hatred.

The speaker describes how when they were angry with a friend, they talked to their friend about the issue which helped them to overcome their anger. However, the speaker was unable to do the same with an enemy and this leads to developing resentment and an even stronger degree of hatred. An extended metaphor of a tree growing in the speaker's garden demonstrates how the anger continues to grow. In the lines 'And I water'd it in fears' and 'And I sunned it with smiles' the speaker actively cultivates the tree/anger.

Eventually the anger blossoms into a poisoned fruit, the enemy eats the fruit and dies and the speaker seems to be glad of this. However, there is also a sense that they see the destructiveness of what has occurred. As the first lines acknowledge, we can easily overcome our anger if we communicate it properly.

### Themes

A growing apple tree is an extended metaphor for growing anger

A number of unifying ideas or [themes](#) run through the poem. Different readers may attach more or less significance to each of these themes, depending upon how they view the poem.

Theme	Evidence	Analysis
<b>Anger:</b> the basic human emotion which sets the events of this poem in motion. Although it is not necessarily wrong in itself, how we go about dealing with anger is extremely important.	'I was <b>angry</b> with my friend:/ I told my wrath, my wrath did end./ I was <b>angry</b> with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow.'	The first stanza (lines that make up a section of a poem) contrasts two different ways of dealing with anger and the two different outcomes that may occur as a result.
<b>Deception:</b> the speaker bottles things up and does not talk about his feelings to his enemy. The enemy sneaks into the garden in the dead of night to take the fruit.	'And he knew that it was mine,/ And into my garden <b>stole</b> '	'Stole' is an interesting choice of word. While it has the clear meaning that the enemy sneaked in under cover of darkness it also reminds the reader that it is an act of theft.
<b>Communication:</b> the poet/speaker communicates a direct moral lesson to the reader about the disastrous consequences of his own failure to communicate with another person.	'I told my wrath', 'I told it not.'	This simple but direct use of antithesis (the use of opposites) shows how simple it would be to talk about an issue but equally how easy it is to say nothing and let resentment grow.

**Interpretation of the line:** 'And it grew both day and night,/ Till it bore an apple bright;'

#### **Interpretation**

The apple represents the anger growing large and ripening.

The apple refers to the apple in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

#### **Reason for interpretation**

The apple has been chosen as a symbol because it is a common fruit and hatred and revenge are common feelings in human beings.

The poet chooses the apple as a reference to the Biblical story, a tale that most of Blake's readers would have been familiar with. The speaker could be likened to a serpent tempting his enemy.

**Interpretation of the line:** 'And I water'd it in fears./ Night and morning with my tears;'

#### **Interpretation**

The speaker intentionally helps resentment and anger to grow.

The speaker accidentally helps resentment and anger to grow.

#### **Reason for interpretation**

He deliberately cultivates the growing tree (anger) with tears of frustration and a refusal to communicate with his enemy.

His tears are ones of sorrow as he worries about his relationship with his enemy.

### **Form**

*A Poison Tree* is written in quatrains. This straightforward grouping of sets of four lines is one of the simplest and most recognisable poetic forms.

### **Structure**

The poem has four stanzas. Each stanza consists of a pair of rhyming couplets in the regular repeated pattern **aabb**. The rhythm of the poem is also straightforward and regular which makes it very easy to read, though not necessarily to understand. The straightforward and seemingly simple way in which Blake has written this poem contrasts with the very complex human emotions he is describing.

The poem also contains two clear turning points which help the reader to understand the character of the speaker. The first comes after the opening two lines and shows the difference in how the speaker handles a difficult situation in two separate cases. In the second, symmetry is introduced in the final two lines and shows the speaker's reaction to what has happened. The wording at this point is ambiguous. It is a new day and a new beginning but the result of the speaker's untold anger is still there to see. This makes the reader continue to think about the poem after they have finished reading it.

### **Language**

The vocabulary is simple (even if some of the words are unfamiliar today). Notice the following:

- in the first stanza many of the words are monosyllables except for the word 'angry', which is repeated twice to emphasise emotion and to contrast with the two different ways the speaker deals with this emotion
- the lines in the first stanza all start with 'I' which emphasises that this is a personal story told from an individual point of view
- seven of the other 12 lines in the poem start with 'and' which helps the story to build and increase in intensity

All of the above makes the poem seem like a piece of verse for children and like a simple nursery rhyme with a clear moral message to be learned. The use of 'and' particularly resembles that of a child telling a story. A difficult message is wrapped up in a form and structure which is deliberately simple and using very straightforward vocabulary, to get its point across.

## Context

William Blake was also known for his paintings including this one, entitled 'The Ancient of Days'

William Blake was born in 1757 and was originally an engraver. He began adding text to his engravings in the form of poems and he was interested as much in the presentation of poems as the poems themselves. In 1789 he published an illustrated set of poems called *Songs of Innocence* and in 1793 followed this with *Songs of Experience* (from which *A Poison Tree* comes). The following year, he combined these two sets of poems, publishing as *Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

The first set of poems is, therefore, generally hopeful and positive while the second set tends to be more negative and pessimistic.

Blake was a deeply religious man and this shows in the moral nature of his work. His poetry was not really well-regarded during his own life. Today he is regarded as a man ahead of his time and he is now thought of as a major poetic writer.

## Example question

How does William Blake make his **message** clear in *A Poison Tree*?

## Considerations

- **Overview:** poem has a moral message around the consequences of anger not being dealt with.
- **First-person narrative:** examining a basic human emotion which can be felt by anyone.
- **Structure and language:** quatrains, rhythm and rhyme scheme emphasises simplicity, use of extended metaphor of tree, simple vocabulary.
- **Reader's reactions:** different views, what message might be taken from reading the poem?
- **Conclusion:** there is a definite message but open to different interpretations, clarity achieved through simplicity and directness.

Some other essay questions to think about:

- What does William Blake have to say about human nature in *A Poison Tree*?
- Blake uses *A Poison Tree* to set out a moral lesson for his readers. Compare his approach to that used by Mary Lamb in the poem *Envy*.

# Cousin Kate by Christina Rossetti

## Context

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was an English poet of the Victorian age. She is strongly associated with the pre-Raphaelite painting movement. Her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was one of the pre-Raphaelites. She herself was a prolific poet, and enjoyed some success during her lifetime. Among other things she wrote the words to the Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

Rossetti was a devout Christian, and member of the Church of England. Her mother was Frances Polidori, the sister of Dr John Polidori, who was the friend and doctor of Lord Byron, the poet. Rossetti grew up surrounded by poetry and Gothic literature, which influenced her writing. Probably her most famous poem was *The Goblin Market*, which combines these two interests.

