GCSE Poetry Anthology

Conflict Cluster

The poems included in this anthology are published by the AQA and assessed in the end of year examinations for GCSE. A comparison between two of these poems is the most likely essay question.

This anthology contains the poems themselves and some information about their social and historical context

Flag

What's that fluttering in a breeze?
It's just a piece of cloth
that brings a nation to its knees.

What's that unfurling from a pole?
It's just a piece of cloth
that makes the guts of men grow bold.

What's that rising over a tent?
It's just a piece of cloth
that dares the coward to relent.

What's that flying across a field?
It's just a piece of cloth
that will outlive the blood you bleed.

How can I possess such a cloth?
Just ask for a flag, my friend.
Then blind your conscience to the end.

JOHN AGARD

Social and Historical Context

The poem uses the flag as a symbol of patriotism. Through a series of questions and answers, it highlights the power of this symbol, a symbol of national pride. The flag can inspire loyalty and great bravery (the imagery suggests this is manifest in war) but in the poem's final stanza, Agard throws out a challenge: does patriotism and hence nationalism lead us to commit immoral acts?

John Agard

John Agard started writing poems when he was about sixteen and his first collection of poetry was published in Guyana in 1974. More recently he has been writer in residence at the South Bank and poet in residence at the BBC and now many of his poems are composed while looking out of train windows. He is not only a popular literary poet, but a powerful performance poet who has a strong sense of his audience, as his celebrated performance of his poem 'Half-Caste' reveals (available on YouTube).

He is most closely identified with a free verse form that uses the rhythms and dialect of Caribbean Creole to make a serious point in a witty way. However, many of his poems use the language and grammar of standard English, and are tightly constructed and metrically regular: the sonnets in Clever Backbone, for example.

The Yellow Palm

As I made my way down Palestine Street
I watched a funeral pass –
all the women waving lilac stems
around a coffin made of glass
and the face of the man who lay within
who had breathed a poison gas.

As I made my way down Palestine Street
I heard the call to prayer
and I stopped at the door of the golden mosque
to watch the faithful there
but there was blood on the walls and the muezzin's eyes
were wild with his despair.

As I made my way down Palestine Street
I met two blind beggars
And into their hands I pressed my hands
with a hundred black dinars;
and their salutes were those of the Imperial Guard
in the Mother of all Wars.

As I made my way down Palestine Street
I smelled the wide Tigris,
the river smell that lifts the air
in a city such as this;
but down on my head fell the barbarian sun
that knows no armistice.

As I made my way down Palestine Street
I saw a Cruise missile,
a slow and silver caravan
on its slow and silver mile,
and a beggar child turned up his face
and blessed it with a smile.

As I made my way down Palestine Street
under the yellow palms
I saw their branches hung with yellow dates
all sweeter than salaams,
and when that same child reached up to touch,
the fruit fell in his arms.

Robert Minhinnick

Robert Minhinnick is a poet, essayist and more recently, novelist. He was born in South Wales, where he still lives, in 1952. He is also an environmentalist; he co-founded Friends of the Earth Cymru (Wales) and is advisor to Sustainable Wales, an environmental charity.

Much of Minhinnick's poetry is rooted in Wales – its landscapes and communities, people, places and weather, his family and his childhood. It is not limited to this, however. He has travelled widely and written on other subjects, including contemporary political events and issues. Poems such as 'The Yellow Palm' and 'After the Stealth Bomber' reference the first Gulf War and draw on his visit to Iraq in 1998. Minhinnick won the prestigious Forward Prize for Best Individual Poem in 1999 for 'Twenty-five Laments for Iraq'.

The Poem

The refrain of 'The Yellow Palm' refers to Palestine Street, but Minhinnick has identified the inspiration for the poem as a different street in Baghdad called Al-Rasheed Street, a major thoroughfare in the city and the location of the Al-Rasheed Hotel, from where CNN broadcast live during the air strikes on the city during the first Gulf War. Minhinnick describes the poem as 'an Audenesque kind of ballad'.

The Yellow Palm

Cultural References in the Poem:

Palestine Street – a major street in Baghdad (although not the street that Minhinnick identifies as the inspiration for his poem), also known as Falastin Street.

Poison gas – a term to describe chemical weapons such as mustard gas and chlorine gas. Poison gas was used by Iraq against Iran during the Iran–Iraq War and also (allegedly) against its own Kurdish minority. The UN supervised the destruction of a quantity of chemical weapons in Iraq after the first Gulf War.

