ESSENTIAL GUIDES

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POETRY

SEAMUS HEANEY and CAUGHT IN CONFLICT

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FOLLOWER

1

The theme of manual labour on the farm, which was a traditional occupation in Heaney's family, is incorporated with family conflict and merged with his love for the land. His fond memories of rural Ireland and his childhood are used to help explain why he sees the ordinary action of farm work, something he himself cannot do, as a skill.

In the first half of the poem, Heaney describes his father working. The intricate detail shows how mesmerised and interested he was and creates a vivid and appealing picture, the full vowel sounds adding a sense of the size of the man and his power:

'His shoulders globed like a full sail strung/Between the shafts and the furrow'.

The image is reinforced by using the simile of a ship. Similarly, the imagery is made more potent by using onomatopoeia in the last line of the first stanza:

'The horses strained at his clicking tongue'.

Heaney is aware of his father's power, that he is in control.

(2) The terse first sentence: 'An expert' isolates these two words from the next sentence and gives them more impact. The rest of this stanza, and the next, describes in a language which is precise and technical, hence almost foreign to the average reader, the work his father is doing. Even as a child, the poet could see the man's skill:

'The sod rolled over without breaking'.

Enjambement connects the second and third stanzas:

'At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins...'

Again, this shows the child's admiration of his father's instinctive ability and also conveys movement with the abruptness of the change of lines, matched by the short words and hardness of the consonants.

(3) The hard work of the men is evident in the description: 'the sweating team', as well as in the last sentence:

'His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly.'

which also demonstrates his natural skill.

FOLLOWER

2

The last three stanzas concentrate on the child's awe of his father, as he followed him while he went about his daily routine, wanting literally, to follow in his footsteps. He longs to share his father's graceful proficiency and feels clumsy by comparison:

'I stumbled... Fell sometimes'.

He still recalls the pride of being his father's son:

'Sometimes he rode me on his back/Dipping and rising to his plod'.

The second line is also a strong image of the movement, reinforcing the rhythm of his father at work.

(5) Here, the poet reveals just how much he admired his father:

'I wanted to grow up and plough';

although his need was surpassed (as revealed in *Digging*) by his love of writing, which became his vocation. However, he still admires the skills of his forefathers. As a child, the confusion he experienced due to this created a feeling of insignificance in him:

'All I ever did was follow/In his broad shadow round the farm.'

(6) His awkwardness is augmented once again at the beginning:

'I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,/Yapping always'.

This is reiterated before the powerful last line:

'But today/It is my father who keeps stumbling/Behind me, and will not go away.'

By making himself sound insignificant before the telling last line, which thus becomes stronger and more forceful. Heaney is clearly not looking down on his father. These lines are full of pathos and appeal to our sympathies, even though the role reversal is unexpected. The awkward child, who trailed after his father, relied on him to look after him, and so he did, as a father should. But, in turn, it is a son's duty to do the same for his father.

Heaney is remembering his father when he was in his prime. In a sense it is not just a tribute to his prowess but a justification, establishing that manual labour is as important as literary ability. He finds it painful to recall the helplessness of the old man but is haunted by him and cannot shake off that memory. It is also an intimation of his mortality: so the old man must have felt about his father, so Heaney's son would, in time, think of him.

EXERCISE
Write about a childhood hero and discuss whether, when you grew up, they continued to live up to your expectations or not.

THE EARLY PURGES

3

Constructed in half rhyme, a jarring effect to intensify emotion, this again deals with childhood in a farming community. Full of pathos, it shows in disquieting detail how farmers get rid of pests. The first line, a bald statement, means we immediately share Heaney's horror as a child: 'I was six when I first saw kittens drown'. It demands the reader's attention and its boldness continues throughout, emphasised by the short words and the hard consonants: 'Dan Taggart pitched them'.
Again, there is a sudden shock when Heaney quotes the man's brutal words: "the scraggy wee shits"; the harshness of the alliteration stressing that he is totally devoid of sympathy. In the third line the oxymoron: 'frail metal' underlines the contrast between weakness (the kittens) and hardness (the cruelty of the action). The onomatopoeia conveys pathos with its softness, even the splashing of the water. This phrase also shows how easily the little creatures were killed, the slenderness of the line between life and death.

(2) Now the pathos is reinforced by onomatopoeia: 'Soft paws scraping like mad' which conveys the futile frenzy of the kittens as they try to escape. Heaney adds to this with assonance: 'tiny din' and more alliteration: 'slung on the snout/Of the pump and the water pumped in'. This continual repetition of sounds not only augments the subtle rhythm, but conveys the slowing of the kittens' heartbeats, while the last line depicts Taggart's movements as he drowns them.

Taggart's brief justification establishes only how hardhearted he is and the contrast with Heaney's feelings. A simile is used to create a vivid picture of the dead creatures: 'Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone', the short words, again, reflecting movement. This simile is also a paradox, heightening the pathos, because gloves do have a use; unlike the kittens.

(4) Heaney often opens new stanzas with sharp, sudden words to reflect his continuous horror. Here, he is 'Suddenly frightened' and creates a distressingly potent picture of the dead animals: 'the three sogged remains/Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung' - they are now nothing more than a mess to clear up. However, he is honest enough to admit to the morbid fascination of young boys. He has to keep looking at the gruesome sight, almost as if to reassure himself of his own mortality.

Enjambement connects the fourth stanza with the fifth; achieving a greater contrast when, after the grisly details, he adopts Taggart's' tone: 'Until I forgot them'. This may be callous but it is typical of a child. However, just as suddenly, there is another change in tone: 'But the fear came back', which shows that he is still not totally devoid of emotion. This is due to his overwhelming exposure to death, courtesy of Taggart: 'trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows'. This stanza concludes with the brutal description of the method used for killing hens; getting rid of pests is an increasing problem.

