

The Poetry of Paula Meehan

Aoife O'Driscoll www.aoifesnotes.com

Paula Meehan

Brief Biography

- Born in 1955
- Grew up in Dublin's north inner city
- Eldest of six children
- Troubled relationship with her mother but part of a large, loving family
- Educated at Trinity and Eastern Washington University
- Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2013 to 2016
- Strong sense of social justice

Resources

Videos, articles etc.

- Paula Meehan speaks with poet Michael Collier about her inner-city Dublin childhood, her education, her poetry and social justice. In the opening minutes, Meehan discusses then reads *My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis* and *The Pattern*. Video length - 28 minutes https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzs8_SDbuuM
- Short video in which Meehan reads *My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis*. Video length – 2.38 minutes
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbJxw66sKWE>
- Short video in which Meehan reads *The Pattern*. Video length – 7 minutes
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EH2D4NVT520>
- At a vigil for Savita Halappanavar, Meehan reads The Statue at Granard Speaks. Video length – 2.33 minutes
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABiZhQrLW2I>
- 2018 interview with Meehan in *The Independent* -
<https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/theatre-arts/i-believe-that-two-lines-of-poetry-can-save-a-life-paula-meehan-36865589.html>

2023 – List of Prescribed Poems

Paula Meehan

- Buying Winkles
- The Pattern
- The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks
- Cora, Auntie
- The Exact Moment I Became a Poet
- My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis
- Hearth Lesson
- Prayer for the Children of Longing
- Death of a Field
- Them Ducks Died for Ireland

Themes

- Social justice - like Eavan Boland, Meehan gives a voice to the voiceless. 'Prayer for the Children of Longing', 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' explore the tragedies that result from society's failure to care for its most vulnerable. 'The Exact Moment I Became a Poet' highlights the snobbery and social divisions that can influence children from an early age. 'Buying Winkles' is a largely positive poem, but it does not gloss over the realities of poverty. In 'The Pattern', Meehan remembers the hardships her mother had to endure, raising a family with little money.
- The role of women – Strong, resilient women are prominent in the poems on the course. Meehan remembers her Aunt Cora's spirit and humour in the face of death, and links her to the other women in the family who shaped the young poet's life. 'The Statue at Granard Speaks' casts a critical eye on the expectations and burdens placed on women. In 'Buying Winkles', the men are drinking in a cosy pub while the women wait at home. In 'The Exact Moment I Became a Poet', Meehan recognises that the women who work hard to provide for their family are not respected in society.

- Memories and reflections on significant moments/influences in her life such as 'The Exact Moment I Became a Poet', and 'Hearth Lessons'. There is a wonderful blend of the child's voice and the adult's 'back construction' as she comes to a greater understanding of transformative events. The rapidity with which memories can fade is explored in 'Them Ducks Died For Ireland'.
- Religion is examined through a critical lens in 'The Statue at Granard Speaks'. Nature is often seen as a greater source of spirituality and comfort than God. In 'Prayer for the Children of Longing', Meehan connects the tree to tranquility and silence and comfort, albeit a cold comfort. In 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis', religion is portrayed in a more positive light, but Francis is an uncontroversial saint, closely linked with nature.

Style

- Strong sense of place: names such as 'Gardiner Street', the 'Rosebowl Bar', the Phoenix Park, Croydon, the field in which she played as a child
- Accessible language, sometimes using direct speech and idioms to bring the people and the events to life. In 'Buying Winkles', the seller advises the poet to 'Tell yer ma'; in 'The Pattern', the poet's grandfather scrubbed 'every spick of lipstick and mascara' from the poet's mother's face and is described as 'a right tyrant'.
- Evocative, sensuous imagery such as the smell of 'lavender polish' in 'The Pattern'; the tactile pleasure gained from walking through the field barefoot in 'Death of a Field'

- Humour: In ‘Them Ducks Died For Ireland’, the colloquial language and startling claim engages the reader, as does the formal pomposity of the epigraph. Once the reader is drawn in , the poem deals with more serious and weighty issues. In ‘Hearth Lessons’, the parents’ fight is elevated to the level of Zeus and Hera, which is clearly ridiculous but also manages to show how important parents are to children and how they struggle to put their words and deeds into perspective.
- Blend of voices: Meehan captures a child’s perspective of the world in ‘Hearth Lessons’ and ‘Buying Winkles’, but manages to marry that with an adult, reflective voice. In ‘The Statue at Granard Speaks’, Meehan gives a voice to Mary and deliberately sets out to shock and force us to question our assumptions.

What Might You be Asked?

- Any combination of themes and style
- For each poem you study, aim to examine in detail two to three images which convey a theme, and explore the techniques the poet uses in that image. Why does she approach the subject that way? What effect does it have on the reader?
- Example: In ‘Hearth Lessons’, Meehan compares her parents to Zeus and Hera. This reinforces the importance of the parents – and the fight – in the child’s eyes, but it is also wryly humorous and shows how ridiculous the argument really is.

Sample Questions

- ‘Meehan makes skillful use of a variety of poetic techniques to explore public and private issues in her poetry.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Paula Meehan on your course.
- ‘Meehan’s uses detailed observations of the world around her to develop a range of themes.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Paula Meehan on your course.
- ‘Meehan uses insightful observations and gentle humour to explore unique personal experiences in her poetry.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Paula Meehan on your course.
- ‘Meehan’s sensitive and carefully judged use of language allows her to transform personal observations into universal reflections.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Paula Meehan on your course.
- ‘Meehan’s accessible and appealing language allows us rich insights into her personal reflections and public commentary.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Paula Meehan on your course.

Buying Winkles

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Were you ever sent on errands as a child? How did you feel? Can you remember the details, the place, the people?
- What do you know about tenement life in Dublin in the 1950s and '60s? What do you imagine the people's lives were like? Do you think they were happy? Why / Why not?
- Did you ever see periwinkles on the rocks on the seashore? What details can you remember about them?

Lines 1-5

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My mother would spare me sixpence and say,
‘Hurry up now and don’t be talking to strange
men on the way’. I’d dash from the ghosts
on the stairs where the bulb had blown
out into Gardiner Street, all relief.

- Dropped straight into the action of the poem
- Poverty hinted at: ‘spare me’ sixpence, blown bulb on the stairs
- Childhood fears are a blend of the real and the imaginary: ‘strange men’, ‘ghosts / on the stairs’ – innocence of childhood is in not knowing the difference
- Excitement and energy captured in ‘Hurry up’ and ‘dash’
- Sense of place: ‘Gardiner Street’
- Drama and realism: direct speech
- Colloquialism: ‘all relief’
- Repeated ‘S’ sounds add to sense of rushing

Lines 6-14

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A bonus if the moon was in the strip of sky
between the tall houses, or stars out,
but even in rain I was happy – the winkles
would be wet and glisten blue like little
night skies themselves. I'd hold the tanner tight
and jump every crack in the pavement,
I'd wave up to women at sills or those
lingering in doorways and weave a glad path through
men heading out for the night.

- Positive tone: ‘even in rain I was happy’; enjoying the responsibility and the adventure
- Roles of men and women: the women are at home or ‘lingering in doorways’ while the men are ‘heading out for the night’ – are the women’s lives more restricted than the men’s?
- The child is unafraid, waving to the women and weaving ‘a glad path’ through the men
- Superstition and childhood innocence: ‘jump every crack in the pavement’
- Images are of light and dark: the moon and stars are ‘A bonus’, the winkles ‘glisten blue’

Lines 15-21

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She'd be sitting outside the Rosebowl Bar
on an orange-crate, a pram loaded
with pails of winkles before her.

When the bar doors swung open they'd leak
the smell of men together with drink

and I'd see light in golden mirrors.

I envied each soul in the hot interior.

- Contrast between woman and child outside and men cosy in the 'hot interior' – hint of poverty in the envy of the warmth
- Appeal of pub clear in the togetherness of the men, and the 'light in golden mirrors'

Lines 22-28

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I'd ask her again to show me the right way
to do *it*. She'd take a pin from her shawl –
'Open the eyelid. So. Stick it in
till you feel a grip, then slither him out.
Gently, mind.' The sweetest extra winkle
that brought the sea to me.
'Tell yer Ma I picked them fresh this morning.'