Although many of her poems have themes that suggest a concern with the rights of women (including *Cousin Kate*), Rossetti was not interested in women's suffrage (the campaign to get women the vote). She remained unmarried.

## Subject matter

A young woman has been jilted by her lover, a "great lord". He seduced her when she was an innocent low-born "cottage maiden". Having set her up as his mistress, in his house, he saw her Cousin Kate one day. Kate is "pure" so the lord casts aside the narrator of the poem, and marries Kate instead.

The speaker is bitter because she has been betrayed by her cousin. She says that if their positions were reversed, she would not have acted like that. Finally she reveals her revenge: she has a son by the great lord, and her cousin does not.

It is a poem about love, the inequalities between men and women (the speaker is ruined while the lord just moves on!), and about the bitterness of being dumped.

## Form and structure

The poem is a monologue, directly addressed to "Cousin Kate", who is called "you" throughout, although she is clearly not present. It is written in a traditional ballad form. This means that it alternates 8 and 6 syllable lines, with a regular rhyme scheme. In this case, every other line in a stanza rhymes. There are six stanzas, each of eight lines. Ballads are often narrative poems, like this one.

*Cousin Kate's* structure follows this narrative, telling the story of the relationship the speaker had with the lord, then the betrayal, and finally, in the last few lines, the twist ending, of the speaker's son.

## Language and Imagery

Much of the lexis in the poem is pastoral in nature. It evokes an idea of the country maid, with plenty of outdoor life. It emphasises the type of girl both the speaker and Cousin Kate are; the narrator's hair is "flaxen", which refers to a plant, flax, with the connotations of the countryside.

## Imagery

*Cousin Kate* is quite a long poem, and Rossetti uses a number of different images during the story. The following are some of the most interesting ones.

The speaker's passivity and the way she has been used is emphasised by the imagery of the second stanza. The simile that she is "like a glove", suggests how easily she was cast aside. It also emphasises how little power she has beside him. This is contrasted with Kate who "might have been a dove" – a traditional



symbol of innocence. This image is picked up later in the poem, with the idea of Kate's "stronger wings", which means she is able to fly higher – that is, to marry the lord.

But is a bird a good thing to be? There is some undermining of Kate's freedom in the fourth stanza that suggests the lord "bound" her "with his ring", as if he has captured her. This is emphasised by the line "You sit in gold and sing". She seems to be like another possession, this time a living one, but still captured in some way.

The final image of the poem takes the traditional metaphor of a child being a "gift". Unlike the possessions that "bought" Kate, this is something she cannot have. The contradiction in the speaker's assertion that her son is both her "shame" and her "pride" serves to underline the tensions in the poem.

### **Sound**

There is strong use of assonance in parts of the poem, particularly of 'o' sounds, as in the words "woe" and "moan" and "howl". These seem to emphasise the speaker's sense of sorrow. Towards the end of the poem the narrator tells her son to "cling closer, closer yet", and the alliteration emphasises both the love she has for him, and the potential fear that he may be taken away.

### **Attitudes, themes and ideas**

There is a strong sense of injustice in the poem, in that it is the lord who seduced the speaker, yet she is the one who has been made an "outcast thing" (not even a person!). There are two potential reasons for this: one is that she is a woman, while he is a man. The other is that she is a powerless, poor person, while he is a "great lord" with land and gold. The first is perhaps more likely: she also describes herself as the lord's "plaything", which implies rather an unequal relationship between men and women. This is emphasised by Kate's lack of power.

There is also a certain bitterness to the poem, to having been passed over in favour of another. This is not a traditional love poem, instead, this is the story of what happens afterwards. Even the married woman is not happy and secure – there is the "fret" or worry of not having an heir for the lord. Included in this is the attitude that perhaps women can be bought – Kate has been, according to the speaker, with the lord's "land" and "ring". The speaker implies that she went with him for love, not money, but she still was "lured" and mentions his "palace home".

## Extract from the Prelude by William Wordsworth

### Context

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is one of the most famous poets in the history of English Literature. He was born in Cockermouth in Cumbria, part of the region commonly known as the Lake District, and his birthplace had a huge influence on his writing. So did the fact that his mother died when he was only eight years old. His father wasn't always around, although William did use his library for reading. William spent time with his grandparents who lived in nearby Penrith, an even wilder and more rugged place.

Wordsworth is believed to have started writing poetry when he was at school; during this time he was orphaned by the death of his father.

He went to Cambridge University and just before finishing his studies he set off on a walking tour of Europe, coming into contact with the French Revolution, which informed his writing. He fell in love with a French woman and she had a child. Wordsworth returned to England before his daughter, Caroline, was born and war between Britain and France meant that he didn't see his daughter or her mother for many years.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge stayed with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in 1796. They worked together on poems which became the collection called *Lyrical Ballads*, published two years later. This volume is a key text in the school of poetry known as 'The Romantics'.

In 1802, shortly after visiting his daughter in France, Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, a friend from his school days. They had five children together. 1812 was a terrible year for them as two of their children died.

Wordsworth was made Poet Laureate (the Queen's poet) in 1843. However, in 1847 he was badly affected by another death, that of his daughter Dora. He was said to be so devastated that he couldn't bring himself to write any more poetry.

He died of pleurisy, an illness that affects the lungs, in 1850, aged 80.

Subject matter: The *Prelude* is one of the greatest works of literature ever written in English. It is a long autobiographical poem in 14 sections. The first version was written in 1798 but he continued to work on it throughout his lifetime. His wife Mary published it three months after his death in 1850.

The poem shows the spiritual growth of the poet, how he comes to terms with who he is, and his place in nature and the world. Wordsworth was inspired by memories of events and visits to different places, explaining how they affected him. He described *The Prelude* as "a poem on the growth of my own mind" with "contrasting views of Man, Nature, and Society".

This extract describes how Wordsworth went out in a boat on a lake at night. He was alone and a mountain peak loomed over him; its presence had a great effect and for days afterwards he was troubled by the experience.

Form: *The Prelude* can definitely be viewed as an epic poem, in length at least. Epics are very long pieces of writing that usually deal with exciting, action-packed heroic events like wars or explorations. Although many of the events Wordsworth writes about are 'ordinary' they are given an epic quality, to fully describe the impact they had on his life. This is an extract of 44 lines written in blank verse.

## Structure

There are no stanzas: the writing is continuous though there is plenty of punctuation to help us read it. This extract is a complete story in itself. It starts with "One summer evening..." and finishes with the effects on his mind of the boat trip: "a trouble to my dreams".

## Language and Sound

The Prelude is conversational, as if Wordsworth is sat next to us, telling us the story himself. The poet uses "and"s throughout to give the verse a breathless quality. Listen carefully next time someone tells you a story: there will be lots of 'and's used.