Muezzin – the person who calls the faithful to prayer at mosque.

Imperial Guard – the unit of volunteers (largely) who originally served as Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's personal bodyguard. The unit's remit broadened into a wider military one.

Mother of all Wars (or Mother of all Battles) – President Saddam Hussein's description of the first Gulf War.

Tigris – river flowing through Baghdad.

Cruise missile – a guided missile that can carry conventional, chemical, biological or nuclear warheads. Cruise missiles were used by both 'sides' during the first Gulf War.

Yellow palm – a type of date-producing palm tree that is frequently mentioned in the Qu'ran. The tree's leaves, bark and fruit are used for a variety of purposes including timber, rope, food and fuel.

Salaam – an Arabic greeting (meaning 'peace') which is used throughout the world, mainly by Muslims. In the Middle East, it is accompanied by two or three light cheek kisses, usually between people of the same gender. It is a shortening of As Salaam Alaykum (peace be upon you).

The Right Word

Outside the door,
lurking in the shadows,
is a terrorist.

Is that the wrong description?
Outside that door,
taking shelter in the shadows,
is a freedom-fighter.

I haven't got this right.
Outside, waiting in the shadows,
is a hostile militant.

Are words no more
than waving, wavering flags?
Outside your door,
watchful in the shadows,
is a guerrilla warrior.

God help me.
Outside, defying every shadow,
stands a martyr.
I saw his face.

No words can help me now.
Just outside the door,
lost in shadows,
is a child who looks like mine.

One word for you.
Outside my door,
his hand too steady,
his eyes too hard
is a boy who looks like your son, too.

I open the door.
Come in, I say.
Come in and eat with us.

The child steps in
and carefully, at my door,
takes off his shoes.

IMTIAZ DHARKER

Imtiaz Dharker (1954-)

Imtiaz Dharker was born in the Punjab, Pakistan in 1954. She grew up in Glasgow in a Lahori household and now divides her time between India, Wales and London. She describes herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist.

As well as being a poet, Imtiaz Dharker is also a prolific and award-winning documentary film maker. Among their many subjects, her films highlight an interest in child welfare and in women's health and education.

Recurring themes in her poetry include cultural identity, freedom, displacement, communal conflict, gender politics and freedom. Critic Tishani Doshi argues that her poems offer 'hope in the face of violence', while Bruce King regards Dharker as 'consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider, someone who knows her own mind, rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies'.

'The Right Word'

Set against the sensitive post-9/11 backdrop of political and religious tensions, 'The Right Word' seems at first to contradict this description. The use of questions and alternative ways of describing someone suggests a poem full of doubt, where words are 'waving, wavering flags' and nothing can be pinned down with certainty. Confusion, fear and distrust prevail.

However, the poem dramatises the search to know one's own mind, the process of moving from uncertainty to certainty. It is when it moves from considering the problem at the political level ('one man's terrorist is another man's freedom-fighter') to the personal ('I saw his face') that the doubt and fear is removed.

Futility

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

WILFRED OWEN

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Wilfred Owen – along with his friend and mentor, Siegfried Sassoon – is now thought of as the poet who exposed the brutalities of trench warfare and the senseless waste of life caused by World War One. Owen spent only four months fighting and only five weeks in the front line, but the shock of the horrors of war was so great that he decided it was his task to expose the 'Pity of War', to represent in poetry the experiences of the men in his care.

He was drafted to France in 1917, in what was the worst winter of the war. After spending January to April in the trenches, he was sent to Edinburgh's Craiglockhart War Hospital for the shell-shocked where he met Siegfried Sassoon, a poet he admired, who encouraged and influenced him. Both poets were persuaded to return to the Front. In a letter to his mother Owen wrote: 'I came out again in order to help these boys; directly, by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their suffering that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can.' Owen was killed on 4 November 1918 trying to get his men across the Sambre Canal. The news reached his parents seven days later, on Armistice Day.

World War One (1914-1918)

Wilfred Owen was particularly keen to make the public aware of the dreadful conditions in the trenches, where more than 200,000 men lost their lives in the Somme offensive. Amid the stink of the waterlogged trenches, men had to contend with lice, rats and disease, not to mention the trauma of watching their friends die and being constantly under attack themselves. Siegfried Sassoon had published a denunciation of the war which claimed it was 'deliberately prolonged by those who had the power to end it'. – both men felt they had no option but to return for the sake of all their fellow sufferers.