- Childhood innocence: the child believes she is being cunning by pretending not to know how to take the winkles from the shell
- Practicality and realism in the description of the winkle-seller's actions: she describes the event in matter of fact terms. Yet her warning, 'Gently' also reflects the gentleness and kindness she shows the child.
- The bonus winkle is 'The sweetest' and it brings the taste and tang of the sea to the poet. Rush of beautiful, vivid imagery following on the winkle seller's words and actions.
- Repeated 's' and 'ee' sounds highlight the sweetness of the winkle and the errand
- Just as in 'The Pattern', the poet imagines a life outside the confines of inner-city Dublin, so the winkle allows the poet to connect to the sea
- Regularity of this errand is clear: 'I'd ask her again'

Lines 29-32



I'd bear the newspaper twists
bulging fat with winkles
proudly home, like torches.

- Echoes of heroic quest: 'proudly' bearing home the twists of paper as if they were torches
- Childhood delight in completing a task successfully

Themes and Exam Focus

Memory: A detailed, positive childhood memory; relationship with her mother is positive; pride in carrying winkles home like a hero in a myth

Childhood innocence: Equates the threat of 'strange men' with 'ghosts on the stairs'; pride in completing a task

Gender: The women are indoors, 'at sills' or 'lingering in doorways'. Although the child does not realise it, the 'lingering' women may be prostitutes. Men are out drinking



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2021: TIME PIECES - Text 1 is based on edited extracts from *Time Pieces – A Dublin Memoir* by John Banville. In this text the writer reflects on some childhood memories and shares his thoughts on the past.
- Composing – 2021 -Write a discursive essay in which you consider the meaning and importance of community.
- Composing – 2019: Write a personal essay reflecting on what you perceive to be the pleasures particular to youth.
- Comp A - 2017: THE WORLD OF CHILDHOOD – Text 3 is adapted from a memoir entitled *Report from the Interior* by American writer Paul Auster. In this extract he focuses on the world of childhood.
- Comp B - 2017: You have been asked to participate in a radio programme entitled *Reflections on the World of Childhood*. Write the text to be broadcast on radio, in which you reflect on the world of childhood, discuss what captured your childish imagination, and recall a selection of the songs or sounds or stories that live on in your memory.
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.

The Pattern

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Do you think it's natural for children to rebel against their parents?
- At what stage in their lives do you think parents and their children best understand one another?
- What would you wish for your children?
- What is the importance of keepsakes?

Lines 1-8

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Little has come down to me of hers,
a sewing machine, a wedding band,
a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand
across my face in one of our wars

when we had grown bitter and apart.
Some say that's the fate of the eldest daughter.
I wish now she'd lasted till after
I'd grown up. We might have made a new start

- Examining a difficult relationship – 'one of our wars' suggests repeated confrontations
- Honesty: keepsakes include a memory of a stinging slap
- Poet does not believe she is like her mother
- Regret that her mother did not live long enough for them to mend their differences and know one another as adults

Lines 9-18



as women without tags like *mother, wife, sister, daughter*, taken our chances from there. At forty-two she headed for god knows where. I've never gone back to visit her grave.

First she'd scrub the floor with Sunlight soap an armreach at a time. When her knees grew sore she'd break for a cup of tea, then start again at the door with lavender polish. The smell would percolate back through the flat to us, her brood banished to the bedroom.

- Role of women: difficult to escape being categorised as '*mother, wife, sister, daughter*'.
- Frank admission: 'I've never gone back to visit her grave'
- Although the poet claimed earlier that 'little has come down to me', her detailed memories of her mother are always with her.
- Mother's life was hard: note repeated references to being brought to her knees
- Sensuous imagery: the smell of lavender polish elevating the tedious task

Lines 19-27

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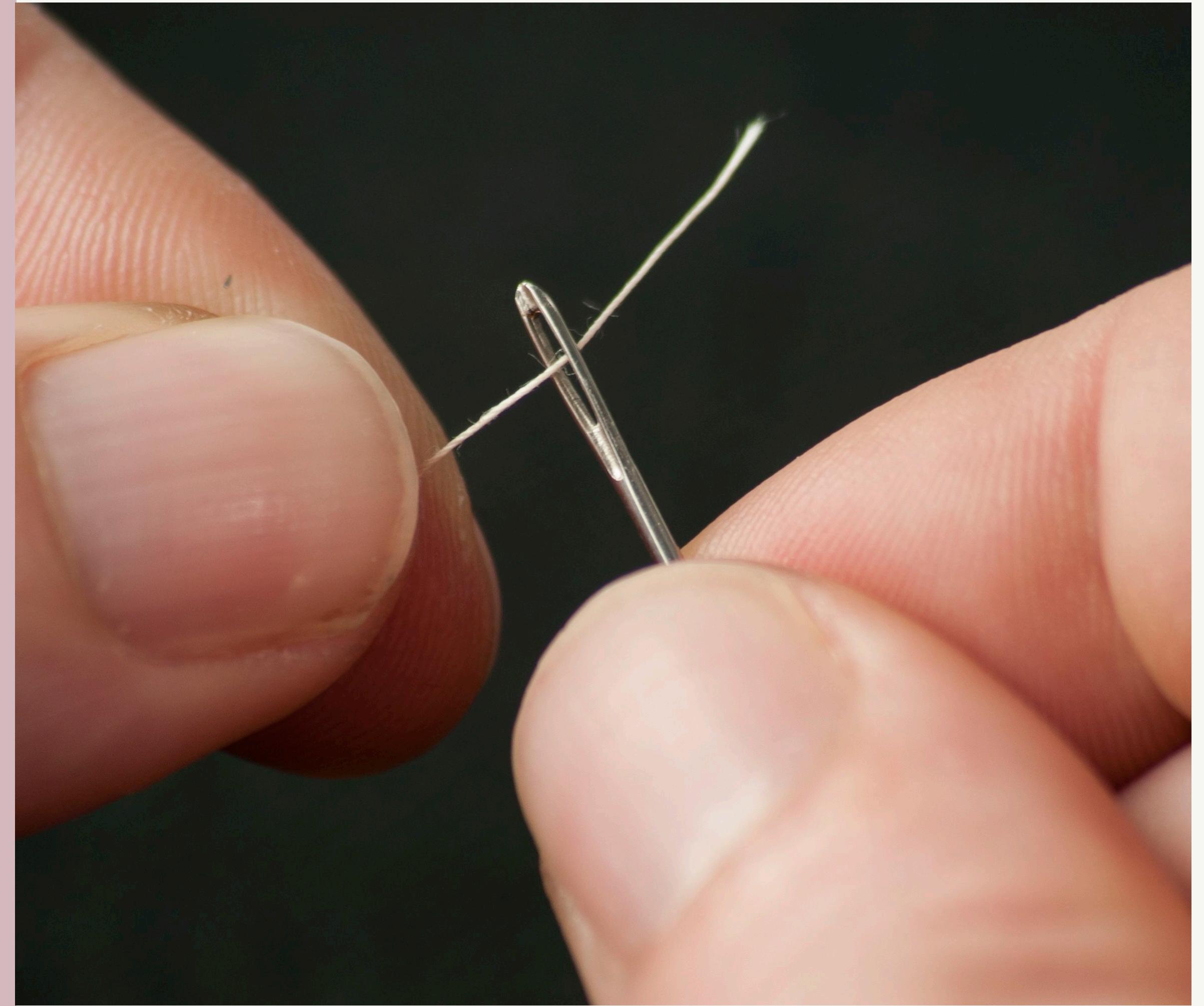
And as she buffed the wax to a high shine
did she catch her own face coming clear?
Did she net a glimmer of her true self?
Did her mirror tell her what mine tells me?

I have her shrug and go on
knowing history has brought her to her knees.
She'd call us and let us skate around
in our socks. We'd grow solemn as planets
in an intricate orbit about her.

- Although the mother was 'brought to her knees' both literally and metaphorically by poverty and hardship, Meehan wonders if she recognised this, if she saw 'a glimmer of her true self' in her reflection on the polished floor.
- Relationship between mother and daughter was not always fraught: the children were allowed to skate around on the polished floor
- They 'orbit' the mother as planets do the sun, highlighting her importance in their lives

Lines 28-33

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She's bending over crimson cloth,
the younger kids are long in bed.
Late summer, cold enough for fire,
she works by fading light
to remake an old dress for me.
It's first day back at school tomorrow.

- The mother works again, this time repurposing an old dress of hers for her daughter
- The light is fading, making the job even more difficult

Lines 34-40

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'Pure lambswool. Plenty of wear in it yet.

You know I wore this when I went out with your Da.
I was supposed to be down in a friend's house,
Your Granda caught us at the corner.

He dragged me in by the hair – it was long as yours
then – in front of the whole street.