Imagery: Wordsworth effectively describes the night-time atmosphere with his choice of images:

Small circles glittering idly in the moon, Until they melted all into one track Of sparkling light.

But gentle moonlight becomes darkness as the poet-narrator's state of mind becomes troubled by the end of the extract:

...o'er my thoughts There hung a darkness, call it solitude Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes Remained, no pleasant images of trees, Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

This is imagery that could be associated with gothic (sinister or grotesque) tales, nightmares or even horror.

Wordsworth continues with this imagery:

But huge and mighty forms, that do not live Like living men, moved slowly through the mind By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Personification is also used by Wordsworth: he refers to the boat as "her" (which is quite common in literature from that historic period) and the mountain peak comes alive and chases him:

...a huge peak, black and huge, As if with voluntary power instinct, Upreared its head...For so it seemed, with purpose of its own And measured motion like a living thing, Strode after me.

## Attitudes, themes and ideas

Attitudes and ideas: Wordsworth does not view humanity as having authority over nature. If anything, it's the other way round as we can see from his description of the huge mountain. Wordsworth also realises that once an event has happened, that doesn't mean it's over; the effect stayed with him for days afterwards.

## Themes

Nature: humanity is part of nature and sometimes we can be made to feel very small and insignificant by the natural world.

Loneliness: Wordsworth is often on his own throughout The Prelude and this is important to him. He can think more clearly and is more affected by events and places as a result.

The night: the poem seems to suggest that you can sometimes experience feelings and events more clearly at night, perhaps due to loneliness.

# The Charge of the Light Brigade

## Context

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was one of 11 children born to an upper-middle class country vicar. He received a good literary education.

Alfred started writing poetry from a young age and published his first poems while still a student at Cambridge. His poems range from those focused on the legend of King Arthur to those dealing with the loss of a loved one.

In 1850 he became poet laureate. This meant he had to write important poems about events that affected the British nation. He held this post until his death in 1892, making him the country's longest ever serving laureate.

In the video below poet Sheila Parry talks about who Tennyson was and how his position influenced his writing.

## Subject matter

The Crimean War was fought between Britain and Imperial Russia from 1853-1856. For the first time in history, newspapers carried eye-witness reports as well as detailing not just the triumphs of war but the mistakes and horrors as well.

The most significant moment in the Crimea came during the Battle of Balaclava. An order given to the British army's cavalry division (known as the Light Brigade) was misunderstood and 600 cavalymen ended charging down a narrow valley straight into the fire of Russian cannons. Over 150 British soldiers were killed, and more than 120 were wounded. At home the news of the disaster was a sensation and a nation that had until then embraced British military exploits abroad began to question the politicians and generals who led them.

## Form and structure

The poem has a strong rhythm. For example "half a league, half a league" two light beats followed by a heavy beat expresses the sound of the horses galloping.

There are six numbered stanzas, as if each stanza is a memorial stone to 100 of the 600 cavalymen. The length of the stanzas reflect the structure of the story.

The first three stanzas - the Light Brigade is approaching the guns.

There is a strong structure. Three lines (of three six-to-seven syllables) are followed by a shorter line (five syllables: "rode the six hundred"). This pattern suggests the strong formation in which the cavalry charge.

Stanza two – the Light Brigade has engaged the enemy so the longer stanzas describe the struggle. The structure starts to break down. The rhythm of stanza four, for example, is broken by four shorter lines, while stanza five has only two short lines (lines 42 and 48). The desperate attempt to retreat is expressed in the run of six longer lines (43-48).

Stanza six is a short, sharp conclusion written as if they are the lines we should remember the Light Brigade by.

**Language and Imagery:** The language of the poem is understandably military: guns, soldiers, cannon, sabres and gunners set the scene. The power of the poem, however, comes from the careful use of imagery and sound effects.

**Imagery:** The strong central image of the "valley of Death" (lines 3,7 and 16) refers to a well-known poem in the bible - Psalm 23 - about the 'valley of the shadow of death'. By using this Biblical allusion, Tennyson shows how important the event is.

**Sound:** Tennyson uses a wide variety of techniques to provide the poem with highly effective sound effects. Alliteration, for example, is used to express the sounds of battle. Note the sound of bullets in line 22 ("shot and shell").

The poem has a strong rhythm. For example "half a league, half a league" two light beats followed by a heavy beat expresses the sound of the horses galloping.

### **Attitudes, themes and ideas**

Tennyson's job as poet laureate was to capture the public mood and, given the poem is still so well-known, he certainly did that. But the feelings in the poem can appear to be ambiguous – in other words, can be seen in two different ways.

How much outrage is there in this poem, though? Part of its success is the way Tennyson recreates the energy of battle – "half a league, half a league". The final stanza does not express any anger at politicians and generals. It does, however, show delight at what they did: "O the wild charge they made!"

The poem therefore seems to be more concerned with creating national heroes for a nation than mourning the dead soldiers or arguing against the war.

### **Question: How does the poet present the experience of conflict in The Charge of the Light Brigade?**

Tennyson presents the experience of conflict in several different ways.

He uses the form of the poem to illustrate both the battlefield he describes (the long, narrow valley) and the memorials he wants built to honour those who took part (six stanzas like memorial stones to the 600).

The structure of the story he tells presents the excitement of the battle: the stanzas get longer and the rhymes more frequent after the calm opening stanza.

He uses rhythm to recreate the sound of the horses charging and repetition to recreate the sound and visual effects of battle ("cannon" lines 17-20 and "flash'd" lines 27-28 for example).

He gives important lines the heavy "-erd" rhyme to emphasise his anger: "Someone had blunder'd".

Finally, he builds to a conclusion, in the final stanza, that suggests that the outcome of this experience is positive: the world wonders, but not as in asking a question such as 'why was the blunder made?' but wonders in awe at the bravery of the British.

Tennyson shows that from this disaster national heroes have been born.

## The Destruction of Sennacherib

The Destruction of Sennacherib is a short narrative poem retelling a Biblical story from the Old Testament (2 Kings, chapter 19) in which God destroys King Sennacherib's Assyrian army as they attack the holy city of Jerusalem. It is probably as well-known for the way in which the poem is constructed as it is for its subject matter.

The speaker sets out events in chronological order. He seems impressed by the might and splendour of the Assyrian army when describing their appearance in the first six lines. However, halfway through the second stanza comes a turning point as he realises the Assyrians' strength is short-lived. He then goes on to tell how the Angel of Death has passed through their camp wiping them out. Although the Assyrians may have been mighty, the speaker realises that the power of God is even mightier.

