The Bright Lights of Sarajevo - Tony Harrison

# Setting

The setting of this poem is in the chilling Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnia war of the mid 1990s

# Content and Context

The poet uses one night in the city to represent an unvarnished, graphic recount of the horrors of war, that lay claim to the lives of the cities’ innocent civilians

However, interspersed through the tragedy is an under-current of hope that takes in the shape in the form of a blossoming romance between two youths

The title invokes a positive response to the reader despite all the negativity, there is a positive under-tone, there is still hope for its inhabitants in the form of a bright future

# Theme

1. Love
2. War
3. Darkness & Death
4. Sufferings
5. Loss
6. Horrors of War
7. Depravation

# Language features & Presentational Devices

**Tone –** The poem starts with a detached tone, recalling events from a safe place away from the danger. Then it changes to excitement/light-heartedness, “But tonight in Sarajevo that’s not the case”. The poem ends with a sad tone when the poem reminds us of the reality of war in Sarajevo. “In a candlelit café, …until the curfew and he holds in her hand…”

**Juxtaposition –** Violence, death, blood juxtaposed with the romance. The romantic nature of the poem, “holds her hand” is continually contrasted with the violent imagery, “broken dead” representing the normality of life that can be taken for granted.

**Darkness (Black Shapes)** is continually contrasted with the light (bright skies) representing the hope in a hopeless situation Dark shapes represent the different communities in a fight. “Black shapes… as Muslim, Serb or Croat.”. There is harmony among these 3 sets, these people never fought amongst themselves but instead lived amongst each other with harmony and peace.

**Romantic Language –** “Candlelit, fancied, flirtatious”

**Alliteration –** “Mortars massacred. “Street Serbs” “Strollers’ stride”

**Repetition –** “Death-deep death-dark, of” “Dark” Stroller’s pace… stroller’s stride”. Create rhythm

**Powerful Language –** In the first stanza, the poet pays tribute to the ordinary civilians were facing. He uses powerful language to show how the people were struggling to obtain their daily necessities, “fuel (canisters of gas) was wheeled home in prams” showing that they were precious and delicate as children, “Obtaining meagre grams of bread” was akin to a death sentence (dodging snipers on the way) and procuring water involved hard physical labor. “Grams of bread” suggest that bread was treated like gold

**Imagery –** “Often dodging snipers on the way.” “Walking streets sherb shell destroyed” “Broken dead” “Blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread” “Dark girl shape… dark boy shape”. Shows how the inhabitants of Sarajevo are used to the war. It’s become normal and has affected both the city and people.

**Symbolism -** “Dark” symbolizes the evil of war e.g Death

**Powerful Verbs –** “Queuing, struggling and dodging.” Add emphasis to the situation being portrayed.

**Second Person Narration –** A switch to the second person point of view, “You’d think” involves the reader in the story that is then to be recounted. The poet recounts the defiant resistance against oppression the youth of the city are showcasing.

**Irony –** “candlelit” which connotes romance but in reality, it is ironical because the candles are used due to lack of electricity. “Dark shape tender radar,” brings out the irony at the play. The courtship ritual begins to mind a military operation which painfully reflects the reality of the setting.

**Local Dialect –** “Hyleb… hleb… kruh”. Shows that in the dark, all ethnic tensions are eliminated as it is impossible to tell who is who.

**Rhyme –** (Often brings a light hearted spin to poetry). It is used in the poem which deals with such grim subject matters, reminding the reader that there is still joy and positivity to be found during the times of despair.

**Enjambment – (Continuation of a syndetic unit from one line to the next with a pause).** Use of enjambment mimics the narration of the story as the poet appears to be the narrating the story of Sarajevo