He called your Da every name under the sun,

- Practical, relatable comment, 'Plenty of wear in it yet'.
- The mother has her own memories, this time of her father's harsh treatment of her

Lines 41-47



cornerboy, lout; I needn't tell you what he called me. He shoved my whole head under the kitchen tap, took a scrubbing brush and carbolic soap and in ice-cold water he scrubbed every spick of lipstick and mascara off my face. Christ but he was a right tyrant, your Granda.

It'll be over my dead body anyone harms a hair of your head.'

- Idiom brings the scene to life: the grandfather scrubbed 'every spick of lipstick and mascara' from his daughter's face
- Patriarchal society portrayed in a negative light: father violently repressing his daughter's self-expression and sexuality
- Irony: although the mother says she will not allow anyone to harm her own daughter, she delivered a stinging slap to her face – history repeats itself

Lines 48-63



She must have stayed up half the night
to finish the dress. I found it airing at the fire,
three new copybooks on the table and a bright
bronze nib, St Christopher strung on a silver wire,

as if I were embarking on a perilous journey
to uncharted realms. I wore that dress
with little grace. To me it spelt poverty,
the stigma of second hand. I grew enough to pass

it on by Christmas to the next in line. I was sizing
up the world beyond our flat patch by patch
daily after school, and fitting each surprising
city square to city square to diamond. I'd watch

- The mother worked hard but her daughter was already ‘sizing / up the world beyond our flat’ and dreaming of a better life
- The mother’s efforts are not appreciated: ‘To me it spelt poverty, / the stigma of second hand’. As an adult, Meehan appreciates the work her mother put into her dress, but in her younger years she could only see ‘the stigma of second hand’.
- The dress is eventually passed on to ‘the next in line’; the mother’s large family means she has little hope of escape from drudgery and poverty
- The poet makes her own imagined pattern in her gradually expanding boundaries.

I'd watch
the Liffey for hours pulsing to the sea
and the coming and going of ships,
certain that one day it would carry me
to Zanzibar, Bombay, the land of the Ethiops.

- Expansion of the poet's dream of escape; she longs for the faraway and the unknown.
- Contrast between the claustrophobic, cramped environment of the flat and the exoticism of 'Zanzibar, Bombay, the land of the Ethiops'.

Lines 64-77

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There's a photo of her taken in the Phoenix Park
alone on a bench surrounded by roses
as if she had been born to formal gardens.
She stares out as if unaware
that any human hand held the camera, wrapped
entirely in her own shadow, the world beyond her
already a dream, already lost. She's
eight month pregnant. Her last child.

Her steel needles sparked and clacked,
the only other sound a settling coal
or her sporadic mutter at a hard part in the pattern.
She favoured sensible shades:
Moss Green, Mustard, Beige.

- Sadness of the mother's limited life: her dream is 'already lost' as she is tied down by children and poverty
- 'Wrapped entirely in her own shadow' could suggest sadness of an unfulfilled life, but also an early death.
- Sensuous evocation of scene: onomatopoeic 'sparked and clacked'; yet the harsh 'k' and 'd' sounds create a negative atmosphere; is there an anger or frustration behind the mother's actions?
- The mother's sensible, limited aspirations are reflected in her choice of colours.

Lines 78-91

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I dreamt a robe of colour
so pure it became a word.

Sometimes I'd have to kneel
an hour before her by the fire.

a skein around my outstretched hands,
while she rolled wool into balls.

If I swam like a kite too high
amongst the shadows on the ceiling
or flew like a fish in the pools
of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly
home, she'd land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes
she'd say, 'One of these days, I must
teach you to follow a pattern.'

- Daughter dreams of a brighter world. She expresses herself with words rather than knitting and sewing (think of Heaney's 'Digging')
- Although the mother tries to reel in her daughter's ambitions and dreams, the poet will not follow the pattern of her mother's life.
- Ambiguity of 'Tongues of flame' in the mother's eyes: the light of desire and dreaming of better things, or anger at her daughter's refusal to follow in her mother's footsteps? Reminiscent of grandfather's behaviour towards his daughter?

Themes and Exam Focus

Relationship with mother: the daughter does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps; pattern is symbolic:
'She favoured sensible shades:
Moss Green, Mustard, Beige
I dreamt a robe of colour
so pure it became a word'.

Regret: Poet and her mother grew 'bitter and apart'; if the mother had lived to know her adult daughter they might have made 'a new start'.

Poverty: In a photo, the mother sits, surrounded by roses 'as if she had been born to formal gardens'; reality brings her to her knees, scrubbing the floor.



Linked Tasks

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- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Comp B – 2015 - Write the introduction for a collection of writing (e.g. poem, stories and articles) by young people about older people. In it you should discuss the importance of older people, such as grandparents, in the live of young people today and the contribution made by older people to society in general.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Unseen Poem – 2015 – Peter Street by Peter Sirr
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.
- Comp B – 2014 – Inspired by Seamus Heaney's essay about the importance of objects from the past, your class has decided to organize an exhibition celebrating the significance of objects from childhood in the lives of well-known people. Write the letter you would send to a well-known person, inviting him or her to contribute an object from his or her childhood and a written explanation regarding its personal significance, In your letter, you should explain the inspiration for the project and include, as an example, a piece you have written about an object from your childhood that is of significance to you.

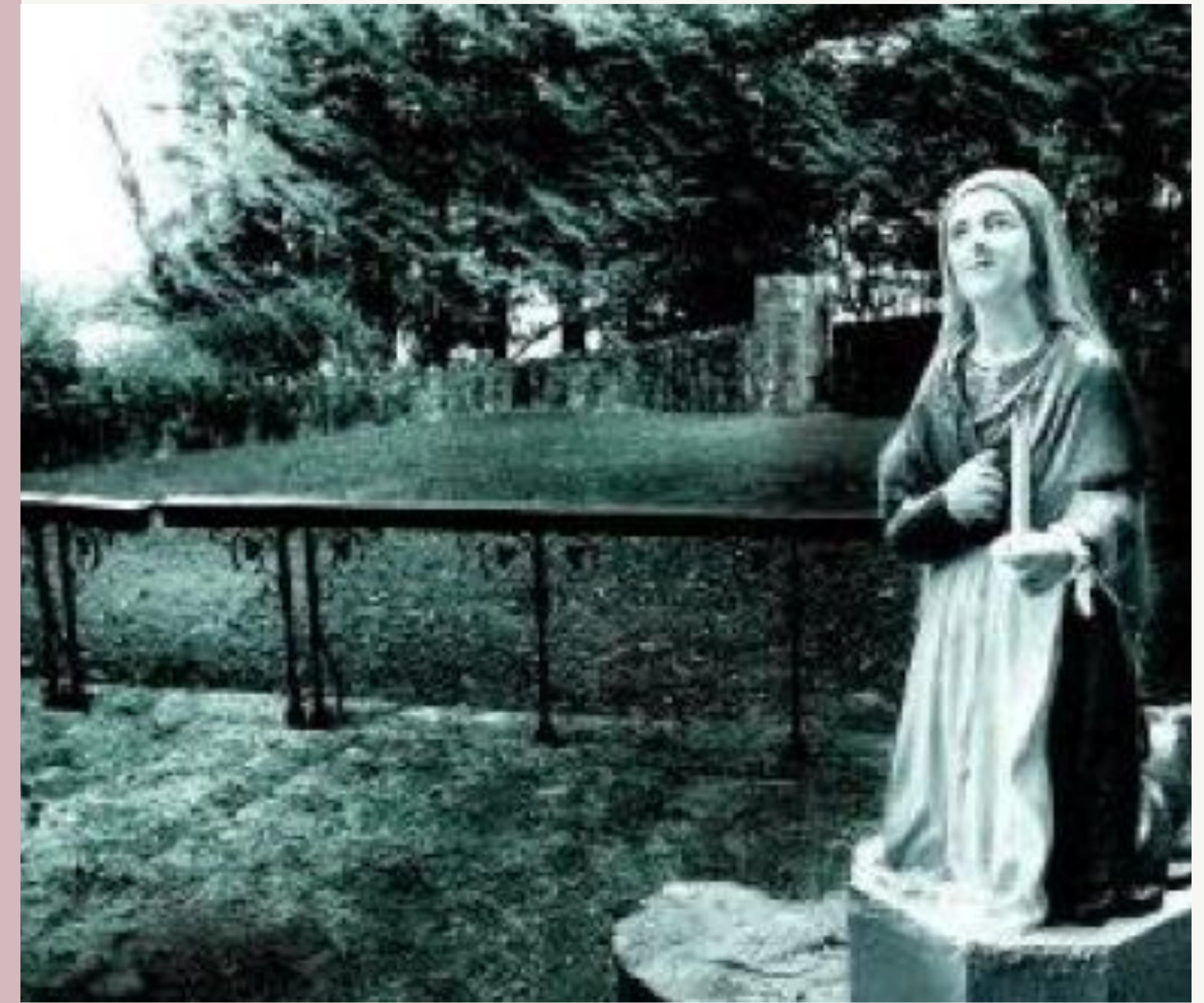
The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Why do people visit grottos?
- What do you know about the mother and baby homes in Ireland?
- Read this article by Rosita Boland: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/ann-lovett-death-of-a-strong-kick-ass-girl-1.3429792>

Lines 1-7

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It can be bitter here at times like this,
November wind sweeping across the border.
Its seeds of ice would cut you to the quick.
The whole town tucked up safe and dreaming,
even wild things gone to earth, and I
stuck up here in this grotto, without as much as
star or planet to ease my vigil.