### Themes

A medieval warrior lying on the ground

Death and war are key themes of 'The Destruction of Sennacherib'

A number of unifying ideas or themes run through the poem. Different readers may attach more or less significance to each of these themes, depending upon how they view the poem.

The context in which a poem was written can sometimes tell you more about its themes, message and meaning.

Some questions you might ask include: are aspects of the poet's life reflected in the poem? is the time or place in which it was written reflected in the poem?

You will need to research the poet's background to discover answers to these questions. But if you do write about a poem and its context, be careful to include only details that reveal something about the poem.

### Context of 'The Destruction of Sennacherib'

Lord Byron was one of the leading poets from the Romantic movement

Byron was one of the leading poets of a group known as the Romantics. Romanticism was a general artistic movement (literature, music, the visual arts, etc.) which dominated European culture from the last part of the 18th century until the mid-19th century. Romanticism had many key features, including:

- an interest in the cultures and history of the Middle East and Far East
- the importance of liberty and freedom
- a fascination with mystical and supernatural events

All of these are features of Byron's poem.

The poem was originally published as part of a collection called Hebrew Melodies in April 1815. This was a time when the subject of war was of great concern throughout Europe. The wars against Napoleon had been going on for sixteen years and were quickly reaching a climax. The Battle of Waterloo, which ended the war, took place just two months after the poem's publication. Just like Sennacherib and the Assyrians in the poem, Napoleon and the French had carved out a huge empire and nothing seemed capable of stopping them. It is estimated that the war resulted in approximately 3.5-5 million casualties. It must have seemed to Byron's original readers that only a miracle could stop the destruction.

## Form

The Destruction of Sennacherib is written in quatrains using a very distinctive rhythm. The effect is of a lively, vibrant poem but this is at odds with the tragic subject. This is where the power of the poem lies for many readers – the contradiction of the form and content can be seen as echoing the contrast between the might of a great army and the tragedy of war.

## Structure

The poem has six stanzas. Each stanza consists of a pair of rhyming couplets in the regular repeated pattern aabb. This helps to drive the narrative forward in quite a simple format.

The rhythm of the poem is also straightforward and regular which makes it very easy to read, though not necessarily to understand. This particular rhythm is often used in comic and light verse, so the fact Byron chose it for a poem about war and death is striking. Some readers see the regular patterning of the rhythm as echoing the hoof beats of the horses which the soldiers would have been riding. The regular rhythm of the poem is further emphasised by the fact that each line is end stopped and that about half of the lines start with the word 'and'. The use of 'and' in this way serves to drive the story forward in the same way the mounted soldiers are charging.

## Language

The Assyrian army are compared to elements of nature

Some of the vocabulary is deliberately archaic (eg 'strown', 'wax'd') and some of the word order also seems old-fashioned (eg 'their hearts but once heaved' rather than 'their hearts heaved once'). This echoes the syntax found in the original Biblical story and thereby suggests a particular time and a place.

Much use is made of similes particularly in the early part of the poem (eg 'the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea'). In the descriptions of the Assyrian army (both alive and dead) they are compared to elements of nature such as forest leaves or the surf of the waves. This is highly-effective and suggests that while mankind can easily be destroyed, nature will endure.

Byron also makes good use of alliteration, for example:

'the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea' – the hissing of the 's' sounds brings a suggestion of evil

'their hearts but once heaved' – the repetition of the 'h' sound slows our reading down for the moment as death occurs

## Comparison

You can discover a lot about a poem by comparing it to one by another author that deals with a similar subject. You could compare features such as theme, form, structure, rhythm, language and figures of speech.

The key thing to do when comparing poems is to note the points where they are similar and the points where they differ. You could make a list noting similarities and differences between the two poems.

Comparison of 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' by Lord Byron and 'What Were They Like?' by Denise Levertov

## Similarities

The two poems look at the effect war has on a particular nation and specifically at the aspect of loss.

The after-effects of war are seen as ongoing and affecting others, beyond those who were engaged in fighting.

Both poems were written at a time when war was dominating the news – Byron's towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars and Levertov's during the Vietnam War.

Both poets make use of alliteration.

Both poets use similes which compare events to aspects of the natural world.

## Differences

Byron uses a highly regular poetic form of four line stanzas. Levertov uses two blocks of free verse.

Byron's speaker is an observer and recorder of events. Levertov uses two speakers (the questioner and the responder) to be more openly critical of what has occurred.

Byron's tone is more neutral than Levertov's. Levertov seems angrier about what has happened - probably because the events she is describing are recent, whereas Byron's are from ancient history.

Try comparing The Destruction of Sennacherib to these other poems:

## Example question

How does Byron present the destructiveness of war in the poem The Destruction of Sennacherib?

## Considerations

1. Overview: war - something which has happened throughout history, told in third-person narrative about ancient history but making timeless points.
2. Imagery: Assyrians shown as aggressors through images of their splendour and might, attacking a defenceless city (wolf/sheep simile) rhythm suggests the attacking horsemen.
3. Tables turned: the aggressors become the defeated, accomplished through the miracle of God's power, natural imagery to describe their deaths.
4. Ongoing effects on the Assyrian people (the widows) and culture (the idols): human power no match for God's.
5. Conclusion: what the poem suggests to the reader about war and aggression; personal response (who does the reader sympathise with?).

Some other essay questions to think about:

How does Lord Byron build excitement and tension in the poem The Destruction of Sennacherib?

Compare how both Lord Byron and one other writer uses poetry to comment on the effects of war.



# Belfast Confetti

## Context

Ciaran Carson, born in 1948, is a poet and novelist from Northern Ireland. Born into an Irish-speaking family, he went on to become Professor of English at Queen's University Belfast. He combines a life-long passion for traditional music with a deep interest in politics.

He lived through what became to be known as 'the Troubles'. This was the era of Irish nationalist terrorism that marked UK social and political life from the 1970s to the 1990s. During that time organisations such as the IRA fought to end British rule of Northern Ireland.

## Subject matter

The conflict in Northern Ireland began in the 1960s when the minority Catholic population began campaigning against discrimination by the Protestant majority. By the 1970s, some Irish nationalist groups had started using violence to force the UK government to make the region independent of Britain.

British troops became an everyday presence on the streets of Belfast, the Northern Irish capital. At first they had come to protect the Catholics from Protestant violence. Before long they became, to nationalists, symbols of an unwanted army of occupation. Violent clashes between protesters and the 'security forces' (the police and army) were common.

## Form and structure

### Form

**The poem's form is immediately striking.** Instead of neat, compact *stanzas*, the lines are over-long and the stanzas stretched.