The Falling Leaves

November 1915

Today, as I rode by,
I saw the brown leaves dropping from their tree
In a still afternoon,
When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,
But thickly, silently,
They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon;
And wandered slowly thence
For thinking of a gallant multitude
Which now all withering lay,
Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,
But in their beauty strewed
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay.

MARGARET POSTGATE COLE

Margaret Postgate Cole (1893-1980)

Although born and raised in an Anglican family, Margaret began to question her religious faith whilst at Cambridge University. She read widely, and influenced by the writings of Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Hobson, she became a socialist, a feminist, an atheist and a member of the Fabian Society.

Her brother, Raymond Postgate, shared her views and was imprisoned briefly during the First World War as a conscientious objector, as the court didn't accept that his atheism and socialist views were a valid reason for not fighting.

It was during her brother's trial that Margaret Postgate's views of the Great War were transformed. Her support for her brother confirmed her as a pacifist (someone who is anti-war) and led her to campaign against conscription, or forced enlistment.

WWI

As Margaret Postgate Cole and other women poets of World War One have shown in their work, it was not only the men who suffered as a result of the war. Women's lives were affected too, not least because of the millions of young men who died, all borne by women, and many loved by women. So, while male poets of this generation can tell us about the agony of trench warfare, women poets voice the despair, anguish and endurance of women, waiting, wondering and grieving.

In this poem, a tree dropping its leaves leads to thoughts of the thousands of young soldiers dying in their prime in the trenches. The pastoral imagery at the start of the poem becomes a contemplation of the death toll in Flanders, and vividly illustrates how the horror of war overshadows every area of life, even a peaceful ride in the countryside.

Extract from Out of the Blue

You have picked me out.
Through a distant shot of a building burning
you have noticed now
that a white cotton shirt is twirling, turning.

In fact I am waving, waving.
Small in the clouds, but waving, waving.
Does anyone see
a soul worth saving?

So when will you come?
Do you think you are watching, watching
a man shaking crumbs
or pegging out washing?

I am trying and trying.
The heat behind me is bullying, driving,
but the white of surrender is not yet flying.
I am not at the point of leaving, diving.

A bird goes by.
The depth is appalling. Appalling
that others like me
should be wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling.

Are your eyes believing,
believing
that here in the gills
I am still breathing.

But tiring, tiring.
Sirens below are wailing, firing.
My arm is numb and my nerves are sagging.
Do you see me, my love. I am failing, flagging.

SIMON ARMITAGE

Simon Armitage

Armitage believes that he does not 'own' the way that the poems should be read:

"Poetry is a very compact language, so you can think about whether there is another meaning to some of the words; it can be like looking into a pond – will something else come into focus? One thing you shouldn't do is assume there's some kind of key that will 'turn' this poem, or that there's some code that you've got to press."

In a recent interview, he talked specifically about form and style:

"I tend to think that poems come pre-packaged, and that when the idea suggests itself to me the form comes with it: I sort of see it in my mind's eye – particularly with poems that come as blocks of text…I think I do imagine these things to be pre-determined in some way – that they are somehow in concert with the whole idea of the poem and with the style of the poem – style is everything to me, in writing. I think that is what people are interested in in poems."

Out of the Blue

The extract in the Anthology is from a longer poem, 'Out of the Blue', which tells the story of the 9/11 attacks from the point of view of an English trader working in the World Trade Center's North Tower at the time.

The poem begins as the trader embarks on his working day. Everything seems ordinary. As the poem progresses, we see the impact of the attacks and his growing understanding of the personal consequences as he is unable to escape. In the extract 'You have picked me out', he sees people leaping and falling from the towers and realises that his situation is hopeless.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

1.
Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

2.
'Forward, the Light Brigade!'
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Some one had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

3.
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

4.
Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre-stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

5.
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them
Left of six hundred.

6.
When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

ALFRED TENNYSON

Historical Context

First published in Maud (1855), the poem tells the story of the failed charge of the British cavalry in the Battle of Balaclava in October 1854. Britain was fighting with France, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire against Russian forces in the Crimean War, which was about control of the Dardanelles, a narrow sea straight in Turkey. If the Russians had power over the Dardanelles, British sea routes (and trade) would have been threatened.

Although it is unclear who was actually responsible, a cavalry group, the Light Brigade (led disastrously by Lord Cardigan who miraculously survived), was ordered to attack a very strongly defended Russian position.

'Come On, Come Back'

Incident in a future war

Left by the ebbing tide of battle
On the field of Austerlitz
The girl soldier Vaudevue sits
Her fingers tap the ground, she is alone
At midnight in the moonlight she is sitting alone on a round flat stone.