- Images of cold and isolation: 'bitter' wind with 'seeds of ice'
- Contrast with those in the town who are 'tucked up safe and dreaming'
- The statue is as alone as the young girl who died at the grotto was
- Resentment and the ridiculous in the statue being 'stuck up here': no sense of spirituality or dignity

Lines 8-19

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The howling won't let up. Trees
cavort in agony as if they would be free
and take off – ghost voyagers
on the wind that carries intimations
of garrison towns, walled cities, ghetto lanes
where men hunt each other and invoke
the various names of God as a blessing
on their death tactics, their night manoeuvres.
Closer to home the wind sails over
dying lakes. I hear fish drowning.
I taste the stagnant water mingled
with turf smoke from outlying farms.

- Images of pain and suffering: 'howling'; 'Trees cavort in agony'
- Reference to the Troubles and men using God as a justification for their 'death tactics' as they 'hunt each other'
- Nature is lifeless: 'dying lakes', 'stagnant water', 'fish drowning'
- Bleak, despairing imagery

Lines 20-29

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They call me Mary – Blessed, Holy, Virgin.

They fit me to a myth of a man crucified:

the scourging and the falling, and the falling again,
the thorny crown, the hammer blows of iron
into wrist and ankle, the sacred bleeding heart.

They name me Mother of all this grief
though mated to no mortal man.

They kneel before me and their prayers
fly up like sparks from a bonfire
that blaze a moment, then wink out

- The statue does not relish her role: she says ‘They call me Mary’ but there is no sense she sees herself as ‘Blessed, Holy, Virgin’.
- The people have shaped the idea of the statue to fit their own understanding of religion
- Christ crucified is a ‘myth’
- The violence of Jesus’ crucifixion is difficult to read, but it is accepted more easily by some people than is the notion of women’s sexuality
- The statue is the ‘Mother of all this grief’ but is unable to do anything for those who pray to her: their prayers are like sparks that die in cold and darkness

Lines 30-42

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It can be lovely here at times. Springtime,
early summer. Girls in Communion frocks
pale rivals to the riot in the hedgerows
of cow parsley and haw blossom, the perfume
from every rushy acre that's left for hay
when the light swings longer with the sun's push north.

Or the grace of a midsummer wedding
when the earth herself calls out for coupling
and I would break loose of my stony robes,
pure blue, pure white, as if they had robbed
a child's sky for their colour. My being
cries out to be incarnate, incarnate,
maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed.

- Wistful tone: the statue acknowledges the beauty of this place in summer
- Images of fertility and sensuality
- The statue wishes to be real and to experience the imperfect but satisfying world of physical love: 'maculate and tousled'
- Her robes are 'stony' and she longs to break loose from the image of purity that others have imposed upon her
- Is the image of sex in the final line more shocking – even though it describes consensual love – than the imagery of the torture and death of Jesus described earlier in the poem?

Lines 43-55

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Even an autumn burial can work its own pageantry.
The hedges heavy with the burden of fruiting
crab, sloe, berry, hip; clouds scud east
pear scented, windfalls secret in long
orchard grasses, and some old soul is lowered
to his kin. Death is just another harvest
scripted to this season's play.

But on this All Souls' Night there is
no respite from the keening of the wind.
I would not be amazed if every corpse came risen
from the graveyard to join in exaltation with the gale,
a cacophony of bone imploring sky for judgement
and release from being the conscience of the town.

- The seasons mark the cycle of life
- Fertility is followed by death
- The dead do not want to be 'the conscience
of the town': the living must shape their
own value system and not hide behind
their ancestors' beliefs and strictures

Lines 56-67

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On a night like this I remember the child
who came with fifteen summers to her name,
and she lay down alone at my feet
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
and she pushed her secret out into the night,
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
and though she cried out to me *in extremis*

I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear

- The poem has been building up to this memory of the death of the girl who 'pushed her secret out into the night'
- Just as the townspeople were 'tucked up' warmly while the statue stood in the bitterly cold grotto, so they are now 'tucked up in little scandals' and too concerned with their petty scandals and bargains and prayers to see that one of their own needs help
- Did the girl come to the grotto for help? She received none. The repetition of 'I did not' and 'I didn't' emphasises the girl's isolation and the ineffectual nature of prayer

Lines 68-74

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On a night like this I number the days to the solstice
and the turn back to the light.

O sun,
centre of our foolish dance,
burning heart of stone,
molten mother of us all,
hear me and have pity.

- The statue does not turn to God but to a more ancient deity, the sun for relief
- Life on earth is a ‘foolish dance’
- The final plea to the sun to ‘hear me and have pity’ is heartrending; will it, like the girl’s cries, go unanswered?
- The ending of the poem is bleak and despairing

Themes and Exam Focus

Religion: Negative view: 'Mother of all this grief'; repression of sexuality: 'Blessed, Holy, Virgin'; 'didn't lift a finger to help'; final lines call on the sun rather than god

Gender: 'men hunt each other and invoke / the various names of God as blessing / on their death tactics'; women are expected to be virginal and pure; even the statue of the Virgin calls out to be 'maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed'

Community: The town is 'tucked up in little scandals' as the young girl lies dying



Linked Tasks

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- Question B: 2021 - You have been invited to write a feature article, entitled *Monumental Matters – The Story of Statues*, to appear in the magazine supplement of a weekend newspaper. In your article you should: reflect on the long-established tradition of erecting statues to celebrate or memorialise people, explore some of the reasons why commemorative statues may be controversial, and give your views on continuing this tradition into the future.

Cora Auntie

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Why do people emigrate from Ireland now? Is it for the same reasons that your parents' or grandparents' generation emigrated?
- What influence can family – past and present – have on our lives?
- Do people change as they age or does their fundamental spirit remain the same?

Lines 1-21

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Staring Death down

with a bottle of morphine in one hand,
a bottle of Jameson in the other:

laughing at Death –

love unconditional keeping her just this side
of the threshold

as her body withered

and her eyes grew darker and stranger
as her hair grew back after chemo

thick and curly as when she was a girl;

always a girl in her glance

teasing Death – humour a lance

- Although Death is personified, it is no match for the vital and resilient Cora
- Love is strong enough to keep her ‘just this side’ of death despite the ravages of cancer and the harsh chemotherapy
- Humour is a ‘lance’ with which Cora jousts with Death (next stanza completes this image) – implicit heroism

She tilted at Death,
Scourge of Croydon tram drivers and High Street dossers
on her motorised invalid scooter

that last year:
bearing the pain,
not crucifixion but glory

in her voice.
Old skin, bag of bones,
grinning back at the rictus of Death:

- Tilting a lance at Death is as pointless as tilting at windmills; despite her strength of character, Cora cannot win this bout
- The images of suffering are vivid: 'Old skin, bag of bones'
- Cora is almost as skeletal as Death yet her grin is real, unlike his 'rictus'
- Cora is not a martyr; she bears the pain but there is glory in her voice, not the sacrificial note of the crucifixion

Lines 22-30

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always a girl in her name –

Cora, maiden, from the Greek κόρη,
promising blossom, summer, the scent of thyme.

Sequin: she is standing on the kitchen table.
She is nearly twenty-one.

It is nineteen sixty-one.

They are sewing red sequins, the women,
to the hem of her white satin dress
as she moves slowly round and round

- Cora is remembered in her youth and beauty
- Her name is linked to the maidens of ancient Greece and associated sensuality
- The poet remembers Cora when she was a young woman being dressed for a party

Lines 31-39

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Sequins red as berries,
red as the lips of maidens,
red as blood on the snow

in Child's old ballads,
as red as this pen
on this white paper

I've snatched from the chaos
to cast these lines
at my own kitchen table –

- Sensual, vivid imagery describes the sequins
- The red of the sequins is described in terms of folk-tales and ballads
- Cora is connected with the past and present: the poet writes with red pen on white paper

Lines 40-48

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Cora, Marie, Jacinta, my aunties,
Helena, my mother, Mary, my grandmother –
the light of those stars

only reaching me now.