On closer inspection, you can see there are two stanzas, the first with five lines, the second with four. Each line, however, spills over so there are additional lines of one or two words. **By presenting the poem like this, Carson is expressing the confusion caused by the riot and bomb.** For example, with the phrase "And/the explosion/Itself" (lines 3-5), we even end up reading backwards as our eyes have to move from right to left across and down the page.

### Structure

However, through the confusion of the form and the language, we can see a narrative structure (an organised story). A demonstration has got out of hand and riot police have moved in to control it. The rioters start throwing things and there's an explosion (it is possible the nuts and bolts come from the explosion itself – time may also be confused in the poet's head). The poet runs for safety, trying to make sense of what is happening, but cannot escape.

The place he knows so well becomes a trap and he runs into a check-point where he is held up and questioned by the police.

## Language and imagery

**The poem is about how the confusion of the riot causes psychological confusion in the mind of the poet.** How can he respond to this chaos? These feelings are expressed in the language and imagery, as well as the form. The title, for example, creates a striking poetic image – the soft *alliteration* of 'f' appropriate to the idea of a wedding celebration. In fact it is the sound of a bomb about to go off. The kind of confetti Carson is referring to is the debris falling after an explosion.

The poetic language is also pushed out by harsh, unpoetic words. These are presented in simple lists to express their lack of emotional associations (e.g. line 3).

Carson also lists the street names in lines 11-13. These work both on a literal level (they describe where he lives and how well he knows these streets) but also the *metaphoric* level. The streets are named after generals and battles and places from the Crimea War, a war the British fought in Victorian times against the Russians. He therefore likens the riot to a battle in a bigger war.

**Force is used when spoken communication has broken down.** So Carson cannot complete a sentence. All he can think of is punctuation marks with no words to punctuate.

## Sound

**The feeling of the poem is too unstable for the poet to carefully craft rhymes.** But there are **two key sounds** that we can hear – the 'f' of the title, then the 'k' of the cracking social order, of the bomb and of the riot-policemen's truncheons. All but four lines contain one or more examples of the sound.

## Attitudes, themes and ideas

The poem seems to be upside down or back-to-front. Instead of starting with a question then answering it, it moves from exclamation marks (in line 1) to question marks (in line 18). Both statements and questions, however, are delivered with equal force (the questions are described as being a "fusillade" which is a round of bullets fired by several guns at once). **The point Carson seems to be saying is that under these conditions language is impossible.**

He notes the unequal sides in this 'argument'. The riot police have Saracen tanks, wire, "Makrolon face-shields" while the rioters have nuts and bolts and nails and car-keys. As a poet, all he has are words. The weakness of these distresses him.

**Where Carson finally succeeds, though, is in expressing this confusion.**

Question

**How does the poet present the effects of conflict in Belfast Confetti?**

Points you could make:

- The poet uses the form of the poem to show how life has become chaotic: every line is too long and the poem looks like it is exploding.
- The structure also shows this confusion: it moves from exclamation marks to questions at the end (not the other way round) and some lines we end up reading backwards (lines 3-5).
- The lack of feeling that comes with panic is shown in the lack of poetic words and the lists of hard, ugly objects (lines 3 and 15).
- The use of metaphor is both strange and confusing for example the street names, like the feelings of the riot, but also shows how language cannot respond to the chaos of the day.
- The final line shows how language has become a weapon ("a fusillade"), turning the idea that language is a non-violent form of communication on its head.

# No Problem by Benjamin Zephaniah

## Context

Zephaniah is a Rastafari and dub poet who grew up in Birmingham. 'No Problem' was written in 1996 - the same year as 'Half Caste'. Strong links between these two anti-racist performance poems.

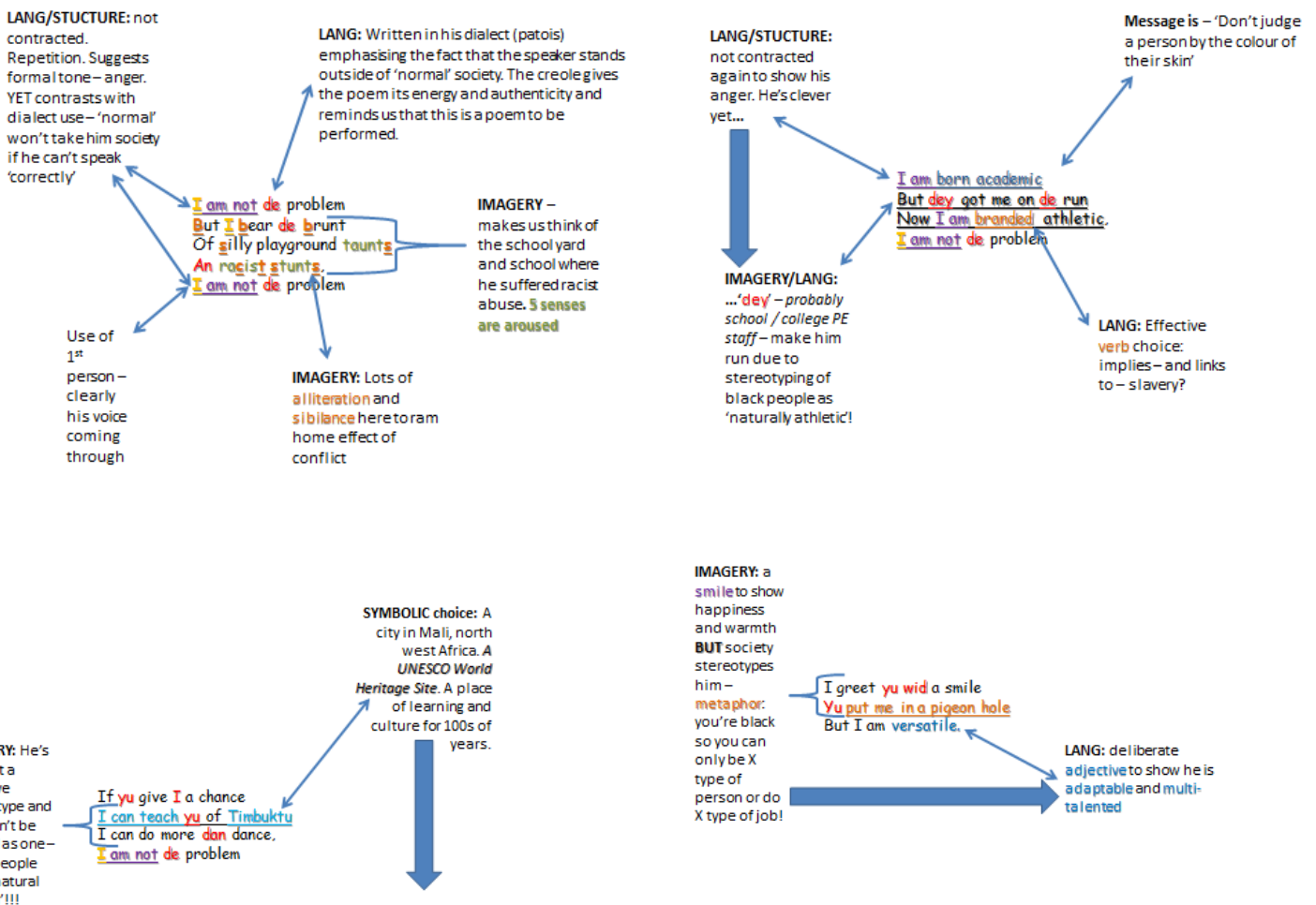
Zephaniah experienced difficulties at school as a black teenager with dyslexia. He was illiterate when he left his 'approved' school (following a criminal conviction) and educated himself as an adult.