THE EARLY PURGES

4

Heaney now adopts a mature, sensible tone which shows he has reluctantly accepted the necessity of such deeds: ‘Still, living displaces false sentiments’, but the line is given pathos by the hissing alliteration. It is disheartening to think he has adopted Taggart’s views and that as a result of his influence, killing pests to get rid of them has become commonplace and he doesn’t seem to care any more. Once again, there is an echo of Taggart’s voice: ‘shrill pups’, ‘It makes sense’, particularly in the harsh: 'Bloody pups'.

Yet it seems that Heaney does still recall his original feelings and has to put on a front. He ends bitterly; virtually attacking those who have no need to utilise this harsh practice and therefore cannot understand. Ostensibly, he wishes that he, too, did not have to do it, even if it is practical, a way of life: ‘But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.’

There does seem to be a political allusion in this poem: the helplessness of the child could be an analogy with the general public, who are spectators to atrocity. The title could refer either to Heaney trying to discard his early feelings of horror, because it is a necessary practice, or the sickness it made him feel. It also refers to the methods which have to be used to get rid of pests, as well as the necessity of people ridding themselves of useless emotions such as sentimentality. Nevertheless, the uneasiness of the tone raises the perhaps unanswerable question: where exactly do you draw the line?

EXERCISE
Write about a childhood memory that had a profound effect on you.

STORM ON THE ISLAND

The title itself is a bleak statement and more sinister than those of Heaney's other poems. The word 'Island' suggests isolation and entrapment, open to menace in every direction with nowhere to hide, while 'Storm' anticipates tension. Anyone living here is exposed to the mercy of the elements.

However, it opens in a different tone, a combination of defiance and optimism: 'We are prepared'. But there is already another subtle threat, with the use of ceasura to break up the line, incorporating a pause to build up tension, a sense of insecurity. By contrast, the poet still appears self assured in the second part of the first line because the houses built are 'squat' and therefore appear solid. This tone is maintained with the description of the sturdy materials used; Heaney appears adamant about their security and this is reinforced by the hard sounds of the short words, especially in the alliteration in the second line: 'rock and roof'.

The defiant tone is, however, modified in the third line when words alter to become softer, as if his conviction is faltering with his realisation he has made mistakes in his plan: 'The wizened earth has never troubled us'. The metaphor introduces doubt, since he cannot rely on the earth for food or hope for a fruitful harvest. Even though this has never troubled them in the past, it doesn't mean it won't be a future problem. He takes false comfort in the fact that at least it means they don't have to worry about crops. Although he seems to be optimistic about this, almost philosophical. His resigned tone (reinforced by the soft 's' alliteration) adds pessimism. The alliteration not only contrasts with the hard words at the beginning, but the hissing sound, and this in itself lends a cynical tone to Heaney's words.

More negative language creeps in, as he reveals: 'Nor are there trees/Which might prove company when it blows full/Blast'. These lines are similar to the previous ones, stressing the barrenness of the landscape. His defensive, doubtful language now justifies itself with a direct appeal to the reader, 'you know what I mean'. It is as if he is trying to reassure himself that they've made the right decision, needing the reader to agree and thus empathise. The defiant tone he originally uses makes him appear to be trying to stay in control, but it continually breaks down.

The mesmerising music of the wind is aptly conveyed in a paradox: 'raise a tragic chorus in a gale/So that you can listen to the thing you fear' and Heaney appears to be fascinated by the music, he has to remind himself: 'Forgetting that it pummels your house too'. This last line has a confessional, yet almost threatening manner.

(2) Heaney refers back to the barren landscape in a negative way; conveying the fact that there is 'no natural shelter', which shows that nature seems to be a threat to him. This idea augments the tone of negativity, pessimism and despair. He suggests that we 'might think that the sea is company' in an almost mocking manner, as if he himself had already made that fatal mistake. The motion of the sea is described in an oxymoron: 'Exploding comfortably', heightening the effect with almost rhyming alliteration: 'company', 'comfortably' and 'cliff'.

The word ‘But’ is reiterated to stress how unstable Heaney now feels - again, as opposed to his originally defiant tone. He creates a potent image of the sea’s strength: ‘the flung spray hits/The very windows’ which injects a sense of fear into the reader because the house is in danger. The antagonistic image is augmented with a simile: ‘spits like a tame cat/Turned savage’ which aptly conveys the way Heaney feels: he was comfortable with something which was so familiar to him, then it turned against him. His feelings of security have been torn apart.

He seems to be comparing the whole experience to that of a fairground ride, as if trying to convince himself that he is safe really, but it is a false sense of security. The erratic noise created by the wind comes from the sounds of alliteration and assonance in the line: ‘sit tight while wind dives’. All the antagonism is evoked by warfare imagery, showing the conflict between man and nature.

This concept is extended in the second to last line, as Heaney describes space as ‘a salvo’. This epitomises his message; he feels that they are ‘bombarded by the empty air’ emphasising the terrifying strength of nature. They feel threatened by ‘a huge nothing’ for all Heaney attempts to laugh this off, beginning the last sentence with the deprecating comment ‘Strange.’ They do need water and land and trees to live, and these are comfortable and familiar things to have around as a part of nature, yet suddenly, these sources of life turn against them. It is a basic fear of the unknown: what we do not understand makes us afraid, especially when we cannot understand why we should be afraid.

EXERCISE
Think about a situation where you felt there was no possible way out and write a poem about it, describing what happened in the end.

MID-TERM BREAK

7

The title itself implies something abruptly cut short and this is one of the most moving of all Heaney's poems, based on the death of his younger brother when the poet himself was a young man. He is also trying to describe a community of people whose everyday speech is far from poetical, in a situation where using almost any words seems impossible. His use of colloquial language and cliché results in a very crafted poem, written in a simple but beautiful style.