I orbit the table I can barely see over.
I am under it singing.

She was weeks from taking the boat to England.
Dust on the mantelpiece,
dust on the cards she left behind

- At the time, the poet did not understand or value the significance of her connection with her female relatives, the ‘light of those stars’ only reaches her when she is an adult
- Cora’s emigration leaves dust gathering on her cards and good luck gifts. All things must eventually come to dust.

Lines 49-57

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a black cat swinging in a silver horseshoe,
a giant key to the door,
emblems of luck, of access.

All that year I hunted sequins:
roaming the house I found them
in crack and crannies,
in the pillowcase,
under the stairs,
in a hole in the lino,

- The poet hunts for the sequins as a way to recapture Cora's presence which is to be found, like the sequins, everywhere in the house.
- Her loss was felt keenly when she emigrated and again, many years later, when she died.

Lines 58-66

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in a split in the sofa,
in a tear in the armchair
in the home of a shy mouse.

With odd beads and single earrings,
a broken charm bracelet, a glittering pin,
I gathered them into a tin box

which I open now in memory –
the coinage, the sudden glamour
of an emigrant soul.

- The box of keepsakes is valuable only to the poet; the ‘odd beads and single earrings’ and ‘broken charm bracelet’ have no real value
- The ‘coinage’ or value of these items are the memories they evoke of a glamorous, young Aunt Cora shortly before her twenty-first birthday and subsequent emigration

Themes and Exam Focus

Strength of the human spirit: Cora is 'Staring Death down' and 'laughing at Death'; she was the 'Scourge of Croydon' on her 'motorised invalid scooter'.

Women: Cora is a strong, vibrant woman, full of humour and linked to heroines from Greek myths: 'Cora, maiden, from the Greek κόρη, promising blossom, summer, the scent of thyme'; she is connected to the beauty and abundance of nature; other powerful, influential women in the poet's life are listed: 'Cora, Marie, Jacinta, my aunties, Helena, my mother, Mary, my grandmother – the light of those stars only reaching me now'.

The sequins are linked to the poet's creativity: 'as red as this pen / on this white paper'.



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A - 2015 – Text 3: Penelope Lively reflects on youth and age and explores the challenges of ageing
- Comp B – 2015 - Write the introduction for a collection of writing (e.g. poem, stories and articles) by young people about older people. In it you should discuss the importance of older people, such as grandparents, in the live of young people today and the contribution made by older people to society in general.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Unseen Poem – 2015 – Peter Street by Peter Sirr
- Unseen Poem – 2009 – Father's Old Blue Cardigan (*contrasting view of ageing and death*)
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.
- Comp B – 2014 – Inspired by Seamus Heaney's essay about the importance of objects from the past, your class has decided to organize an exhibition celebrating the significance of objects from childhood in the lives of well-known people. Write the letter you would send to a well-known person, inviting him or her to contribute an object from his or her childhood and a written explanation regarding its personal significance, In your letter, you should explain the inspiration for the project and include, as an example, a piece you have written about an object from your childhood that is of significance to you.

Prayer for the Children of Longing

Pre-Reading Tasks

- When you think about Christmas tree lights being switched on in the city centre, what images and feelings come to mind?
- Do you think gathering together as a community helps people in times of difficulty?
- Does prayer and spirituality help people to recover from loss and cope with sorrow?
- In what ways might society be failing young people today?

Lines 1-8

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A poem commissioned by the community of Dublin's north inner city for the lighting of the Christmas tree in Buckingham Street, to remember their children who died from drug abuse.

Great tree from the far northern forest
Still rich with the sap of the forest
Here at the heart of winter
Here at the heart of the city

Grant us the clarity of ice
The comfort of snow

The cool memory of trees
Grant us the forest's silence
The snow's breathless quiet

- Tree is 'rich with sap' and will be brightly lit: image of light and life contrasting with the deaths of the young people
- Repetition of 'heart' evokes the loving support of the community 'at the heart of the city' who have erected this tree in memory of their lost loved ones
- Repetition of 'Grant us' brings a prayer-like quality to the poem: a plea for understanding and peace
- Nature is associated with peace and tranquility

Lines 9-17

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For one moment to freeze
The scream, the siren the knock on the door
The needle in its track
The knife in the back

In that silence let us hear
The song of the children of longing
In that silence let us catch
The breath of the children of longing

- Dramatic change from tranquillity to horror
- Violence and noise replace the ‘breathless quiet’ of the previous lines: ‘scream’, ‘siren’, ‘knock’, ‘needle in its track’, ‘knife in the back’
- Harsh ‘ck’ sounds add to the jarring quality of these lines
- Prayerful ‘let us hear’
- Gathered around the tree, there will be meditation and silence, reflection on the lives lost. The ‘song’ and ‘breath’ of the dead will at last be heard. Gentleness replaces violence in these lines.

Lines 18-29

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The echo of their voices through the city streets
The streets that defeated them
That brought them to their knees
The streets that couldn't shelter them
That spellbound them in alleyways
The streets that blew their minds
That led them astray, out of reach of their saving
The streets that gave them visions and dreams
That promised them everything
That delivered nothing
The streets that broke their backs
The streets that we brought them home to

- The streets are personified: they contain empty 'visions and dreams', the lie that drugs will bring happiness
- The streets 'promised them everything' but 'delivered nothing'
- Social commentary: the young people were 'led astray' and 'defeated'
- Yet this place is also their home: 'The streets that we brought them home to' so their family could bury them

Lines 30-36

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Let their names be the wind through the branches

Let their names be the song of the river

Let their names be the holiest prayers

Under the starlight, under the moonlight

In the light of this tree

Here at the heart of winter

Here at the heart of the city

- Prayerful tone; chant
- The children of longing are given dignity in death
- They lived in darkness but are remembered in light: ‘starlight’, ‘moonlight’, ‘In the light of this tree’. It is not the bright, warm light of summer sunshine, but it is comfort of a sort
- The place where they were betrayed and broken is also the place where they will be commemorated and mourned
- The final lines repeat the third and fourth line of the poem, reminding us of the heart of the community and of the love the families have – and always will have – for those they lost

Themes and Exam Focus

Social justice: Society has failed these young people. Their longing for a better life was exploited by drug dealers and criminals who promised everything but delivered nothing.

Nature: Nature is associated with peace, spirituality and healing

Community: There is more to the community than violence and crime: these children were loved and are commemorated; they are 'brought home' by their family in a last act of care



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2016 – Bono’s speech to graduating students in which he stresses their role in making the world a better place for future generations
- Comp A – 2012 – Former President Mary Robinson’s speech to an international conference on hunger
- Comp B – 2012 – Write a proposal, to be submitted to the relevant authority (e.g. local council or national body), suggesting one event or person you believe should be commemorated. Explain why you feel this person or event should be commemorated and suggest what form this commemoration might take.

My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis

for Brendan Kennelly

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you know about St Francis of Assisi?
- Do you know who Brendan Kennelly is? What is his connection with Paula Meehan?
- Do you think that people change as they grow old? How would you expect old people to behave?

Lines 1-14

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It was the piebald horse in the next door's garden
frightened me out of a dream
with her dawn whinny. I was back
in the boxroom of the house,
my brother's room now,
full of ties and sweaters and secrets.

Bottles chinked on the doorstep.

The first bus pulled up to the stop.

The rest of the house slept

except for my father, I heard
him rake the ash from the grate
plug in the kettle, hum a snatch of a tune.

Then he unlocked the back door
and stepped out into the garden.

- Onomatopoeia in 'whinny' and 'chinked' helps to bring the scene to life
- Sibilance in lines 8 and 9 is appropriate for a sleepy, quiet scene inside the house
- The father's actions are routine and unremarkable, at first

Lines 15-29



Autumn was nearly done, the first frost
whitened the slates of the estate.
He was older than I had reckoned,
his hair completely silver,
and for the first time I saw the stoop
of his shoulder, saw that
his leg was stiff. What's he at?
So early and still stars in the west?

They came then: birds
of every size, shape, colour; they came
from the hedges and shrubs,
from eaves and garden sheds,
from the industrial estate, outlying fields,
from Dubber Cross they came
and the ditches of the North Road.

