

EDEXCEL Certificate 1/2

IGCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ANTHOLOGY, Unit B

POETRY NOTES:

DISABLED

WILFRED OWEN

OUT, OUT-

ROBERT FROST

REFUGEE BLUES

W.H. AUDEN

AN UNKNOWN GIRL

MONIZA ALVI

ELECTRICITY COMES TO COCOA BOTTOM

MARCIA DOUGLAS

Notes for study, prepared by Jonathan Peel

DISABLED:

Owen's poem of 1917/18 tells the story of what happens to one of the heroes of the Great War once he is wounded and invalided out of the army. It shows in detail the shift from being the heroic young man, proudly showing –off the scrapes of a game of "football" –to a forgotten shell of a man, unable to act for himself and ignored by society as a whole. Owen is warning the reader and invoking pity for the soldiers by showing the stark reality of the Great War. This does not mean that students should consider him a pacifist – nowhere in his poems does he call for an end to war and seek peace, rather he strives to educate the reader to the reality of war once the patriotic jingoism has been removed. Possibly, before reading the poem, students should consider the quotation paraphrased here "if you want to know the reality of war, look in a field hospital". These words were written in the 1920s by the German Erich Maria Remarque following his experiences in WW1. Owen's writing seems remarkably prescient.

The poem is focused from the opening word on a soldier – wholly impersonal and therefore representing all soldiers- who is sitting alone in an hospital ward having lost his legs in battle. This man reflects on his past heroics and the current isolation he suffers now that he is fully marginalised from society. Owen is able to reflect his loneliness and also to comment on the nature of the war propaganda which led young men to join the army, even lying about their age with the full connivance of the recruiting officers.

The language in this poem is indicative of the care taken by Owen to find precisely the right words to suit his purpose. Looking closely at Stanza 1 will show what I mean. After the opening word –"He" - which reflects the impersonal nature of the poem Owen's scene setting introduces a sequence of telling linguistic choices: The soldier waits for "dark", prefiguring death as well as the end of the day; he wears a "ghastly suit of grey" which not only bleaches colour and strength from the young man but also introduces a sense of the hellish and the ghostly into the poem; The third line, after shocking the reader with the opening "Legless", breaks half way through – the caesura seeming to reflect the very injury referred to in the line; This sudden break is followed by references to unattainable "voices" of boys and play – the very thing this boy will no longer have access to before Owen uses the verb "mothering" to imply a sense of security and motherly love, both of which he is now denied.

Another feature of the writing is the use of active verbs and euphemism when discussing his injury. He "threw away his knees" as though nothing more than waste paper; he "poured" his blood down shell holes, again making the soldier the agent of his own misfortunes. Owen avoids any graphic description of the wound, instead telling his tale of how it used to be when the boy was carried shoulder high with a "smear" of blood on his thigh –a far cry from the heroic "leap of purple" which "leaps" so athletically from him as he receives his crippling wound. And he sets this against a beautiful and calm image of the "glow-lamps" of the times when the boy was fit and healthy.

Owen also breaks up his syntax in stanza 4 as the young man recalls his enlisting. As he questions his thought processes and realises the vanity and the hypocrisy evident in the process his control falters.

The lines fragment as the sentences become short and broken. In this stanza Owen writes in line 3 a line which manages to look both ways –first explaining the image created in the opening couplet and then, as it moves to line 4 showing the reader that it was on the back of his heroic sporting exploits that the boy “thought he’d better join”. The link is clearly made between sport and the image of war portrayed by the authorities of the time.

This sense of propaganda is carried on into the next stanza and built up to further stress the contrast with his return and the eerie man who “*thanked*” him – the italics stressing the word possibly to highlight the lack of thanks received from official quarters – before trying to use his injury to engage him in a proselytising exercise.