(1) The poem opens with Heaney on his own, waiting to be taken home and his painful feelings are reflected in the second line: 'Counting bells knelling classes to a close.' The alliteration of 'Counting', 'classes' and 'close' echoes the ringing of the bells and the numbing boredom. It is augmented by assonance and onomatopoeia: 'bells knelling', in particular since 'knell' signifies a funeral. The steadiness of the rhythm stresses that time has run out for the child, and the inevitability of death. None of us can escape it.

By the end of this first stanza, the reader can detect that something is wrong, an unease which leads into the first line of the second stanza: 'In the porch I met my father crying-'. In the second line, a funeral is mentioned in a colloquial phrase: 'He had always taken funerals in his stride-'. These careless lines seem to be cut off short, as if Heaney realises what he has actually said; everyday expressions take on unfortunate meanings in such circumstances. It is as if he is crying himself, gasping for breath. Again, he resorts to a cliché at the end: 'it was a hard blow', a colloquialism which nevertheless truly expresses the pain of grief.

In contrast to the solemn mood, Heaney now describes the baby who 'cooed and laughed and rocked the pram/When I came in', an optimistic image: life must go on, one of the most common clichés uttered at funerals. He recalls his embarrassment when strangers expressed their sympathies, even though telling him: 'they were 'sorry for my trouble', again, this is a cliché, not a personal remark. Perhaps he did not know how to express his grief and was aware that he had to be civil to the 'old men'. He does not want to break down in front of them and he also feels confused because they are all talking about him. They seem to feel that they cannot speak to him face-to-face; other than uttering clichés, they do not know what to say to him.

(4) The reader is aware that the funeral is for someone very close to both Heaney and his father. His mother is clearly as full of grief and as confused about expressing it, which can be seen in the jerkiness of the phrase: 'coughed out angry tearless sighs'. It may even be harder for her because she has to hold everything together, although this can be a blessing since it keeps the mind occupied. Heaney now announces that the ambulance soon arrived: 'With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.' The suddenness of the first part is quick and brutal, as if he does not want to think about it; being factual may help him in trying to hide his grief. The simplicity of his words, however, heightens the depth of his pain because of the contrast.

MID-TERM BREAK

Heaney manages to pluck up courage to go and see the corpse the next morning and the pathos of this description shows the beautiful simplicity of his style: 'Snowdrops/And candles soothed the bedside'. Whiteness is a symbol of purity, simplicity, peace and beauty and, more importantly, the snowdrops indicate Springtime, an allusion to the age of the child. This augments the tragedy of the situation. It is the first time 'in six weeks' since Heaney had seen his little brother and he seems almost mesmerised by the sight of the body. Its pallor reflects the whiteness of the flowers, making the 'poppy bruise' more discernible. The unusual flower image softens the gory picture of the wound and suggests the transience of life; it also conjures up an idea of the futility of all the young who die needlessly, like the soldiers in the First World War.

Heaney describes the coffin as 'the four foot box'; a euphemism to take away the horror of the situation and likens it to the child's cot, another euphemism which implies that the boy is not dead but asleep, conveying peacefulness. The fact that his brother does not look dead or as if he's just been involved in a fatal car accident is again reinforced: 'No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear'. It adds to the sense that Heaney and his family are grappling with the sheer impossibility of believing the child is really dead. The last stanza is one line only, which makes it stand out with shocking impact. It begins with a reiteration of 'A four foot box', as if the realisation suddenly hits him again and concludes with: 'a foot for every year', finally disclosing the age of the young boy. Once again, the simplicity of this adds to the pathos and tragedy.

EXERCISE
Look at the colloquialisms and the poetic imagery, then decide how they are successfully used side by side.

DIGGING

9

Another poem based on Heaney's childhood memories of a peaceful, rural community. It displays his admiration for his family's traditional occupation as farmers, comparing it with his own vocation for writing.

Despite the happiness and innocence of his childhood, he begins the poem in a solemn tone with a rhyming couplet which introduces two instruments of power. This stresses the potential strength of Heaney's words, proof that he believes in himself as a writer. The word 'snug' shows how comfortable he is with his pen, and that writing feels as natural to him as working on the farm did to his forefathers. Yet 'gun' is far more sinister, coupled with the blunt assonance of 'snug', and suggests his awareness that many of those who turn to violence also come from ordinary backgrounds. Everyone has to make choices about where their future lies: pastoral, literary or political.

(2) 'a clean rasping sound' introduces Heaney's vivid auditory imagery, a typical aspect of his sensuous style. The onomatopoeic 'rasping' and the alliteration of the hard 'g' sound in 'gravelly ground' are examples of his simple but effective language. Enjambement merges the second stanza with the third, which shows his father at work. Heaney takes the reader back in time: 'comes up twenty years away' to convey how long generations of his family have been working on the farm. The action is constant and familiar and he watches his father: 'stooping in rhythm'. To him, these movements have their own beauty, which he likens to poetry. This aptly conveys awe for his father's skill. At the end of this stanza, the word 'digging' is reiterated for emphasis.

(4) The assonance of the odd combination of 'coarse' and 'nestled' gives a fluid sound, stressing the proficiency of the farmer's action: 'The coarse boot nestled on the lug': Heaney is fascinated as he writes about these simple actions, making them visible with alliteration, 'He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep'. In this stanza, the assonance of: 'boot', 'rooted' and 'cool' conveys the way his father is rhythmically working. The stanza ends with emphasis on Heaney's love of his land, shown in his choice of sensuous words: 'To scatter new potatoes that we picked/Loving their cool hardness in our hands'.

(5) Although he has been using simple, almost child-like words throughout, as if to remind us that this is what he used to watch in the past, his colloquial language, and pride, is clearly evident: 'By God, the old man could handle a spade'.