- The frost which 'whitened' the roofs of the houses in the estate is linked to the father's hair which is now 'completely silver'
- Winter is associated with death and endings
- The father is stooped and stiff, and the poet is puzzled that he should go outside on a still-dark, frosty morning: 'What's he at?'
- Dramatic shift: colour and action fill the garden
- Sense of place: 'eaves and garden sheds', 'the industrial estate', 'Dubber Cross', 'the ditches of the North Road'

Lines 30-37

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The garden was a pandemonium
when my father threw up his hands
and tossed the crumbs to the air. The sun
cleared O'Reilly's chimney
and he was suddenly radiant,
a perfect vision of St Francis,
made whole, made young again,
in a Finglas garden.

- 'pandemonium' means chaos and confusion, but it originally meant hell: a place where all the demons lived. The father brings order to chaos.
- He throws crumbs 'to the air' and to the waiting birds
- This is obviously as much a part of his morning routine as putting on the kettle and raking the ashes
- The sun rises and the father is 'suddenly radiant', his age and infirmity forgotten.
- 'O'Reilly's chimney' brings the imagery briefly to earth before it soars again.
- The father is transformed: 'made whole, made young again' and, in the unlikely setting of 'a Finglas garden', is a vision of St Francis
- The ordinary is made extraordinary

Themes and Exam Focus

Memory: This is a positive memory of the poet's father; he is a gentle, caring man who is at one with nature and is almost saintly in his kindness.

Relationships: The poet's relationship with her father is loving and caring in this poem. She worries about his ageing but is delighted by his transfiguration into a saintly vision.



Linked Tasks

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- Read Brendan Kennelly's 'Begin'
- Prescribed Poetry – 2010 – This poem was set as an OL question with short questions and longer writing tasks
- Comp A - 2015 – Text 3: Penelope Lively reflects on youth and age and explores the challenges of ageing
- Comp B – 2015 - Write the introduction for a collection of writing (e.g. poem, stories and articles) by young people about older people. In it you should discuss the importance of older people, such as grandparents, in the live of young people today and the contribution made by older people to society in general.
- Composing – 2015 - Write a personal essay about your response to an ending, or endings, in your life that you consider significant.
- Unseen Poem – 2015 – Peter Street by Peter Sirr
- Unseen Poem – 2009 – Father's Old Blue Cardigan (*contrasting view of ageing and death*)

Hearth Lesson

Pre-Reading Tasks

- Do you know who Zeus and Hera were? If not, research them and the reasons for their fights.
- What is meant by having ‘money to burn’ or ‘money burning a hole in your pocket’?
- Do you think anyone can really have the last word in an argument?

Lines 1-5

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Either phrase will bring it back –
money to burn, burning a hole in your pocket.

I am crouched by the fire
in the flat in Seán MacDermott Street
while Zeus and Hera battle it out:

- The poet's memory of her parents' fight is triggered by hearing the phrases '*money to burn, burning a hole in your pocket*'.
- The word 'crouched' suggests fear and a desire to remain unnoticed or out of the line of fire.
- The place name – 'Seán MacDermott Street' lends authenticity.
- The fights are mundane and rather silly, but to the poet they have huge significance. Parents loom large in a child's life.

Lines 6-14

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for his every thunderbolt
she had the killing glance;
she'll see his fancyman
and raise him the Cosmo Snooker Hall;
he'll see her 'the only way you get any
attention around here is if you neigh';
he'll raise her airs and graces
or the mental state of her siblings,
every last one of them.

- An extended metaphor of a poker game in which both parties play their best hand
- The verbal blows become more cutting and insulting: it began as an argument about money but now the father's gambling and the mother's 'airs and graces' and even her family's sanity are dragged into the fight.
- The lines are short, as are tempers, and the choppy rhythm reflects the verbal to and fro.

Lines 15-24



I'm net, umpire, and court; most balls
are lobbed over my head.

Even then I can judge it's better
than brooding and silence and the particular hell
of the unsaid,
or 'tell your mother...' 'ask your father...'.

Even then I can tell it was money
the lack of it day after day,
at the root of bitter words
but nothing prepared us one teatime
when she handed up his wages.

- A tennis metaphor is used to describe the insults flying over the child's head. She does not understand most of them.
- For all that the fight is unpleasant, it is better than the 'brooding and silence' or the 'particular hell' of being forced to act as a go-between.
- Even at a young age, the poet was aware of the poverty that placed such a huge strain on her parents' relationship. The repetition of 'Even then' shows the impact the fighting had on the child: at a young age, she understood the root cause and dreaded the unpleasantness.

Lines 25-35

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She straightened up each rumpled pound note, then
a weariness come suddenly over her,
she threw the lot in the fire.

The flames were blue and pink and green,
a marvellous sight, an alchemical scene.

'It's not enough,' she stated simply.

And we all knew it wasn't.

The flames sheered from cinder to chimney breast
like trapped exotic birds;
the shadows jumped floor to ceiling, and she'd
had the last, the astonishing, word.

- The mother's extraordinary action is 'the last, the astonishing word'.
- There is no anger in her gesture, just weariness. Even the father's wages are not enough, and there is no prospect of a better future.
- The sight is 'an alchemical scene' but in this case the worthless wages are transformed into flames rather than a base metal being turned into gold.
- The mother is also like a 'trapped exotic bird'.

Themes and Exam Focus

Poverty: Lack of money exacerbates the problems in the marriage, and there is no prospect of a resolution. The mother's actions prove this.

Family relationships: The fighting is routine and more a question of having the last word than actually disliking one another. At the same time, it shows that those who are closest to us and know us best are best placed to wound us. The child is helpless in the face of her parents anger but elevates it to an importance it does not deserve, comparing them to Zeus and Hera.



Linked Tasks

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- Unseen Poem – 2013 - ‘The Fist’ (Focus on the pain of love and the hurt relationships can bring)
- Comp A – 2018 – Extract from Fiona Mozley’s debut novel, Elmet – father / child relationship
- Comp A - 2017: THE WORLD OF CHILDHOOD – Text 3 is adapted from a memoir entitled *Report from the Interior* by American writer Paul Auster. In this extract he focuses on the world of childhood.
- Comp B - 2017: You have been asked to participate in a radio programme entitled *Reflections on the World of Childhood*. Write the text to be broadcast on radio, in which you reflect on the world of childhood, discuss what captured your childish imagination, and recall a selection of the songs or sounds or stories that live on in your memory.
- Comp A – 2014 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST – Text 3 is based on an essay by Seamus Heaney entitled *The Sense of the Past*. In it he reflects the influence of the past on our lives.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.

The Exact Moment I Became a Poet

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What are your earliest memories of school?
- Can you remember a time when someone made a throwaway remark that stuck with you?
- Can you think of moments in your life when you made a sudden decision about your future? What might trigger such a decision?

Lines 1-12

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was in 1963 when Miss Shannon
rapping the duster on the easel's peg
half obscured by a cloud of chalk

said *Attend to your books, girls,
or mark my words, you'll end up
in the sewing factory.*

It wasn't just that some of the girls'
mothers worked in the sewing factory
or even that my own aunt did,
and many neighbours, but
that those words 'end up' robbed
the labour of its dignity.

- Sense of place and time: the year, the teacher's name and the detail of 'rapping the duster' add authenticity but also show that this was a moment the child would never forget. It is seared in her memory.
- The teacher's thoughtless snobbery has a marked effect on the child
- Suddenly, the work that her neighbours and family did on a daily basis is 'robbed' of its dignity.

Lines 13-24

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Not that I knew it then,
not in those words – labour, dignity.

That's all back construction,

making sense; allowing also
the teacher was right

and no one knows it like I do myself.

But I saw them: mothers, aunts and neighbours

trussed like chickens
on a conveyor belt,

getting sewn up the way my granny
sewed the sage and onion stuffing
in the birds.

- It is only in her adult years that the poet appreciates fully the snobbery and prejudice, through 'back construction'.
- The poet, coming from an inner-city environment, knows better than the teacher that her words, though harsh and unfeeling, are true. Education is generally the path to a more prosperous life and more career choices, but does that devalue the lives of those who work in the sewing factory?
- The teacher's words dehumanise those she knows and cares about: they are 'trussed like chickens / on a conveyor belt'.

Lines 25-27

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Words could pluck you,
leave you naked,
your lovely shiny feathers all gone.

- The metaphor of preparing chickens for the table is continued in these final lines.
- The shine, or the value, is taken from the lives of those who 'end up' in the factory.
- The poet will harness the power of words, but for a different purpose.

Themes and Exam Focus

Power of words: The teacher's remark seemed to rob the poet's working class family and neighbours of dignity; the girls were warned that they might 'end up' working in the sewing factory. Yet the poet realises the teacher was right, and she pursues education while resenting the snobbery that values one job above another. Words can hurt deeply and expose unpleasant realities: 'Words could pluck you, / leave you naked, / your lovely shiny feathers all gone'. Ironically, the poet's skill at crafting words allows her to express this.