Graded by the Memel Conference first
Of all human exterminators
M.L.5.
Has left her just alive
Only her memory is dead for evermore.
She fears and cries, Ah me why am I here?
Sitting alone on a round flat stone on a hummock there.

Rising, staggering, over the ground she goes
Over the seeming miles of rutted meadow
To the margin of a lake
The sand beneath her feet
Is cold and damp and firm to the waves' beat.

Quickly – as a child, an idiot, as one without memory –
She strips her uniform off, strips, stands and plunges
Into the icy waters of the adorable lake.
On the surface of the water lies
A ribbon of white moonlight
The waters on either side of the moony track
Are black as her mind,
Her mind is as secret from her
As the water on which she swims,
As secret as profound as ominous.

Weeping bitterly for her ominous mind, her plight,
Up the river of white moonlight she swims
Until a treacherous undercurrent
Seizing her in an icy-amorous embrace
Dives with her, swiftly severing
The waters which close above her head.

An enemy sentinel
Finding the abandoned clothes
Waits for the swimmer's return

('Come on, come back')
Waiting, whiling away the hour
Whittling a shepherd's pipe from the hollow reeds.

In the chill light of dawn
Ring out the pipe's wild notes
'Come on, come back.'

Vaudevue
In the swift and subtle current's close embrace
Sleeps on, stirs not, hears not the familiar tune
Favourite of all the troops of all the armies
Favourite of Vaudevue
For she had sung it too
Marching to Austerlitz,
'Come on, come back.'

STEVIE SMITH

Historical Context

Although this dramatic poem is set in a future war, some of the references in the poem seem to point to previous wars, including the Napoleonic Wars and World Wars One and Two.

- Austerlitz, now a part of the Czech Republic, was officially under Austrian control in 1805 when Napoleon's troops, in what became one of his greatest victories, defeated the Russian and Austrian armies at the Battle of Austerlitz.
- The town of Memel (now Klaipėda) came under German rule after the Napoleonic war, although it is a coastal town in Lithuania. In 1939, the territory was seized back by Hitler's German forces and became increasingly anti-semitic, leading to its 1300 Jewish inhabitants being expelled.
- In the poem, Stevie Smith imagines that the 'Memel Conference' has graded 'M.L.5' as the 'first/Of all human exterminators'. Smith leaves the language deliberately ambiguous, but there are arguably reminders of the extermination camps used by the Nazis in World War Two.

At the Border, 1979

'It is your last check-in point in this country!'
We grabbed a drink –
soon everything would taste different.

The land under our feet continued
divided by a thick iron chain.

My sister put her leg across it.
'Look over here,' she said to us,
'my right leg is in this country
and my left leg in the other.'
The border guards told her off.

My mother informed me: We are going home.
She said that the roads are much cleaner
the landscape is more beautiful
and people are much kinder.

Dozens of families waited in the rain.
'I can inhale home,' somebody said.
Now our mothers were crying. I was five years old
standing by the check-in point
comparing both sides of the border.

The autumn soil continued on the other side
with the same colour, the same texture.
It rained on both sides of the chain.

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

CHOMAN HARDI

Choman Hardi

Choman Hardi was born in 1974. She spent the first part of her life in Southern Kurdistan before her family moved to Iran in 1975. Four years later they returned to Iraq. However, they had to flee again in 1988 when Saddam Hussein started attacking the Kurdish people with chemical weapons. In 1993 she entered the United Kingdom as a refugee.

The Poem's Context

Iraq is credited as being the home of the first civilisation, that between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This means that people have lived in ordered communities there for eight thousand years. Some scholars believe that the first writing system was used in Iraq. Whether particular dates or discoveries occurred is irrelevant to the fact that the culture is very old and there is a sense of the ancient ingrained in the people.

In 1926 the modern Iraqi state included the regions of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul under the rule of the British. However, this changed in 1932 with independence. Several coups and occupations followed until 1979 when Saddam Hussein took over. Soon after he became ruler, Iraq came into conflict with Iran. Saddam Hussein decided to punish the Kurds for supporting Iran by using chemical weapons against them. These attacks continued for some time.

When the Iraq–Iran War ended in 1990 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait for its oil. This caused the start of the First Gulf War. As well, Saddam Hussein was portrayed as being 'evil' because he attacked his own people, the Kurds.

'At the Border' is autobiographical. The border is the border between Kurdistan and Iran.