(6) Memories make his pride swell and becomes more and more apparent. Firstly, he remembers his grandfather's speed and precision when he worked, and takes pleasure in remembering small, perhaps insignificant details: 'Once I carried him milk in a bottle'. The old man is so diligent he barely pauses long enough to drink and refresh himself.

Heaney is not only proud to be a part of this tradition but also in forging his own way in the world, a way that is so completely different to his forebears.

EXERCISE
Look at Heaney's sensuous imagery and focus on what techniques he uses to achieve this. Describe a garden, using similar techniques.

CAUGHT IN CONFLICT
INTRODUCTION

The poems in this section deal with conflict in different ways and have various outcomes. The most usual conflict is that of war yet each of the poems has a different way of looking at it and dealing with it: from the mother who feels she cannot do anything to protect her son from going to war, to the viewpoint of the men who are actually experiencing it. Whatever way it is described, it is expressed in the poems with the utmost pathos and bitterness.

The violence of war gives these poets the opportunity to express their anger and frustration in their work, creating potent images of what they have seen, felt or heard. The language in the poems reflects this, and so we often gain a bitterly honest insight into the horrors of war.

Nevertheless, there are other types of conflict: inner conflict, racial conflict, as well as the conflict which is often prevalent in relationships. It should be kept in mind, of course, that these can also be related to war.

Another form of conflict can be seen in the actual language of poems such as *The Twa Corbies*, where the language is archaic and in *You Hear Bout* (Jamaican Patois). Although not foreign languages, they can be difficult to understand and reflect different times and different cultures. Such work may be considered as giving rise to conflict with our own way of speaking and our own ideas about speech.

Poetry is a very effective medium to express being *Caught in Conflict.* Conflict may be seen as something negative in reality, but it is the driving force in literature. The contained form of a poem aptly epitomises the feeling of being trapped and successfully demonstrates the frustration which is experienced as a result of conflict and the emotions which arise from it.

Constructed in a regular yet subtle rhyme scheme of couplets, this maintains the solemnity of the tone, exploring the relationship between father and son, and how it is affected by the father's experience of war and the boy's growing up. It opens at a funfair; where the rides are referred to as 'machines', linking them with war. Although they are scary, the boy is excited by them in the way a young soldier thinks about going to war. The names of the rides are also relevant: 'The Long Drop' is the scaffold, and 'The Haunted House' suggests the family home and its ghosts, the father's memories of the war. The third line brings a contrast which highlights the generation gap; the boy sees the outing as 'thrills' and a 'holiday', but for the father it is 'that post-war year'. He does not enjoy the funfair any more because it seems too frivolous after the war, but his son doesn't understand that. He thinks his father is being mean because he won't join in the fun. The line 'my father watched me spend impatiently' also suggests money problems.

The isolated second stanza has the boy quoting his father, as if he is mocking him. It also shows that they probably do have financial difficulties and the boy's lack of understanding of his father's problems, though he may not be privy to them. He goes on to reveal how he defied his father: 'sneaked back the moment that you napped' although he is at least aware of how hard his father has to work: '50 weeks of ovens, and 6 years of war'. The reference to ovens suggests heat and hell, thus the intense suffering he has been through. Aware that all his father wants to do was rest, and that if he couldn't, he would become irritable. The boy appreciates that he cares enough about him to make the effort to take him out to a fun fair and to spend his hard-earned money.

The father's irritability is clear in his harsh injunction: 'Breathe God's fresh air!' It is good advice, evidence of caring, even if lacking tenderness. But the boy is too young to see this and: 'sulked all week, and wouldn't hold your hand' because he doesn't understand. He is shocked by his father's sudden swearing and the mention of God. It seems the man is now thankful to God for sparing his life; conversely, while his faith has thus been strengthened, the coarse language is also the effect of the war. The poet concludes the fifth stanza with the confession that 'it took me until now to understand'.

He echoes this sentiment in the beginning of the next stanza with the understanding which comes with maturity, when he refers to time and change. He describes the two fairground amusements, both of which make a mockery of war by using it for entertainment. It is difficult for his father to watch simulated death and fake ghosts when he must be haunted by terrible memories. The son's sudden revelation is stressed by the wry pun at: 'The penny dropped in time!' - just as the penny activates the games at the fair, so he now understands his father's feelings. He then adds: 'Wish you were here!', almost a double entendre: the clichéd holiday phrase plus a yearning to have his father back so that they can talk.

The holiday atmosphere is maintained in the second part of the poem, since they appear to be at a peaceful resort, but is distorted by the children playing war games. Nature and harmony contrast greatly with the horrors of war and the children's games are, unknown to them, both a mockery and a cruel reminder to their parents. Hard consonants: 'built', 'bombed Boche' plus hissing alliteration: 'stalags', 'sands', 'starfish' reinforces the sardonic tone, as the poet increasingly understands his father's plight.

There is a strong sense of patriotism. The poet sees himself as the young boy on the rides while his father watches, he sees them all 'holding hands', experiencing the 'shocks' together. Paradoxically, it links the feelings of the boy and his father with the third line of the first stanza since 'shocks' can be both frightening and exciting. For the first time, there is a sense of unity. He epitomises this revelation in concluding: 'The current would connect'. The poet explains how they all shared experiences, and the harmony apparent in the holiday at the beginning reinforces this feeling: 'the family circle, one continuous US!'. However, though the security of the family is reassuring, 'one tense grip' suggests that although they are all together, it doesn't mean everything is automatically all right and they still have difficulties to face. All the fun of the fair and its machines are drawing the family together, which not only brings excitement, but a better understanding of one another and a stronger sense of unity.

The poet was grown up when they all began to connect as a family unit: 'That was the first year of my scholarship'. Now he begins to condemn himself more openly, since he seems to feel that he would be the person who would 'make that circuit short', perhaps because his education set him apart. He gives examples of various things he had learnt, describing the subjects he studied as 'half-baked' which indicates that schooling can teach you facts, but there are certain things that you can only learn from experience. Using this particular phrase is another play on words, a link with his father's occupation. He assumes his father would feel all his studying would make him 'a bore', which shows that one thing he has still not learned is how to communicate with his father or to understand him. This may be because he feels his father simply doesn't want to know. The exclamation mark heightens this cynicism, being a feeble attempt to make a joke.