Left alone in the ward for “a few sick years”, his short life ruined by his actions, the man reflects on his situation. At the end of the poem, after the contrast with the “whole” man which helps to pick up the theme of the poor attitude of the women he has loved to his situation, Owen places the reader into the soldier’s head and forces us to share his anguish. The repeated “why don’t they come?” haunts the reader as it is a question that we simply can not answer and possibly fear to do so. It is about so much more than bed time – it is about the attitude of those who remained at home and allowed others to fight for them; about those who shy away from the ill, the crippled and the infirm.

“OUT, OUT-“:

Written in 1916, in the USA, Frost’s poem concerns an accident on a farm in which a boy severs his hand with a buzz-saw and dies from his injury. Frost comments on the response of the family and also builds up a series of images relating to the title of the poem – part of a quotation from Macbeth, in which the hero, contemplating the death of his wife and his own demise starts a soliloquy “Out, out, brief candle” equating life and the candle and thus pointing out how easily death can come to all of us.

The poem is written in Free Verse –that is to say there is no rhyme scheme or regular rhythmic pattern to the poem. Instead, the poet has freedom to place words and phrases wherever he wishes for maximum effect within the single stanza of the poem.

A range of devices are used in the poem. The saw itself is personified as some form of wild animal – “snarled and rattled” is repeated three times to give a sense of the continuous noise and threat that exists whilst at the same time linking the saw to predatory animals and rattle snakes. The personification continues in the description of the attack as the saw “leaped” at the boy, before Frost acknowledges that the boy must have had a part in the accident himself – “he must have given the hand”- and then focuses the reader on the object at the centre of the poem. “But the hand!” which ends L18 is a half line, strengthened by the preceding caesura which focuses the reader away from the emotion of the boy and onto the hand itself. The exclamation mark reflects not only the boy’s shock but also the importance of the hand. Without a hand, a farmer is useless and in rural Vermont, we assume, there is little future left for the boy. This is made all the more tragic when we notice that in L12 we notice the idea of the sister arriving so that the boy might be “saved” from

work. He is distracted, wants to play in his half hour of freedom and loses control of the saw –after all, as Frost reminds the reader, he is doing “man’s work”.

Frost sets up the scene with contrasts between the savage saw and the “sweet smells” and beauty of the vast American countryside. The accident is set against such an idyllic landscape yet the reader notices the time of day –sunset and the fact that the boy is later put into the “dark of ether”. The day is ending, and so this reflects the end of the life of the boy.

As the narrative progresses from L20, the boy first gives a “rueful” laugh – almost apologetic, and certainly understated in response before reality hits him and as he recognises “life spilling” (a half line in which the following caesura seems to represent the finality of the statement), and Frost delays the flow of information using parenthetical dashes to build tension as he comments on the age of the victim before the powerful monosyllables which open L25. As he begins to fear for his life, the boy calls to his sister (or possibly a nurse) and falls into the hands of the medics who try to save him. In his darkness, the doctors become unnamed, unformed figures – “the watcher” who responds with fear to the slipping pulse, and Frost uses punctuation to clearly show the stages of life ebbing from the boy; “Little – less-nothing!-and that ended it”. As this line closes with the simple finality, the life has lost all existence and is now merely “it” – the boy no longer has life. Frost repeats the word “boy” several times between LL 19 and 24, stressing his youth, and now the humanity is replaced by the reaction of the family and those present. This is not a callous disregard for the boy, but rather a recognition that life has to continue – the world turns, seasons change and, in nature, animals die.

REFUGEE BLUES:

Put in simple terms, this is a poem about the plight of a specific group of refugees displaced and arriving in a country that is generally hostile to their situation, even if well-meaning. Written in 1939, Auden focuses on the German Jews arriving in the UK at that time, though the poem has taken in a timeless quality due to the commonality of its subject. Indeed, it is not until stanza 8 that Auden identifies his Refugees. Possibly he is trying to show the reluctance of the persecuted to identify themselves for fear of further persecution, possibly he is allowing the narrator –we assume a husband – to present the key ideas of his poem without the idea of Jewishness in some way getting in the way of a *universal* message. He has chosen the title Refugee Blues to link to the protest and subculture of the enslaved Blacks, who developed this musical form in the Southern USA, and has written a poem in which the rhythm and rhyme scheme (AAB) reflects the musical style. This is another way of linking the fate of the Jews with a more universal theme of suffering. Remember that this was written in 1939 – before the Holocaust and before any real idea of the savagery and brutality of Hitler and Stalin.