Social class: Snobbery and class prejudice should have no place in the classroom but even at an early age, the children in the poem are made acutely aware of a social hierarchy. Despite her solidarity with the workers, Meehan knows that they are 'trussed like chickens / on a conveyor belt' and acknowledges the truth of the teacher's words: 'no one knows it like I do myself'.



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2016 – Text 2: two writers talk about what has influenced them.
- Comp B – 2016 – Young people today are subject to many influences. Write the text of a talk you would deliver to your class in which you consider some of the positive and negative influences on young people's lives today and how they respond to these influences.
- Comp B – 2018: Young people are often the recipients of unwanted advice. Write an open letter to all those who have ever offered you unwanted advice. In your letter you should identify some nuggets of unwanted advice you have received, describe your response to receiving such advice, and share your opinion on how and when advice could be appropriately offered. Your letter may be amusing or serious or both.
- Comp B – 2018 – Based on your experience of second level education, write an opinion piece, suitable for publication in a national newspaper, in which you acknowledge what you see as the strengths of the education you have received, criticise what you see as its weaknesses and make suggestions for its improvement.
- Composition – 2018 – You are competing in the final of a national public speaking competition. The topic to be addressed is: *Language is a great weapon*. You are free to agree or disagree. Write the speech you would deliver.
- Composing – 2017 - Write a personal essay in which you reflect on moments of insight and revelation you have experienced.
- Unseen poem – 2016 – And Yet the Books

Death of a Field

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you know about the Celtic Tiger era?
- Do you think we, as a society, pay enough attention to the wilderness that is being lost every day?
- Have you a special memory of a place that was filled with natural beauty?

Lines 1-12

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The field itself is lost the morning it becomes a site
When the Notice goes up: Fingal County Council – 44 houses

The memory of the field is lost with the loss of its herbs
Though the woodpigeons in the willow
The finches in what's left of the hawthorn hedge
And the wagtail in the elder
Sing on their hungry summer song

The magpies sound like flying castanets
And the memory of the field disappears with its flora:
Who can know the yearning of yarrow
Or the plight of the scarlet pimpernel
Whose true colour is orange?

- The field is 'lost' the moment the planning notice goes up.
- The capitalisation of 'Notice' adds to its importance; there is no escaping this fate.
- The birds are unaware that their habitat, their food store, is about to be razed to the ground and replaced with concrete. Oblivious, they 'Sing on their hungry summer song'. Even the magpies' far less melodious rattling cry has music of a sort; it resembles castanets.
- The reader's empathy is evoked by the 'yearning' of the yarrow and the 'plight' of the little scarlet pimpernel.

Lines 13-18

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And the end of the field is the end of the hidey holes
Where the first smokes, first tokes, first gropes
Were had to the scentless mayweed

The end of the field as we know is the start of the estate
The site to be planted with houses each two- or three-bedroom
Nest of sorrow and chemical, cargo of joy

- Not only nature is displaced by the building site. Local youngsters used the end of the field as a place to do things for which they needed to be out of sight of adults.
- There is a balance between the beauty of nature and the rather unsavoury activities for which the young people used the field.
- The ‘field’ will vanish and an ‘estate’ will rise. Instead of birds’ nests, there will be pollution.

Lines 19-28



The end of dandelion is the start of Flash
The end of dock is the start of Pledge
The end of teasel is the start of Ariel
The end of primrose is the start of Brillo
The end of thistle is the start of Bounce
The end of sloe is the start of Oxyaction
The end of herb Robert is the start of Brasso
The end of eyebright is the start of Persil
Who amongst us is able to number the end of grasses
To number the losses of each seeding head?

- The poet starkly contrasts the natural and the man-made.
- The list of plants that will be replaced by chemicals is repetitive, emphasising the scale of the destruction and the magnitude of the pollution that the estate will bring.
- ‘The end of’ a plant is ‘the start of’ a chemical replacement.
- Another rhetorical question asks how we can possibly calculate the number of plants that will be lost when seed heads are cut down.

Lines 29-39

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I'll walk out once
Barefoot under the moon to know the field
Through the soles of my feet to hear
The myriad leaf lives green and singing
The million cycles of being in wing

That – before the field became map memory
In some archive on some architect's screen
I might possess it or it possess me
Through its night dew, its moon-white caul
Its slick and shine and its profligacy
In every wingbeat and in every beat of time

- The poet will commune with nature once more by walking barefoot through the field so she may better experience a connection with 'The myriad leaf lives green and singing'.
- The poet wants to be at one with nature: 'I might possess it or it possess me'.
- There is anguish and regret in the poet's elegy for a field that will soon be paved over to make way for construction.

Themes and Exam Focus

Nature: At the time the poem was written, there was a construction boom. Meehan deplored the greed of developers and the destruction of the natural world.

Memory: Although the field will soon be a 'map memory', Meehan will ensure that her connection with nature allows it to live on in her memory and senses too.



Linked Tasks

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- Composition – 2021 - In TEXT 2, Doireann Ní Ghriúfa celebrates the colours in her garden, the sounds of the past and the “purring” of bees. Write an article, for publication in a popular magazine, about the many and varied colours and sounds that punctuate and surround our daily lives and the impact they have on us.
- Comp B – 2021 - An assertion that other creatures’ lives are somehow lesser than human life has prompted extensive debate on social media. In order to join in this online debate, write an open letter to be shared on social media, in which you: state your position in relation to animal rights, explore some of the issues associated with our current engagement with animals and outline what you see as the major challenges we face as we share the planet with animals in the future.
- Comp A – 2021 – Text 2 is adapted from poet Doireann Ní Ghriúfa’s award-winning prose debut, *A Ghost in the Throat*. In this edited extract the writer reflects on how the past and the present come together in her garden.

Them Ducks Died For Ireland

Pre-Reading Tasks

- What do you know about the Easter Rising?
- Do you think people should be commemorated for their efforts in war time?
- How long do you think it takes for a person's memory to fade into oblivion?

Lines 1-12

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'6 of our waterfowl were killed or shot, 7 of the garden seats broken and about 300 shrubs destroyed.'

Park Superintendent in his report on the damage to St Stephen's Green during the Easter Rising 1916.

Time slides slowly down the sash window
puddling in light on oaken boards. The Green
is a great lung, exhaling like breath on the pane
the seasons' turn, sunset and moonset, the ebb and flow

of stars. And once made mirror to smoke and fire,
a Republic's destiny in a Countess' stride,
the bloodprice both summons and antidote to pride.
When we've licked the wounds of history, wounds of war,

- The unexpected title is humorous and engaging. It is a most unusual perspective on the casualties of the Easter Rising.
- The setting is an elegant house overlooking St Stephen's Green: there are 'sash windows' and 'oaken boards'.
- Time, like condensation, 'slides slowly down the sash window'. The sibilance reinforces the idea of drops of water slithering down the glass.
- St Stephen's Green is 'a great lung', and the passing seasons are reflected in the glass.
- Once, through that window, the Easter Rising was visible. Countess Markiewicz's determined 'stride' led others into battle but there was a 'bloodprice' which both encouraged sacrifice for the sake of freedom and prevented great pride because it was associated with such suffering and loss.

Lines 13-18

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we'll salute the stretcher-bearer, the nurse in white,
the ones who pick up the pieces, who endure,
who live at the edge, and die there and are known
by this archival footage read by fading light;
fragile as a breathmark on the windowpane or the gesture
of commemorating heroes in bronze and stone.

- There are other casualties of war, as is made clear, albeit humorously, in the epigraph (short quotation at the beginning of a book, poem, etc. suggesting the theme)
- There are statues 'commemorating heroes in bronze and stone' but we should also remember and honour those who 'endure', those who 'live at the edge, and die there'. Their deeds are not marked in the same way as the more famous fighters and victims; recording their deeds in a poem is 'fragile as a breathmark on the windowpane'.

Themes and Exam Focus

Memory and commemoration: The poem explores changing perspectives on significant events and asks who we remember and why. Memories fade quickly; time is like water or a 'breathmark on the windowpane'. Some of the ways we commemorate people may last longer than others, but all will eventually fade.



Linked Tasks

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- Comp A – 2021 - Text 1 is based on edited extracts from *Time Pieces – A Dublin Memoir* by John Banville. In this text the writer reflects on some childhood memories and shares his thoughts on the past.
- Comp B - 2021 - You have been invited to write a feature article, entitled *Monumental Matters – The Story of Statues*, to appear in the magazine supplement of a weekend newspaper. In your article you should: reflect on the long-established tradition of erecting statues to celebrate or memorialise people, explore some of the reasons why commemorative statues may be controversial, and give your views on continuing this tradition into the future.
- Unseen Poetry – 2019 – *The Wound in Time* by Carol Ann Duffy, written to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One.
- Read ‘Ozymandias’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley

The question

- No matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet's themes and style.
- Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with the works of the selected poet.