The beginning of the last stanza is sudden and sharp: 'Two dead', a straightforward and solemn tone. The poet refers to the surviving family's mortality: 'the current still flows through us three'. The tone is filled with pathos with his comment: 'the circle takes for ever to complete'. He suddenly feels quite inadequate in the second to last line, as the enormity of eternity and annihilation transcends him. However, there is a hint of optimism because despite this mortality, he sees their connection as eternal, continuing in future generations. Their unity is described as a circle and the poet is still confident that there is 'that small bright charge of life where they both meet'. There is both optimism and pathos pervading this poem.

The 'bright charge of life' brings the poem full circle, stressing again the family's unity. 'Illuminations' suggests the brightness of hope for the future and the poet's clearer understanding of his father, as well as the fairground lights and also the sudden flashes of gunfire in the war. These two things, suggested throughout, create a paradox which is personified in the father and the son and also appears throughout their relationship.

EXERCISE

Write a piece of prose about a holiday experience that you had with a close member of your family.

A WAR FILM

13

Free verse, with occasional rhyme, and a predominant tone which is melancholic, this is written in the persona of a mother. She is attempting to convey the strength of her feelings towards her son, and the helplessness she feels about war and the soldiers. She expresses her fear of the young boy growing up, how unbearable it would be if he had to go to war.

The very first line is just two short words in isolation, like the sharp intake of breath caused by shock. The pause is intriguing, especially as it lingers into the next line. It is clear from the title what she has seen, but we are still left wondering about the details since she is quite vague about them. Her helplessness is captured in the next line and her feelings now seem confused, judging by the paradox, 'Sorrow and pride'. She should feel patriotic and support her country but cannot help her overwhelming sadness.

She uses quotations with irony: 'The "week's great draw"' suggests a lottery, but in reality, she feels that the number is up for some men; they are manipulated into believing that they are about to be involved in something which is a good thing. The last line of the first stanza echoes her earlier sentiment about her feelings being torn - she feels horror at the atrocities of war, but is compelled to feel patriotic. 'Glory' appears to be used ironically and the way 'and the' appears between each key word slows down the pace, increasing the sadness of the tone.

This slow, painful pace continues in the next stanza, as if by so doing it will give her more time with her child while he is still young and she can protect him. It seems that for her the whole concept of the horrors of war is dreamlike and unreal. She is haunted by the memories of what she has seen and heard, creating auditory imagery with onomatopoeia and alliteration: 'machine-guns rattle and shells scream'. The ferocity is all the more powerful because it contrasts with her usual downcast tone. Attempting to evade the images and sounds, she finds that they still prey on her mind.

The tone is heightened in the third stanza by using alliterative consonants to make a harder sound: 'When the day was done'. However, this is also rhymed with 'My little son' and the softness of these words show his fragility and vulnerability, in contrast with the brutality of war. He is too small and weak to survive right now without his mother and his wide-eyed innocence augments this image, as does the rhythmic alliteration of the line, 'Naked upon my knee' which, again, slows the pace down. Not only does it maintain the downcast tone, but adds a sense of bitter-sweetness by concocting the subtle antithesis of sadness and happiness. She is so content to be there with him and to protect him yet she is very afraid of the future.

It is not only the child's innocence, because he doesn't know about war, but her need to shield him, so that he is never exposed to it. Her feelings and knowledge are contrasted with those of her son's; she doesn't seem to mind that she has seen some horrors of war, just as long as he stays innocent. He has no comprehension of what she is feeling when she is with him and she is almost comforted by his innocence. Then her feeling of 'sudden terror' is personified in the way it: 'assaulted' her.

She allows that line to linger in the reader's mind and then comes straight back into her predicament. Again, the tone is harsh and with the alliterative 'body I had borne', the hard, short words are angrily spat out. Throughout she poses the question: how dare they try and take my son away from me? This paradoxical belligerence is striking: for all her loathing of war, there is no doubt she herself would wage war for the sake of her son.

She then becomes more poetic in her imagery, as well as melancholy once more, describing the beauty of her pregnancy: 'Nine moons beneath my heart'. By incorporating a part of her own body, she continually affirms that he is 'A part of me..'. This immense love for her son reflects her emotions; if he were to be hurt in any way, it would affect her as much as if someone hurt her directly.

Once again, a sad, dreamlike tone is adopted, as she considers, after seeing the film and understanding how much she loves her son: 'If, someday,/It should be taken away/To War'. He is no longer a separate being but so close to her that she still tends to look upon him as if he were still in her womb. The words: 'War. Tortured. Torn./Slain.' are all written with capital letters in isolated sentences to emphasise how hard it is to face up to them and to make us pause, try and understand the horror. She reiterates the line 'My little son...' echoing the sorrow, now fresh and renewed. Pathos expresses her solidarity with the mothers of war victims at the end of the third stanza.

She reiterates that her son is still innocent and lacks her comprehension, perhaps to try and calm herself; for the meantime, he is still hers to protect. The poet writes that she 'kissed and kissed and kissed him'; repetition conveying the strength of her feelings. It stresses her depth of feeling as well as the assurance that she will never stop trying to love and protect him. She uses a simple, childish word, 'daft' to illustrate his innocence while the repetition in the very last line echoes the music of his laughter. The last few lines have a more blatant rhyme scheme, reminiscent of a child's nursery rhyme, again confirming his youth and vulnerability.