There is a wide range of powerful imagery used to build up the overall picture. In the opening line, the choice of the word “souls” is important since it not only suggests a religious or sacred connotation, but also serves to remove barriers between peoples – all are souls whether in “mansions” or “holes”. Auden points out the artificial nature of human segregation here. He refers to a Yew tree in stanza 3, locating the poem in England but also setting up, by means of the

reference to the Spring blossoms, an idea of hope for the future which must be allowed to permeate this poem, negative though it is. The tree is carried into the reference in the next line to “old passports” – in essence dead trees- which suggests that hope may not actually exist for all the people of the world. Auden uses Pathetic Fallacy in stanzas in stanzas 7&10 with great effect. Hitler’s speeches are metaphorically linked with thunder and therefore with threat and destructive power and in the final stanza the snow serves to provide chill and a bleaching of emotion to accompany the remarkable prediction of the events in Russia some years later.

Other linguistic devices that might be of interest include the direct speech in stanza 4, the use of the word “politely” in stanza 5, and the repetition of “my dear” which runs through the poem in an understated comment on the affection and love between the couple.

The poem’s meaning is clearly expressed in Stanzas 2 & 9. This is more than simple comment on the fate of the displaced. IN Stanza 2 Auden refers to the fact that “once we had a country and we thought it far” and seems to be looking beyond the homeland just left back to Palestine, the traditional homeland of the Jewish race. If this is the case, then a reader must sense a stronger political comment here. The Jews would be granted Palestine in 1947 to set up the state of Israel and since this time the area has been riven with conflict. Is Auden suggesting as early as 1939 that this should be the aim of the refugees? Whatever your opinion on this, the harbour portrayed in Stanza 9 offers two meanings. First the harbour and the quays are reflections of travel – of the great Diaspora undertaken from Germany in the 30s and elsewhere throughout history as persecuted peoples wait to embark to escape their tormentors. Auden links this idea with that of the contrast between the freedom of the animal kingdom, seemingly within touching distance (but still out of reach) and the persecution or polite lack of interest shown to the narrator of the poem.

The poem has an effect beyond the apparent simplicity of its message and it gains in power from the musical form and the ideas within it. The reader will notice, hopefully with a shudder of self recognition, that the Jews are viewed as thieves of “our daily bread”, a phrase which links the accusers directly to the Christian community and shows up the innate hypocrisy of many “people of faith”.

An Unknown Girl:

Monika Alvi was born in Pakistan and moved to England when a baby. This poem seems to engage with her search for her cultural identity and uses the idea of the Hennaing of her hands to explore the feeling she has for her native continent.

The poem is written in free-verse and centred on the page, possibly reflecting the nature of the henna pattern itself. Within the free verse stanza, however there is structure. The poet repeats the phrase “In the evening bazaar” three times and each time adds more detail to the subsequent description of the treatment. We should also note that the poem is framed by the bazaar itself, though by the end, “evening” has been replaced in the line by “neon”.

This suggests a purpose for the setting in the evening. Since that time-between-times is neither day nor night, this suggests that Alvi is likewise torn between her two cultures. By the end of the poem, night has fallen and the neon beams strongly as she recognises the strength of her native Pakistani/Indian culture. The neon was used in L2 to represent the decoration of the unfamiliar world in which she was sitting. Now it defines her world.

The three stages of her response are clearly defined. At first she is relating the experience to Western cake decoration. The description of the “wet, brown line” has little beauty in it and although her “satin-peach” trousers suggest beauty to see and to touch, the idea is not explored and is distanced from Alvi by the use of the metaphor relating the colour to the knee, rather than to the clothing.