Poppies

Three days before Armistice Sunday
and poppies had already been placed
on individual war graves. Before you left,
I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,
spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade
of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

Sellotape bandaged around my hand,
I rounded up as many white cat hairs
as I could, smoothed down your shirt's
upturned collar, steeled the softening
of my face. I wanted to graze my nose
across the tip of your nose, play at
being Eskimos like we did when
you were little. I resisted the impulse
to run my fingers through the gelled
blackthorns of your hair. All my words
flattened, rolled, turned into felt,

slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked
with you, to the front door, threw
it open, the world overflowing
like a treasure chest. A split second
and you were away, intoxicated.
After you'd gone I went into your bedroom,
released a song bird from its cage.
Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,
and this is where it has led me,
skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy
making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without
a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.

On reaching the top of the hill I traced
the inscriptions on the war memorial,
leaned against it like a wishbone.
The dove pulled freely against the sky,
an ornamental stitch. I listened, hoping to hear
your playground voice catching on the wind.

JANE WEIR

Jane Weir

Jane Weir describes herself as Anglo-Italian, and grew up in on the outskirts of Manchester on a council estate. She is a textile designer, writer and poet who has recently drawn high praise from her peers, including the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy.

The Poem's Context

Weir describes being surprised by the 'overwhelming response' she had from readers across Europe to 'Poppies'. Many of the readers who contacted her were mothers of soldiers killed in action in recent conflicts. She commented in an interview that, 'I wrote the piece from a woman's perspective, which is quite rare, as most poets who write about war have been men. As the mother of two teenage boys, I tried to put across how I might feel if they were fighting in a war zone.'

Weir has acknowledged that 'A lot of my poems are narrative driven or scenarios', and in 'Poppies' she tells the 'story' of a mother's experience of pain and loss as her son leaves home to go to war. She has indicated that: 'I was subliminally thinking of Susan Owen [mother of Wilfred]... and families of soldiers killed in any war when I wrote this poem. This poem attempts on one level to address female experience and is consciously a political act.'

Weir has commented that she likes the adventure of 'cross dressing' in terms of her use of language, often borrowing from the 'language of other genres, be it fashion, art... and so on'. This is apparent in 'Poppies' where the tactile language of fashion and textiles seems to permeate the text. Her poems have been described as 'multi-sensory explosions'.

next to of course god america i

"next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

E. E. CUMMINGS

E. E. Cummings (1894-1962)

Edward Estlin Cummings was born on 14 October 1894 in Cambridge, Massachussets, USA

During World War One, Cummings enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, based in Paris, a place he loved. In 1917, Cummings and a friend were mistakenly arrested on suspicion of espionage, having openly expressed anti-war views and spoken of a lack of hatred for the Germans. They were released after three and a half months in an internment camp after the intervention of Cummings' well connected father. He returned to the USA where he was drafted into the army until November 1918. Cummings' first book The Enormous Room recounted his experiences of internment, and immediately gained him an international reputation

Cummings experimented with form, punctuation, spelling and sentence structure, often abandoning traditional techniques to create a radical, idiosyncratic style.

The Poem's Context

'next to of course god america i' is a satirical poem. The absence of punctuation and capitalisation allows the reader to engage with the poem's ambiguity – what does the speaker actually intend with his words? It is interesting that he chooses to capitalise the pronoun 'He' as if placing the speaker in a place of superiority or distance. He initially appears to glorify America, although this is also ambiguous as he tempers this with phrases such as 'and so forth'. His oxymoronic description of the soldiers as 'heroic happy dead' also leaves the reader feeling ambivalent. In many ways one can view this as a very modern poem, with many of the criticisms Cummings levels at his country being as relevant today as they were in the 1920s.

Hawk Roosting

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

TED HUGHES

Ted Hughes

Hughes writes about the elements and aspects of the natural world in much of his poetry. The poet Simon Armitage said that for Hughes, poetry was 'a connecting rod between nature and humanity'. Hughes was a very prolific writer who in addition to poetry, also wrote for children. In his book Poetry in the Making, he gives insight into the writing process and his inspiration for writing:

"It is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of all those many mansions in the head and express something – perhaps not much, just something – of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a crow flies over and the way a man walks and the look of a street and from what we did one day a dozen years ago. Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are."

The Poem's Context

'Hawk Roosting' was published in 1960 as part of Hughes' second book, Lupercal. It is one of many poems that he wrote about nature and the natural world.

At the time of writing Hughes was living with his wife Sylvia Plath, in America.