She is aware that he is not ignorant but only temporarily protected from the atrocities of war. She wants to protect him forever; but is forced to her recognise that she cannot do so. The title is straightforward and almost reflects the dreamlike melancholy encapsulated in her style, as films tend to be stories, and not real. But as she knows it is real and it affects her deeply. The title also suggests that she has only seen one frightening film - there are many more horrors that she hasn't seen.

EXERCISE
Think about a war video, or a film on TV which you have recently and imagine your best friend in a similar situation. Write a letter to them about how you feel.

THE TWA CORBIES

This poem about 'The Two Crows' can be quite difficult to understand because not only is it written in Scottish dialect, the language is archaic. The ballad consists of regular rhyming couplets which have no punctuation in the middle of the lines, allowing for constant flow and rhythm. The narrator of the poem hands over to the birds after his opening three lines, explaining that he was taking a walk and chanced upon them. Crows are not only sinister because of their black colouring, their scavenging links them with death. One of the birds asks the other '"Where sall we gang and dine to-day?"'. This suggests that they are respectable, if not civilised, and the reader is unaware of what they are to dine on, so the tone is innocent, even jovial.

The other crow continues with the narration of the rest of the poem, which is his suggestion of what they should eat and why. The reader is aware by the second line of the second stanza that they intend to eat the 'new-slain Knight', but the crow does not openly suggest this, building up to the last line of the third stanza. There is a distinct hint of pathos in the tone, for example, when the crow reveals that there is a dead Knight, evidently killed in battle and bluntly states that 'naebody kens that he lies there' - nobody even cares about this man. However, we are suddenly led to believe that he will be missed by those closest to him, due to the quick change of tone with the next line, 'But his hawk, his hound, and lady fair'. This lulls us into thinking that perhaps his death was not totally futile, since he will be remembered; this will be his legacy.

However, the slightly bitter, slightly mocking alliteration which is densely used in this line indicates that the crow has not quite finished, there is something more to come and it does not bode well. The alliteration continues into the third stanza, although the poem retains its jollity and rhythm, showing how nobody cares about the Knight after all, as the hound and hawk have both gone off to hunt and his lady has 'ta'en another mate'. The fact that the merciless hawk kills with such ferocity underlines the brutality of the Knight's death; perhaps he himself had killed others in such a way in battle. The crow concludes that as no one cares about him, they won't miss him. They won't care if the crows eat him because he is useless now.

The bird continues by cheerfully explaining exactly how they will attack him, which heightens the unfeeling tone. The casual, cynical manner and apparent cheerfulness makes the poem all the more macabre, especially in this stanza. The crow states that 'I'll pick out his bonny blue een' and that they'll both steal his hair so that they can keep their nests warm 'when it grows bare'. The poem becomes somewhat ambiguous at this point, because it is so horrific, stripping him of his blond hair and blue eyes, yet, even dead, his body is of some use and his hair will keep their offspring warm, in a sense, enabling life to go on. However, it is evident that as he rots away he becomes depersonalised, just as in war, all the dead become nothing but statistics.

In the last stanza the crow reiterates: 'But nane sall ken where he is gane' a reminder of the ultimate loneliness of death while the last two lines have the most pathos. Once these two birds have stripped the Knight of everything, he is nothing but an unidentifiable pile of bones. 'The wind sall blaw for evermair'. shows the futility of war because the man is dead, yet the world carries on regardless. He has left no lasting impression.

EXERCISE
Attempt to translate 'The Twa Corbies' into modern English prose.

YOU HEAR BOUT?

16

Written in Patois, the poem takes a little effort to understand, although this is made easier because it deals with events which are only too common, frequently described in the Media. However, having to concentrate harder, means more time spent focusing on it and perhaps therefore a greater understanding. It is constructed mostly of questions about racism and how people in power can brutally abuse this power by using it against minorities.

This is a poem for everybody because once you have understood the language, it is simple to comprehend the message. It is straightforward and conversational, particularly as the words are written as speech: 'about the' becomes 'bout di'. This form of abbreviation includes a lot of hard alliteration which creates a more cynical tone. These repeated questions show the events described inexorably worsening: the first people mentioned were arrested for what some might excuse as a stupid prank, putting dung through the letterbox into an Asian family's home. Then the police, who are supposed to uphold the law, are implicated in beating up a: 'black bwoy widout a cause'; the use of the word 'cause' here may have two meanings; Martin Luther King fought for a cause, something he strongly believed in and was assassinated as a result. By the end of the poem, an entire race of people are under threat because they are not being protected by those in power. Justice becomes more and more impossible for them.

The second to last question is a lot more forceful because of the lack of punctuation while the second line is the only one in the whole poem which doesn't begin with a capital letter, creating enjambement to add to the flow and a sense of the inevitable. It all builds up to the climax of the last two, short, sharp lines.

The very last question, 'Yuh noh hear bout dem?' is almost accusatory, as if to make us admit to our ignorance. But then the poet confesses that she hasn't heard about it either, in a cynical, resigned tone which confirms that there is no justice. Likewise, there is no simple answer to any of these questions and such crimes are being committed over and over again. The irony is that we are hearing about it now - but will that make any difference?

EXERCISE
Study a newspaper for a week and pick out similar stories of injustice. Choose the one which makes you feel angry and write a poem or a short story about it.

EXPOSURE

The most graphic of the war poems in this collection, as Owen retells the experience in great detail over an excruciatingly lengthy period of time. The main concept is the paradox: waiting for action, but in constant fear of attack.

The opening is very intense which drags the reader straight into the moment, sharing the soldiers' feelings and their suffering. The rest of the first line is full of assonance, with the onomatopoeia of: 'merciless iced east winds' and 'knive' to convey the slicing sensation of the wind, while the hissing repetition echoes its sound The use of so many negative words throughout the poem reflects the bitterly cold atmosphere. The alliteration of: 'Wearied we keep awake' slows the pace even further, stressing the soldiers' fatigue. The noise of the wind is the only sound; in the same line Owen first mentions the silence, which is then continually referred to.

