

THE POETRY ABOUT THE TROUBLES

Seamus Heaney (“Punishment”), Lorna Shaughnessy (“Sunnyside”, “The Harpist”, “Good Friday, 1998”), John Kelly (“In Lieu”) and Anne Haverty “Omagh”.

Main aspects of form and content in the selected poems (theme, structure, imagery, lineation, sound patterns).

N.B. I will provide some examples here, but I do not expect you to reproduce the same ones in the exam. You should be able to find your own examples.

The poems in this section are about the conflict of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. They explore the impact of sectarian violence on everyday life and on individual responses and responsibilities.

1. Seamus Heaney, “Punishment”

Theme: The individual’s moral responsibility in the face of collective punishment (stanzas 8, 10 and 11 highlight this theme).

Structure: 3 main parts. 1. Stanzas 1-5: The poetic persona’s description of, and identification with (“I can feel the tug”), the woman’s body found in the bog (notice that the body corresponds to times before the Current Era). 2. Stanzas 6-9: The poetic persona addresses the body as ‘you’ in a dramatic monologue and admits he would be among those who witnessed the punishment in silence: “but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence”. 3. Stanzas 10-11: The poetic persona establishes the comparison between past punishments of women and those during the Troubles: “when your betraying sisters, / cauled in tar”.

Imagery: Metaphor: “the rigging of her ribs” (rib cage compared to the ropes of a ship, because she lied in wet land); simile: “her shaved head / like a stubble of black corn” (time has turned her into a plant).

Lineation: Most stanzas are end-stopped with some punctuation mark, except 5, 6 and 8. Especially significant is the enjambment between stanzas 8 and 9: “I am the artful voyeur // of your brain’s exposed /...”, because the word ‘voyeur’ has sexual connotations and there is a certain intrigue about its use in this context.

Sound patterns: The first stanza shows that this poem will abound in sound patterns: Reverse rhyme (nape and naked /nei/) and alliteration: neck /n/. All these sounds are in words about the body just found and part 1 is a poetic description of that body.

2. Lorna Shaughnessy, “Sunnyside”

Theme: Impact of sectarian violence on ordinary family life. The trauma of experiencing terrorist violence in Northern Ireland (keeping silent about the attack for 32 years). Memory of past sectarian violence.

Structure: 3 main parts. 1. Stanza 1 (young woman’s arrival home; domesticity and family life). 2. Stanza 2 (detailed description of the terrorist attack). 3. Stanzas 3-4-5 (the aftereffects of the attack: the spectacularization of the attack, the fear, the wounds, the trauma).

Imagery: “miracle kitten”: “miracle” is a metaphor to express the surprising (miraculous) survival of the kitten, since the family could not even take it with them to the back garden.

Lineation: The short lines of the 2nd stanza increase the speed of the explosion (seven seconds)

Sound patterns: Alliteration: fingers-fear /f/ to stress the shock; skin-smell-smoke /s/, /sm/ to highlight the sensorial impact.

3. Lorna Shaughnessy, “The Harpist”

Theme: Impact of sectarian violence on ordinary family life. Recollection of a past terrorist attack and its effect on the poetic persona and on the family.

Structure: Fragmentation, with past and present interspersed. Present (stanzas 1-2, 4-5); Past (stanza 3 -1984-, part of 6, part of 7). The news of the father’s funeral-2009- reminds the poetic persona of his daughter’s death in an terrorist attack aimed at the father -1984.

Imagery: “placed a sleeping baby in her cot”: the wife burying the coffin is compared with a mother laying her baby in a cot. This stresses the notion of family affections and vulnerability.

Lineation: Special effects through line length (e.g. last two lines: “each one rung in / each one counted”) in order to emphasize the difficulty of overcoming the loss of the daughter year after year. The anaphora and the line break reinforce the counting of years.

Sound patterns: Alliterations: bullets-body /b/, day-daughter-died /d/. Both alliterations intensify the drama of the murder.

4. Lorna Shaughnessy, “Good Friday, 1998”

Theme: The impact of the peace agreement on family life. Expectation. Mutability and change.

Structure: The stand-alone lines mark the structure of the poem. Part 1: The news of the agreement and its effect on people. Part 2: a recently born baby is taken to the family home. Part 3: Radical change for Northern Ireland.

Imagery: “the island hovers”, as if Northern Ireland were in the air. “Hovers” is a metaphor to convey uncertainty and the feeling of unreality.

Lineation: The stand-alone lines refer to the act of breathing (breath as life). The agreement restores life.

Sound patterns: Although the poem is written in free verse (no regular metrical pattern or rhyme pattern throughout the whole poem), the stand-alone lines have an evident iambic rhythm: The house exhales (./) (./); I hold my breath as I approach (./) (./) (./) (./). This rhythm reinforces the idea of regularity (returning to a normal life).

5. John Kelly, "In Lieu"

Theme: The predicament of living one's adolescent years in Northern Ireland during the period of the Troubles.

Structure: It is a short, insistent poem that repeats the same idea through the "in lieu of" opposition. Rather than a conventional division into various parts, one could argue that the poem basically opposes ordinary adolescent life (sports, dating, etc) to terrorist violence (explosives, list with victims, etc).

Imagery: A tendency to metonymy and synecdoche (names of specific explosives, weapons and girls in the place of the abstract ideas of terrorism and love). Irony: 'in lieu of' is a too formal and elegant expression to be used in the context of adolescents and violence.

Lineation: Variations in the collocation of the 'in lieu of' prepositional phrase, either on a line of its own with an anaphora (l. 4, 9, 11) or on a line with the two terms of the opposition (Armalite-togs, gelignite-Brut)

Sound patterns: Predominant iambic meter (that increases the irony because of its musicality) on lines: 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

6. Anne Haverty "Omagh"

Theme: Terrorism ruins the prospects of a peaceful and enjoyable day in Northern Ireland in 1998. Ephemerality of life.

Structure: The first 5 lines describe the day (atmosphere and mood), while the last line refers to the victims of the terrorist attack: "the dead".

Imagery: Although every word can be understood literally, the choice of lexicon acquires special significance if read in the context of a terrorist attack: transcendent, mundane, shadowy, lost, toss, ephemeral.

Lineation: Declarative and solemn tone of the poem with its end-stopped lines (all the lines end with a punctuation mark that increases the pause).

Sound patterns: One case of alliteration is especially significant: day-dead /d/, because it stresses the terrorist attack on that particular day. Notice also the alliteration shadowy - shimmer /ʃ/ of the pathetic fallacy (emotional description of a landscape).