Belfast Confetti

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation
marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And
the explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst
of rapid fire …
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept
stuttering,
All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and
colons.

I know this labyrinth so well – Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman,
Odessa Street –
Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street.
Dead end again.
A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-
talkies. What is
My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?
A fusillade of question-marks.

CIARAN CARSON

Belfast Confetti

Ciaran Carson

Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is very much a son of that city, graduating from Queen's University, Belfast, and living there still now. His first language is Irish and he says that 'I write in English, but the ghost of Irish hovers behind it; and English itself is full of ghostly presences'. His name is in many ways symbolic of his Irish identity – Ciaran is a Catholic name, whereas Carson is Protestant. Apparently one of his ancestors enthusiastically converted to Protestantism.

Influenced by writers such as Paul Muldoon, C.K. Williams and Louis MacNeice in particular, Carson extends traditionally based Irish vernacular storytelling in verse that uses a 'long line' style – a feature of 'Belfast Confetti'. Much of his writing is influenced by music, particularly jigs and other traditional forms. In an interview in the New Yorker magazine, he says, 'The more I write, the more I think that music and song are fundamental to what I write. Especially the genre of song known in the Irish language as sean-nós (old-style). Its sound-structure is always at the back of my mind.'

'Belfast Confetti'

'Belfast Confetti' (1990) won the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for Poetry. The title of the poem initially suggests a celebration, but the phrase 'Belfast Confetti' pre-dates the poem and refers to the screws, bolts and nails that were placed in IRA bombs as shrapnel.

The poem is about the aftermath of an IRA bomb attack. Even the language itself becomes a weapon: the bomb in 'Belfast Confetti' is loaded ironmongery as well as a 'fount of broken type'.

'Belfast Confetti' reveals a fascination with language itself. Influenced by James Joyce's street language in Dubliners and Ulysses, the poem explores how written language echoes the sounds of a city in turmoil.

Carson has said, 'I'm not that interested in ideologies. I'm interested in the words, and how they sound to me, how words connect with experience.' This can certainly be seen in the poem, where he does not seem to take sides, and does not say whether he condemns the bombing or not. It is about the effect on people and the power of words.

Bayonet Charge

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –

In bewilderment then he almost stopped –
In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running
Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
Listening between his footfalls for the reason
Of his still running, and his foot hung like
Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.
He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror's touchy dynamite.

TED HUGHES

Mametz Wood

For years afterwards the farmers found them –
the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades
as they tended the land back into itself.

A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
the relic of a finger, the blown
and broken bird's egg of a skull,

all mimicked now in flint, breaking blue in white
across this field where they were told to walk, not run,
towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.

And even now the earth stands sentinel,
reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened
like a wound working a foreign body to the surface
of the skin.

This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave,
a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm,
their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre

in boots that outlasted them,
their socketed heads tilted back at an angle
and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.

As if the notes they had sung
have only now, with this unearthing,
slipped from their absent tongues.

OWEN SHEERS

Owen Sheers (1974-)

Owen Sheers was born in Fiji in 1974 but was brought up in south Wales. He now divides his time between Wales and New York. As well as poetry, he has written an award-winning non-fiction book, Dust Diaries, essays, novels and plays and has worked as a television presenter.

'Mametz Wood'

The poem 'Mametz Wood' was inspired by a trip to the Somme. Sheers was involved in a documentary film project about two Welsh writers, David Jones and Wyn Griffiths. They served with the 38th Welsh Division and both fought at Mametz Wood (described by Jones in In Parenthesis). While Sheers was in France, a previously unknown grave was uncovered. It contained the bodies of 20 Allied soldiers, hastily buried but with arms interlinked as described in the poem. Sheers has said that when he saw the photograph of the grave, he knew it was an image that would stay with him and that it was a subject he would want to write about.

The battle of Mametz Wood was a real event that took place in July 1916, part of the First Battle of the Somme. The 38th Welsh Division was trying to take a heavily fortified wooded area on high ground. German forces were well equipped with machine guns and the attacking soldiers had to approach across exposed, upwardly sloping land. The 38th Welsh suffered heavy losses (almost 4000), including some to what is now called 'friendly fire'.

Dance macabre or 'Dance of Death' was a theme of much medieval poetry and art. It depicts a skeleton (Death) leading all ranks of people (from the highest to the lowest) to their graves. It symbolises the inevitability of death for all, and the futility of earthly rank and material possessions. Its appearance in religious imagery was meant to urge viewers to reflect on the state of their souls.