The repetition of words and sounds to add to the imagery and reinforce his message is typical of Owen's style, for example, the assonance in: 'Low, drooping' which continues to slow the pace down, as does his use of ellipsis. The line ends with 'salient', a similar word in sound and appearance to 'silent', hence a reminder of the men's fear of the absolute quietness, and their constant terror as they wait: 'Worried by silence'. The polysyllabic words and punctuation, again, slow the pace and prolong the tension. The stanza ends with a line that is used as a chorus: 'But nothing happens', an isolated line filled with pathos, loneliness and desperation. It is almost as if he wants something to happen, anything to happen, to relieve him from the paradox of utter boredom and intense fear.

(2) The other senses are now introduced to make the images more potent and involve the reader more: 'Watching', 'hear'. Nature is personified so that the brutal weather seems like a human enemy because of the painful imagery: 'the mad gusts tugging on the wire', adding to the effect with the simile: 'twitching agonies'. There is now a touch of irony, as the men all appear to be looking 'Northward' - whether straight ahead or upwards, to look in that direction suggests hope, whereas it seems likely that they are doomed. Owen exposes us, via all our senses, to the constant pain: 'flickering gunnery rumble'. He manages to encapsulate the idea of their torment in a nightmare scenario with a distancing from reality: 'like a dull rumour of some other war'; by the end of the second stanza, the whole thing has ceased to make sense to any of them.

Again, irony makes the tone sound as bitter as the wind, but it is also incredibly melancholy and resigned; he describes the new morning as 'poignant misery'. Paradoxically, the dawn of a new day invariably suggests a new beginning, hope for the future. 'We only know war lasts,' implies desperation, however, as well as capturing the length of time they have been suffering, with the alliteration. In the second half of this line, this is almost ambiguous, with the hiss of bitterness and anger, which is also a soft sound, conveying their melancholy and fatigue.

This feeling is reiterated in the next line with the personification of Dawn; but there is also a paradox in the words 'melancholy army', which aptly conveys the strength of nature's power and the threat to the men. The personification is continued in the next line, sustaining the image.

Suddenly the tone changes, with quick words which instantly attract our attention; describing boredom runs the risk of boring the reader and by now, we have been lulled into a strange sense of security, as if believing that nothing ever would happen. However, a frightening image is concocted as a result of the alliteration used constantly throughout the fourth stanza: the hissing noise of 'flights of bullets' which also echoes the wind. In the second line nature is again personified and Owen introduces another paradox: 'black with snow'. The falling of the snow is likened to the 'flights of bullets'; both seem just as dangerous to the soldiers. By the fourth line, the pace is crawling once more with the alliteration and long syllables of 'We watch them wandering' to convey the erratic snowfall and the renewed calm of the battle; the wind is described as nonchalant; showing the unfeeling cruelty of the weather. In opposition to the utmost anxiety and tension in the rest of the stanza, Owen concludes by reiterating: 'But nothing happens'.

(5) He continues with the emphasis on nature's attacking the men, instead of their human enemies, and shows how nature uses similar tactics to slowly kill them: 'Pale flakes with fingering stealth'. The paleness of the flakes reinforces the men's' frailty and therefore their suffering, because they are completely at the mercy of the elements. There is a sinister hint in the last part of the first line - it is evident this furtive attack is reducing them to humble creatures who 'cringe in hole' like little, frightened children. This is followed by potent imagery, shell shocked men who can only dream of home, now so distant, it is almost forgotten; Their stunned and fatigued state is shown by alliteration: 'stare, snow-dazed,/Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed'. The paradox here encapsulates the idea of the soldiers being bored yet frightened, with the soft 's' sound and the hard 'd' sound. The tranquil, delicate and beautiful nature imagery in the penultimate line contrasts immensely with what we have already been told, and helps heightens the harsh tone. The last line: 'Is it that we are dying?', a digression from the usual ending to the stanzas, is full of pathos, as the soldiers suddenly realise that they may never return home.

(6) opens slowly and miserably, with little hope: 'glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed/With crusted dark-red jewels' is something they can only picture, not feel. The deep colours of the fireside contrasts with the black and white of reality. The caesuras employed in every line but the last slows the pace further and seems to give a false sense of hope with the pause, as if the tone will change. At the end of the stanza, it is apparent that the soldiers feel they have been shut out of the warmth. By now, they are aware that they are more likely to die than go home; but even if they do return, it will be very difficult for them to be a part of the family again because of what they have been through. Their resignation is brutally apparent in the very last line; they are no longer questioning their fate.

(7) The most contradictory stanza: hope is extinguished yet Owen reminds himself that his faith is being put to the test - he must believe that he is participating in this war for the good of his country. The first lines suggest that if men have no faith, there is no point to anything because, in contrast to the brightness of the sun, they live in darkness and despair. He seems to believe that God's love will always be there; since a 'spring' is a source which should not dry up; 'invincible spring' could indicate that no matter what, the seasons turn and life continues. The rhyme of 'made' and 'afraid' provides an emphasis which contrasts with the rest of the stanza, littered with warm words. The last lines are mournful; the men feel that they were born only to die, yet try to cling onto their faith.

In the final stanza, the men have succumbed, overpowered by nature. With the aid of personification and alliteration, Owen describes how they have been imprisoned, so that they will belong to nature for eternity; using potent imagery in the second line to show that the men are barely distinguishable from the earth; they have become a part of it. The explosive alliteration of 'party', 'picks' and 'Pause' echoes the sound of the movement of the men digging. Yet the soft alliteration of 'shovels' and 'shaking grasp' gives a picture of them shaking with the cold, the cold which killed the soldiers, and perhaps conveys their empathy. The 'half-known faces' indicates the loss of the dead men's individuality, heightening the pathos of their death and its horror: The last grim image: 'All their eyes are ice' suggests that just as the eyes, the windows of the soul, are reduced to nothingness, so have the men themselves.