He writes about his direct experience of racism and prejudice and is politically and socially very active campaigning on a range of issues such as gay rights in Jamaica, voting reform and animal rights.

He uses his poetry to speak to ordinary people and works to reject its association with 'dead white men'.

He was offered an O.B.E. for his contribution to literature but refused it due to the impact the British Empire had on the world:

'Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought. I get angry when I hear that word "empire"; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised...'



LANG: Noun  
choice: i.e.  
the  
stereotyping/  
racism that  
he's been  
subjected to  
in his youth

These **conditions** may affect me  
As I get older,  
An I am positively sure  
I have **no chips on me shoulders**

IMAGERY: **Idiom choice:**  
he has no feeling of  
resentment **despite** what  
has happened in his youth

Double  
meaning: **1=**  
showing that he  
has no personal  
axe to grind  
against white  
people; **2=**  
hugely ironic as  
he is using a  
stereotype! (To  
claim that we  
have positive  
feelings about a  
whole group  
because we  
know **one**  
member of that  
group is clearly  
to stereotype)

Emphasizes the point that this poem is social  
and political: it is not just about the experience  
of one student; it is about race.

**Black is not de problem**  
**Mather** country get it right.  
**An juss fe de** record,  
**Sum** of me **best** friends are white.

A plea?—  
UK! GET IT  
RIGHT!

## Structure

Dub poetry developed in the West Indies (Caribbean) out of dub reggae music (spoken word over heavy, mellow and often psychedelic sounds). It is written for live performance and chanted with strong rhythms and gesture.

Dub poets are generally concerned with issues related to social justice and equality. 'No Problem' is no exception.

It has strong rhymes that underpin the conflict in the opening 16 lines: ABAB where only line B rhymes as beat is rooted in the sound of reggae music.

In the second and final stanza, when the poet reflects on his experience and what it means, the rhyme and rhythm are looser and a more contemplative mood is created.

'I am not de problem' opens the poem and its repetition gives this statement a rhetorical force as well as structuring ideas in the opening 16 lines.

In each ABAB quatrain (4 lined section), an aspect of the black stereotype is explored and rejected (e.g. athletic, dancer)

## Half Caste by John Agard

'Half-Caste' is a poem about how language can be used to control, hurt, suppress and demean people.

Agard takes the until-recently common term 'half-caste' and unpacks it of its prejudiced associations. With great verve and energy he demolishes these associations, presenting instead 'mixture' as an essential part of nature and great art.

Agard is attacking full-on racism and a mind-set that believes in racial segregation. He makes such ideas seem as absurd and foolish as they are. His tone is commanding 'Explain yusef', 'what yu mean', and the rhythm is emphatic, beating out its rhymes with confidence. Agard uses phonetic spelling to create the sense of a spoken voice. Here the accent is Afro-Caribbean. But Agard also uses many more recognisable standard words. The language of the poem is a mixture of English's. Agard rejects conventional punctuation; there isn't a comma or full-stop in the whole poem.

This reflects his rejection of the sort of 'conventional' ideas that produced the term 'half-caste'.

It's a wonderful poem to listen to. And any chance to see John Agard perform live should not be missed. When you listen to this reading concentrate especially on the rhythm and the tone of the poem.

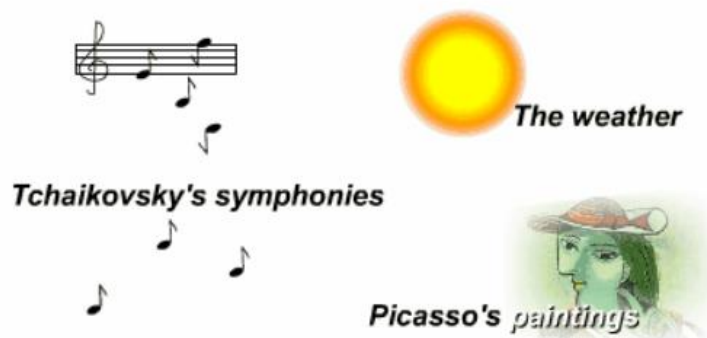
### Revision

The poem is like a challenge addressed to someone who holds prejudiced views. Agard repeatedly tells the person to 'explain yusef', and asks them 'what yu mean' when they use the term 'half-caste'.

The tone is confrontational, angry. The repetition of the command and question create the effect that the other person is unable to explain them his or herself, or answer the question.

Agard uses three examples to show how mixing things together can be creative and natural.

***What are these examples?***



Why do you think he used these particular examples? Agard uses a mixture of standard and dialect English. He is mixing two different types of English, and two different cultures, together to create a new original sound. In other words, the language of the poem enacts the idea of mixture being a good thing. Agard also uses irony to show up the stupidity of racist attitudes. It makes the racist views seem stupid...

**Quote:****Meaning:**

I'm sure you'll understand

You ought to understand but you're either too stupid or too prejudiced. Because of this you probably won't understand.

Consequently when I dream I  
dream half-a-dream

Why should my dreams be 'half' dreams? My thoughts and hopes are at least as valid as yours are.

I half-caste human being  
Cast half-a-shadow

I'm just as much of a full human being as anyone else. I'm not lesser or inferior.

Agard also suggests that racists are actually not thinking properly or paying full attention. In the last stanza he tells them to use the 'whole of yu eye / an de whole of yu ear / an de whole of yu mind' to understand his experience.

**Subject**

The poem is about prejudice. It attacks people for holding racist, separatist views. It shows these views to be offensive and poorly thought through. In particular Agard homes in on how language can be used to re-enforce racist thinking, using the word 'half-caste' to illustrate his point. This word was commonly used until fairly recently and shows that racist views can reach wider into society than is comfortable to acknowledge.