As the experience continues, Alvi mentions “a few rupees” suggesting either a sense of guilt, perhaps or of awareness of the poverty of so many in this region. She now recognises the lines as a metaphorical peacock – a thing of beauty. As she is caught up in this beautiful display colour enters the poem in the balloons, but even these are leaving. What is concrete, oddly, is the canopy under which she sits, like a Queen or Maharajah which seems to be made of old advertising banners – again reinforcing the idea of poverty and a divide between poet and Unknown Girl.

In the third section, not only does she recognise the skills of the painter, but also describes herself as “clinging” to the “firm peacock lines”. “Clinging” and later “longing” show the change that is coming over Alvi as she sits. The wish to reconnect with her past becomes tangible and in the simile is likened to those undertaking a journey in this vast continent – clinging to the outside of the train because of poverty, despite the huge risks involved. She describes scraping off the brown lines to reveal the beauty underneath – almost as though she herself recognises the metamorphosis of her own experience and the emergence of her inner beauty as linked to her birth-culture.

She knows this to be a transitory moment in her life. However the experience has left her with longing and a wish to reaffirm her contact with the Indian subcontinent and her birth heritage.

Electricity Comes to Cocoa Bottom:

This poem is written by Marcia Douglas, a Jamaican who moved to the USA in 1990. She writes about a symbolic moment in her island’s history, when electricity transformed the lives of the rural population. The poem is a narrative, telling the story from the position of an omniscient observer – despite the fact that the poem tells us that “there was no one” to make a record of what happened.

The event is described in three stanzas of a free verse form poem. The story is told at first with a strong sense of anticipation and excitement, beginning in medias res “Then the children...” suggesting that the reader is joining in the middle of a story already being told. As they approach the local celebrity, Mr Samuels’ house, their excitement grows – the third sentence is long and weaves its way through four lines which delay the moment all are waiting for. Their lamps are old fashioned yet “filled with oil” suggesting that they are ready for a long wait and they are “camped” outside the house awaiting sunset. The poet introduces strong colours into this description of a dying day and the children await the replacement of natural light with artificial. Even “Grannie Patterson” is described as “peeping” possibly suggesting fear or excitement.

Douglas builds the tension by describing how nature itself is “congregating” to witness this great event. The verb introduces a sense of a religious experience being undergone as the personified breeze holds its breath in anticipation of what is to come. The stanza closes gently with the alliterative soft Ss of “closing” lulling the reader into a peaceful watchfulness.

The second stanza opens with a single word line: “light!” So strong is this that it represents the power of the image on those present and even recalls Genesis and God’s creation of light prior to populating the Earth. This is an enormously powerful event, and in L25 the repetition of the idea helps to sustain this impression. The light itself has resulted in shock and panic amongst the birds present and suggests the shock at a world which will not now ever be the same again. The children gasp with awe, the birds fly off and the breeze itself responds with a strong wind. Whether this is nature rebelling against the new order of things is unclear, nevertheless, it is the breeze which speaks to the children and starts the clearance of the area, having caused the grass to bow its head like a figure at prayer. The Wind “whispered” the question referred to at the opening of this piece – who is here to record this event? As the stanza ends with a rather dull finality, the mood changes and the anticlimax sets in.

The third stanza records the sad departure of the children. The reader should wonder what “sound” was expected – a great noise to match the light? A speech? Some signifier of the grandeur of the moment? What is recorded is the children having already lit their lamps – the pluperfect tense placing this event before the wind got up as they recognise the essential idea that humans often long for an invention, but just as quickly become bored by it if it doesn’t “perform” in some way.

Sadly, Douglas records that the “moment had passed” in a simple closing line. The poem reflects well the excitement of all concerned as well as the growing realisation that now that electricity is a fact of life, it is not really that interesting.