The final line is full of hopelessness, stressing the pointlessness of war and that nothing can be done to stop it. A disturbing and pessimistic poem, this can be seen as a comment not only on man against man but man against nature.

EXERCISE
Pick another poem by Wilfred Owen and look at his language and how effective it is. Compare it with the techniques used in 'Exposure'.

I AM

Despite the defiance of the title, this is a potent picture of depression. Written in archaic language, it is constructed with a regular rhyme scheme which seems to give it a false sense of jollity. However, this only adds to the intense pessimism and hopelessness, making the tone all the more powerful.

Within the first line, there is a sudden change of tone to pessimism, after the defiant, 'I am', and from then onwards, this becomes the atmosphere. Clare states that 'none cares or knows' what he is, which could suggest that they have yet to learn. However, in the second line, it is evident that he feels all hope is lost, because his friends have deserted him; hard alliteration heightens his bitterness. The metaphor at the end of this line is melancholy and dreamlike: 'like a memory lost'. He describes himself as 'the self-consumer of my woes', which shows that his misery is eating him up and he blames himself because as long as he dwells in despair, it will continue to do so.

He uses a metaphor again to create a more explicit picture of his misery, his despairing mental state, showing how hard it is to define and focus on his depression, as if trying to grasp shadows. By incorporating love in the metaphor, he adds to his bitter loneliness. He continually writes 'I am' throughout the poem in a feeble attempt to maintain his defiance. At the end of the first stanza he adds to the words: 'and live', as if he is still optimistic, but the metaphor: 'like vapours tost/Into the air nothingness of scorn and noise' delves deeper into his pessimism. It adds to his helplessness by showing such an erratic, intangible image: vapours and shadows.

An enjambement connects the first and second stanzas, so despite the orderly structure of the poem, Clare's words and hence his frustration, pour out. The first line of this stanza is a potent image of his feeling of inferiority because he feels totally swamped and overpowered by other people. He continues to portray a dismal picture of a world in which he cannot achieve his dreams and claims that he is drowning in 'the living sea of waking dreams'. He describes a kind of nihilism to express his utter depression: 'Where there is neither sense of life or joys', - even the good things in his life always seem to become 'a vast shipwreck'. He releases himself from the metaphor for the last two lines of this stanza and is more blatant and specific when he once again refers to 'the dearest that I love best'. Yet he feels deceived by them; whereas they should be the closest to him for comfort and love, their actions towards him means he understands them less.

The last stanza sees him wishing for escape. He dreams of a place 'where man hath never trod/A place where woman never smiled or wept' which shows that he wants to be away from people, because they seem to be the central cause of his misery. He feels that it is better to experience nothing, or even heart-ache, than only a few good times.

It is evident that throughout the poem he has been questioning his faith yet his only hope in this last stanza is God, because what he wants in this lonely place is to 'abide with my Creator, God'. But he also longs for his childhood innocence, when he didn't have to face what he has to now: 'Untroubling and untroubled' is a hypnotic repetition which gives a melancholy rhythm. It echoes the peacefulness of death, which attracts him so much because it is the ultimate escape. At the very end it seems he wants to become a part of nature in all its tranquillity, and the last line suggest an image of him in his grave. However, 'the vaulted sky' suggests that heaven is there and he can see it, but because it is out of his reach, it makes him question his faith.

There is only his precarious faith and the wish to return to his childhood innocence, which is impossible, but, he feels, nothing else. The regular rhyme scheme creates a cycle; it emphasises the fact that he won't be able to free himself. As with the form of the poem, he is contained and controlled. The defiance in the title is eradicated in the succeeding verses, which is all the more ironic, because by the end he ceases to be. The conflict inside him is slowly killing him until he yearns only for death.

EXERCISE
Imagine yourself as a small child who has got lost or that you're in charge of a small child who suddenly goes missing. Pick which situation you think is worse and describe your feelings.

GLOSSARY OF TECHNICAL TERMS

AL.LIT.ER.A.TION The repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighbouring words or syllables (as wild and woolly, threatening throngs).

AL.LU.SION An implied or indirect reference.

AS.SO.NANCE To answer with the same sound. Resemblance of sound in words or syllables: relatively close juxtaposition of similar sounds: repetition of vowels without repetition of consonants (as in stony and holy) used as an alternative to rhyme in verse.

CLI.CHE A trite phrase or expression; also the idea expressed by it. A hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation. Something (as a menu item) that has become overly familiar or commonplace.

COL.LO.QUI.AL Of or relating to conversation: conversational; used in or characteristic of familiar and informal conversation; also unacceptably informal.

DOU.BLE EN.TEN.DRE Ambiguity of meaning arising from language that lends itself to more than one interpretation; a word or expression capable of two interpretations.

EL.LIP.SIS To leave out, fall short, the omission of one or more words that are obviously understood but that must be supplied to make a construction grammatically complete. A sudden leap from one topic to another indicating an omission (as of words) or a pause.

EM.PA.THY The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.

EN.JAMB.MENT The running over of a sentence from one verse or couplet into another so that closely related words fall in different lines.

EU.PHE.MISM The substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.

IM.AG.ERY The art of making images; pictures produced by an imaging system; figurative language; mental images; the products of imagination.

IN.CON.GRU.OUS Not harmonious: incompatible not conforming: disagreeing.

MET.A.PHOR A figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money).

ON.O.MATO.POE.IA The naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of the sound associated with it (as buzz, hiss).

OX.Y.MO.RON A combination of contradictory or incongruous words (as cruel kindness).

PAR.A.DOX A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.

PA.THOS To experience, suffer; an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or compassion: an emotion of sympathetic pity.

SIM.I.LE A figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like (as in cheeks like roses).