Varying your vocabulary

“

Identify **key words** and think of **synonyms** if possible. This will help to ensure that your language is varied while still focusing on the terms of the question.

?

Ask yourself what the coding for the question might be. Make sure that each and every point in your plan could be coded by the examiner. This will ensure that you are remaining focused on the question.



TIP!

tip

- Each of the poets you have studied has a signature style.
- They also deal with a limited number of themes.
- Work these out, and you will be prepared for any question.

Choosing your poems

Choose four to five poems which are relevant to the question.

You are making a case in your essay, so you must have a thesis.

The examiner is not interested in reading a re-hash of your poetry notes.

Organisation

HAVE A REASON FOR PUTTING THE POEMS IN A CERTAIN ORDER



Order

YOUR THESIS SHOULD BE THE THREAD
HOLDING YOUR ESSAY TOGETHER



Structure

There is no hard and fast rule here; use whatever structure has worked for you in the past.

Introduction: Refer to the question and outline your approach

Two paragraphs on each poem

Link sentence at the start of each new poem

Conclusion: it is effective to end on a quote if possible

Some suggestions

Move from poems written about the poet's childhood to poems written about middle age or old age.

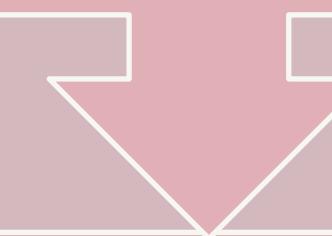
Move from poems written when the poet was young to poems written when he / she was an older person.

Move from positive to negative or vice versa.

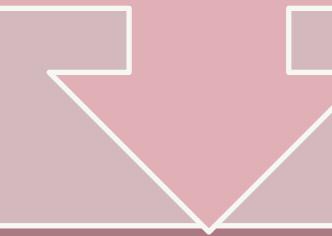
Move from personal to public or vice versa.

Planning - continued

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans. If you just launch into your essay without a clear idea of where each poem is taking you, you will get a low grade



A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.



You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

What poems would you use
next?

Think of the ORDER in which
you would place your poems,
and the links between them.



Introduction

“

You can - and should - work the terms of the question into your opening paragraph

“

Avoid the temptation to include too many points in your introduction. You must only mention themes/aspects of style that you intend to explore fully in the rest of the essay. Be wary of phrases like ‘a multitude of themes’ or ‘many interesting ways’. Those are big claims. Can you back them all up? A focused thesis is a better idea.

Pitfalls

‘I agree with the above statement’. NEVER begin an essay this way.

Mentioning topics in your introduction but failing to deal with them in the answer

Writing an unbalanced answer in which you deal with one or two poems in great detail and skip quickly over others

Body of the Essay

Each paragraph should advance your argument

The topic sentence in each paragraph should answer the question

Each paragraph should be linked to those before and after it

Use link words or phrases to connect your paragraphs: however; it is not only; we can also see; it becomes increasingly clear; as the poem progresses...

LINK PHRASES TO CONNECT EVIDENCE AND/OR QUOTATION

This idea is reinforced by / when...

This is cemented by / when...

X adds to the sense of...

This is further driven home by / when...

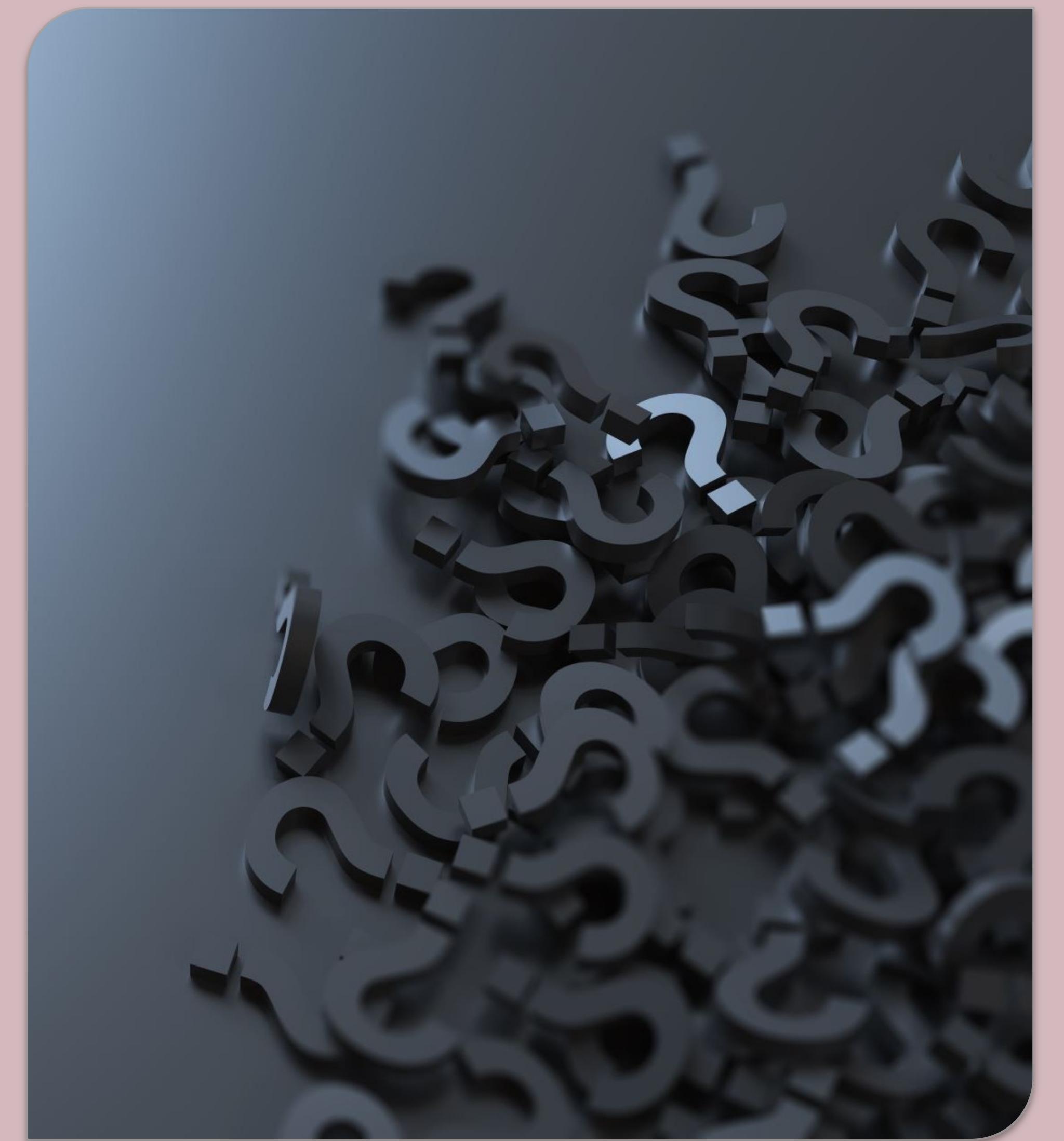
This message is even more powerfully
expressed by / when...

We see this same idea...

In much the same way...

Furthermore...

In addition...



STRUCTURING EACH PARAGRAPH – THERE IS NO ‘RIGHT’ WAY, BUT THIS IS ONE OPTION

Sentence One: Topic sentence which addresses the question

Sentence Two: Explain your point in a little more depth (this may take more than one sentence)

Sentence Three: Use evidence, including quotations, to support your point

Sentence Four: Comment on the evidence / quote and explain how it proves the point you made in your topic sentence

Sentence Five: Use a link phrase to introduce your second piece of evidence / quotation (see next slide for link phrases) and give your second piece of evidence

Sentence Six: Comment on the evidence etc.

Conclusion



Your conclusion should tie up your ideas and be a very brief rewording of your thesis/introduction.



There is no need to say, 'As I have shown in this essay'. Let your points speak for themselves.



Make sure not to raise any new points in your conclusion.



If you have an apt quote by or about the poet, this is a good time to use it.

Structuring an Answer: Approach for Each Poem

1

Point in relation
to the question

2

First piece of
evidence to
support the
point

3

Comment on
the evidence in
relation to the
point

4

Second piece of
evidence to
support the
point

5

Comment on
the evidence in
relation to the
point