**Attitude**

The poem is a powerful expression of Agard's anger and frustration with racist thinking.

The tone is one of confrontation, of a clear challenge to racist people to try to justify their opinions.

Despite the strong feelings there is also humour in the poem. The opening image, for example, is jokey, absurd. Agard also uses irony in the fourth stanza.

## Style

Agard uses a mixture of language. The poem is clearly written in an Afro-Caribbean dialect, but this is modified so that it is easily understandable to other English users.

Lines like 'ah rass', and 'some o dem' are mixed with the standard 'I'm sure you'll understand.'

The form and rhythm of the poem is irregular. Agard imposes his own voice and the rhythms of West Indian culture on English language and poetry.

# The Man He Killed by Thomas Hardy

## Context

Victorian novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born in Dorset. His father was a stonemason, and although he would have been expected to follow in his father's footsteps, his mother encouraged him to pursue literary interests and to read widely. He trained to be an architect and then moved to London to pursue his studies and career. After five years in the capital, he returned to Dorset and began writing more seriously.

His writing often dealt with class, maintaining a sense of his socially inferior origins all his life. His first writing career was as a novelist rather than a poet. Some of his most famous works include *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native* and *Jude the Obscure*.

Hardy wrote poetry all his life, but his finest work was penned after the death of his first wife, Emma, in 1912. Although his poems were not as popular as his novels during his lifetime, they have remained well known and well read. They often deal with themes of grief, and often appear deceptively simple.

Themes which recur in Hardy's writings are injustice, love, break-ups, disappointment, fate and the unfair treatment of women. He was basically a traditionalist when it came to the form of poetry, but one interesting thing he often did was include colloquial language.

## Subject matter

*The Man He Killed* was written in 1902, at the time of the Second Boer War. The Boer Wars were fought between the British and the Dutch settlers of the Boer republics in what is now South Africa. There were a number of wars throughout the 19th century which were aimed at consolidating British rule throughout the Empire.

Hardy was against the Boer War. Like many liberals of the time, he thought the Boers were simply defending their homes. Why did the British feel the need to keep their territory so strongly? Perhaps the diamond and gold mines of the area had something to do with it.

*The Man He Killed* deals with the futility, or pointlessness, of war. It is told from the point of view of an ordinary working-class soldier, who is reflecting on the idea that the man he killed in battle probably had a lot in common with him. The idea of having a drink together suggests a sense of brotherhood between the ordinary soldiers. The lack of conviction in the narrator's voice about the necessity of killing the enemy man emphasises the idea that the soldiers who fight just follow orders, rather than knowing what it is they are doing. It is generally thought that the speaker is a soldier who has just returned from the Boer War, and that he is talking in the pub with his friends. setting the scene in a particular inn in Dorset.

## Form and structure

### Form

The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue in the voice of the returned soldier. It has five stanzas each of four lines which follow a regular metre and an ABAB rhyme scheme in each stanza. The first, second and last line of each verse is about six syllables long, while the third line is slightly longer at eight syllables. The regular metre gives the poem a 'chatty' tone, which helps to set the scene, as well as delaying the realisation that this is actually quite a dark poem.

The only place where the regular metre breaks down is in the fourth stanza. Dashes are used to break up the rhythm, perhaps to reflect the gradual realisation that the "enemy" soldier probably had more in common with the speaker than he may have thought.



## Structure

The structure of the poem moves from a friendly opening to the idea that the speaker is talking about an enemy soldier, to the realisation that he is not an enemy, and finally to the last stanza which sums up the futility of war and its effect on the people who fight. This reflects the developing realisation on the part of the soldier.

## Language and Imagery

The language of the poem is very simple, fitting the character of the speaker and creating a powerful anti-war message. It is written in the first person and the vocabulary suggests a local Dorset man – the word *nipperkin*, for example, was most widely used in the West Country. This increases the sense of the common man being the speaker, and the connection to the text for the reader.

## Imagery

In keeping with the simple form of the poem, there are no similes or metaphors. Instead the speaker imagines having met his enemy at the pub instead of on the battlefield. The image of the "ancient inn" gives the sense of a traditional British setting, and of a cosy drink, which contrasts with the reality of the shooting.

The dramatic monologue form shows the speaker imagining the back story for the man he killed. The use of the hesitant "perhaps" and the effect of the multiple dashes is to create a vivid picture of the speaker thinking and imagining without having any direct description at all.

## Sound

The poem uses a lot of repetition and parallel sentence structures to emphasise the pairings of the speaker and the man he has killed, such as "face to face" and "I shot at him as he at me". This is particularly true in the third stanza, where the repetition of the words "foe" and "because" add to the internal rhyme of "just so" to create the impression that the speaker is trying to convince himself.

## Attitudes, themes and ideas

There is a strong anti-war message in the poem. The fact that neither the speaker nor the man who has been killed is named gives it a universal feel – a sense that it could be anyone in this position.

The reasons given for killing the man are weak – he was a "foe" but the speaker cannot work out why that is true. This shows the stupidity of war, in that men kill each other because they are ordered to.

There is also an element of class in the ideas of the poem. The two protagonists have more in common with each other than they do with those who give the orders. The men who fight are either working class or out of work (as the speaker says in the fourth stanza), so they feel compelled to enlist (sign up to the army). It is these men who will suffer in the war, and are more likely to be killed. This is picked up in the reference to the "ancient inn", as well as the colloquial language like "nipperkin".

The ordinariness of the speaker brings home the realities of war: it's also an appeal to the reader to consider the similarities between themselves and the Boers against whom the war is being fought. This connects to the poem as a protest against the Boer war – it helps to prevent the dehumanisation of the enemy.

## Practice Question:

Compare the ways in which Thomas Hardy explores the idea of death in war in *The Man He Killed* with one other poem from the anthology. Discuss the poet's ideas, language and form and structure.

## War Photographer Analysis

This poem, *War Photographer*, centers around the tragic, comparing poverty to leisure. The author, Carole Satyamurti, is known for facing pain and suffering head on in her works of poetry. The words of these poems center around modern warfare, and explicitly reveal the minor details of the effects war has on individual lives. Rather than seeing war as a whole, the author reveals that the details seen by a war photographer reveal that war is individual and personal.

### Stanza 1

'The reassurance of the frame is flexible  
you can think that just outside it  
people eat, sleep, love normally  
while I seek out the tragic, the absurd,  
to make a subject.  
Or if the picture's such as lifts the heart  
the firmness of the edges can convince you  
this is how things are –'

In the opening stanza, the speaker uses intense imagery to reveal what a picture of war can do to the viewer. Upon first glance, the picture is safely inside the frame. To most viewers, the photo is of a different place and perhaps even a different time. Thus, one is not forced to entirely enter into the photo. The speaker reveals that as a person looks at a war photograph, they can think outside the frame of the photo and believe that "people eat, sleep, love normally". But life is different for the photographer herself. She must "seek out the tragic" and thus live in it. For the one who sees the realities of war first hand, life outside of war is hard to imagine. One might even forget that it exists. The speaker mentions the edges of the photo again, implying that "the firmness of the edges" can help a person to live outside of the tragedy of war, keeping the realities safely within the borders of the pictures. However, other pictures are the kind that "lift the heart" and most people tend to look at these pictures and convince themselves that "this is how things are". The photographer herself, however, knows that photos are only a snapshot in time and could never fully encompass the way things are in any time and place.

### Stanza 2

'as when at Ascot once  
I took a pair of peach, sun-gilded girls  
rolling, silk-crumpled, on the grass  
in champagne giggles'

Here, the speaker recalls a picture she took is Ascot. The picture was clearly of some rich, fairly privileged girls. She describes them as wearing silk and giggling in the grass as they sipped champagne. This is clearly a group of girls who represent happiness and perhaps ignorance of the tragedies going on in the world around them. The purpose of this stanza is to reinforce what the speaker said in the previous stanza concerning the viewers' ability to believe in the truthfulness of the happy photos rather than the tragic ones. The imagery provided here will also contrast with the images the speaker presents throughout the

rest of the poem, allowing the readers to understand the irony of the fact that some people get to enjoy wealth and ease while others suffer war and tragedy.

### **Stanza 3**

'as last week, when I followed a small girl

staggering down some devastated street,

hip thrust out under a baby's weight.

She saw me seeing her; my finger pressed.'

With this stanza, the speaker drives her point home by providing a specific instance and revealing that it happened recently. She remembers following "a small girl" as she was "staggering down some devastated street". The vivid description of the small child allows the reader to enter into the scene and feel as though he is there with the photographer, following the small girl. She describes the way her "hip thrust out under a baby's weight". This reveals that this small girl was not only so weak that she was staggering, but she walked down a street that could only be described as "devastated". On top of that, she had to care for a baby when she was only a child herself. The photographer looks at the girl and takes the picture just as the girl turns to look at her. This subtle description of the act of taking this picture allows the readers to enter into the photographer's reality. She cannot do much to help the child. She is simply there to report and take pictures of life there. The readers, then, can understand that there is so much more to the realities happening behind the pictures they see. They will see only a photo of an impoverished child caring for a baby. They do not know how it feels to see that child first hand, and to know that the child has seen you, and yet be able to do nothing to help save for spreading awareness of the situation through the photos taken. The description of this child sharply contrasts the previous stanza, allowing the reader to juxtapose the two situations and understand the harsh reality that some starve while others drink champagne.

### **Stanza 4**

'At the corner, the first bomb of the morning

shattered the stones.

Instinct prevailing, she dropped her burden

and, mouth too small for her dark scream,

began to run...'

With this stanza, the speaker continues to describe the small child who held the baby. The fact that the bomb is described as "the first bomb of the morning" suggests that there have been numerous bombs prior to this one, and that many more would follow. This poem becomes all the more shocking, however, when the child drops the baby she was carrying and flees for her own life with a scream that seemed too loud for the mouth from which it came. This also reflects the contrast between this stanza and the second, suggesting that when it comes down to it, human nature, by instinct, will cause one to take care of himself first and foremost. This offers more insight into the reason some can enjoy riches while others starve.

### **Stanza 5**

'The picture showed the little mother

the almost-smile. Their caption read

'Even in hell the human spirit

triumphs over all.'

But hell, like heaven, is untidy,

its boundaries

arbitrary as a blood stain on a wall'.

With the final stanza, the photographer reveals the way pictures can be deceiving. While she saw the child first hand, looked into her eyes, heard her scream, and watched her run, dropping the baby in her arms, the picture she captured did not tell the whole story. In the picture, it looked almost as if the child was smiling. The caption reveals that the photographer played a role in the deception of the public. Whether she wrote the caption herself or simply allowed it to be published, she knew that the realities of life for this young child were not truthfully reflected through the photo. The caption said that "even in hell the human spirit triumphs over all". This gives readers the false idea that the child was happy. This allows the readers to believe that even though the war was going on and people were starving and dying, the people could still be happy. This, the photographer knows, is untrue.

However, it is apparently what the public wanted to hear, and therefore what the photographer published. The last three lines, however, reveal that the photographer is aware of the deception of her photos, and wants to proclaim the truth. She explains that "hell" does not have specific boundaries like the edges of the photo. Rather, they are "arbitrary as a blood stain on a wall". This ending reveals that pain and suffering are arbitrary, or senseless. It is not fair that some people get to sun bathe and drink champagne while others scream and run in terror as bombs go off around them. This reveals the injustice that goes on in a world in which small, innocent babies are casualties of war. By the end of the poem, the speaker successfully reveals that which the media fails to reveal. She proclaims the truth about war, that it is painful, ugly, and personal. She reveals the injustice of a world that turns its back on the suffering, willing themselves to believe in the pictures that reveal happiness. Her words bring conviction for those who have been content to keep the tragic pictures within the borders of the picture without concerning themselves with the tragedies of others.

# Unseen Poems to annotate and analyse

## Prayer Before Birth

I am not yet born; O hear me.  
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the  
club-footed ghouel come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.  
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me  
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words  
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,  
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,  
my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me  
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses  
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,  
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God  
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
one face, a thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.

Louis Macneice

## **PIANO**

**By D.H. Lawrence**

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;  
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see  
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings  
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong  
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside  
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

1918

### **A Mother In A Refugee Camp**

No Madonna and Child could touch  
Her tenderness for a son  
She soon would have to forget. . . .  
The air was heavy with odors of diarrhea,  
Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs  
And dried-up bottoms waddling in labored steps  
Behind blown-empty bellies. Other mothers there  
Had long ceased to care, but not this one:  
She held a ghost-smile between her teeth,  
And in her eyes the memory  
Of a mother's pride. . . . She had bathed him  
And rubbed him down with bare palms.  
She took from their bundle of possessions  
A broken comb and combed  
The rust-colored hair left on his skull  
And then—humming in her eyes—began carefully to part it.  
In their former life this was perhaps  
A little daily act of no consequence  
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it  
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave.

—Chinua Acheb

## **Remember**

BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

1830–1894 Christina Rossetti

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.  
Yet if you should forget me for a while  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave  
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.

## **Do not go gentle into that good night**

**Dylan Thomas**

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.