

Cluster 3

Conflict

This cluster explores a range of types of conflict: terrorism, civil war, colonial war, occupations, nationalist struggles, the tensions between ethnic groups and religions.

As well as presenting different types of conflict, these poems offer a variety of attitudes to war, from the glory of 'Charge of the Light Brigade' to Owen's bleak and bitter 'Futility'. Sometimes the poem speaks from the point of view of a soldier, as in 'Bayonet Charge' or 'Futility'. Other poems explore the wider effects of conflict – for example 'Poppies' concentrates on the feelings of a mother, 'Belfast Confetti' on a community, and 'The Falling Leaves' explores the idea of bereavement and loss.

Some of the poems take a wider perspective, considering the concept of conflict and its consequences, for instance 'Mametz Wood' or 'next to of course god america i'. And, in the widest sense, both 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Flag' comment on the behaviours and attitudes that may lead to conflict.

When studying this cluster, it might be useful for students to focus on some of the following considerations:

- What kind of **conflict** does this poem focus on? Is it about terrorism, civil war, or conflict between cultures in one geographical location? Is it about the aftermath of world war? Is it about the effects of war on countries / individuals / loved ones?
- From what **perspective** is it written? Is the perspective **first person**, **second person** or **third person** address? Is there a **persona** and, if so, are they a participant, an observer, a victim? Is the poem written after / before / during the conflict? Is it set in the present, the past, or a future time?
- **How** does the poet explore conflict? What does the poem tell us or suggest about conflict? Does it bring alive the experience of battle, or make us think about the pain of losing a loved one in war, or is it about the barbarity and senselessness of war?
- Why has the poet written this poem? What **feelings**, **attitudes** and/or **ideas** is the poet considering through his or her presentation of conflict? What is the **mood** – is it angry / reflective / saddened / quizzical?
- How has the poet communicated his or her ideas? What aspects of **language**, **structure** and/or **form** are particularly significant in this poem? What **literary techniques** is the poet using to achieve their effects?

Flag

John Agard

Background and Context

In 'Flag', published in 2005, John Agard (1949–) uses a pattern of questions and answers to create a format which invites the reader to question the purpose and value of the flag. He explores the roots and causes of conflict and poses questions about man's role within it: ultimately, is it the flag or man that causes the conflict?

A flag is a piece of fabric used primarily now to symbolise a country, but the origin of flags is in warfare, where they were developed to assist military communication on the battlefield. As such, flags are powerful patriotic symbols which can be used and interpreted in many ways. The American Pledge of Allegiance begins, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag...'

Flag

Present tense: the poem is about now and this will always be an important question

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

An innocent image – pure and clean but also flimsy and insubstantial

Each stanza opens with a question which is then answered. There are two different voices: a young naïve questioner and a wise, advisory answerer

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

Insistent repetition forces us to ask whether the flag is 'just' a piece of cloth – literally, yes; metaphorically, no

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

Suggestion of a military encampment
Here meaning to forgo his cowardliness

Assertive and confident future tense implies strength (and immortality?) of the flag

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

Alliteration draws attention to this alarming phrase

Pattern of stanzas changes

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

Use of second person to involve reader
Ambiguous – the consequences of our actions or until death?

Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poem considers the value of patriotism as symbolised by the flag, and as such explores ideas of national identity which provoke conflict. Beyond this, it considers how the flag is used and exploited – because, as the refrain concedes, the flag is ‘just a piece of cloth’.

‘Flag’ invites the reader to consider why the flag is so powerful, what it represents and, perhaps most importantly, its hold over us. It asks a series of simple questions. In each of the first four stanzas an answer is given which both asserts and challenges the power and value of the flag: it can control countries; it can motivate men; it can change the minds of cowards; it can live forever. In the final stanza the person asks how he can possess such a powerful item, and the answer to the earlier questions is revealed, with the significant caveat that possession of the flag can have terrible consequences.

Agard ultimately gives the reader a decision. In the penultimate stanza he addresses the reader directly: ‘the blood you bleed’. He follows this in the final stanza, by revealing what the ‘piece of cloth’ is, but also revealing the consequences of taking the flag – losing your independence, the freedom to make your own decisions and, it is implied, your morality.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure – patterns and repetition.* The poem has a very simple form, five short stanzas. Each starts with a question, followed by an answer. In the first four stanzas the answer always begins in the same way, making the reader think again and again about what the ‘piece of cloth’ is and the influence it has. Agard breaks this pattern in the final stanza, giving it great impact. The second line of the first four stanzas is always the same, with the emphasis particularly on ‘just’... the word which survives into the final stanza to suggest the dangerous ease with which the flag can be claimed.
- *The rhyme scheme* reinforces the stanza pattern. It changes in the final stanza, from *aba* to *abb*, highlighting the significant friend/end final couplet.
- *Question and answer structure* – a formal device, but at the end the poet’s voice comes through, addressing the reader directly in ‘you’, and ‘my friend’, implying that he wants to help by giving good advice.
- *Imagery* – The flag is given almost magical power: it can control men, and ‘will outlive’ them. The power is alluring, but perhaps also illusory – battles and empires are lost as well as won.

Targeting C

Look at the connotations of the verbs that describe the flags in the questions: ‘fluttering’, ‘unfurling’, ‘rising’, ‘flying’. What qualities do these suggest?

Targeting A/A*

Look carefully at the ambiguity of some statements. How can ‘brings a nation to its knees’ be interpreted in different ways?

Why does Agard choose to close the poem with the word ‘end’?

Does the problem lie in the flag or in man’s response to the flag?

Compares with...

‘The Right Word’ – perceptions and challenging assumptions

‘At the Border, 1979’ – causes of conflict

‘next to of course god america i’ – concepts of patriotism

Extract from *Out of the Blue*

Simon Armitage

Background and Context

The use of dramatic monologue allows Armitage to explore the thoughts and feelings of a victim of conflict. This extract comes from a much longer poem called 'Out of the Blue', commissioned by Channel 5 for the fifth anniversary of the bombing of the Twin Towers in 2001. The powerful TV images of the planes flying into the buildings, the subsequent fires and the collapse of the Towers captured the events, as they happened, for a stunned and horrified worldwide audience. Nearly 3000 people died in the attack, of whom 67 were British. A video of 'Out of The Blue Part III' can be found on YouTube (see 0.00–1.50).

See page 42 for more on Simon Armitage

Exploring the Poem

Title

The title describes the perfectly blue skies of September 11th 2001, and the absolute suddenness and surprise of the attack. There is a sense that even in those skies, where nothing could be hidden, danger is lurking.

Stanza 1

- 1 'You have picked me out' – directly addresses the TV viewer / partner / reader, identifying the speaker in a specific context in relation to the video images, and establishing a particular relationship between speaker / victim and passive, powerless, horror-struck watcher
- 4 'a white cotton shirt is twirling, turning' – 'white' suggestive of innocence, peace or surrender

Stanza 2

- 5–6 Speaker introduced; very active ('waving, waving'), but also with a sense of vulnerability ('Small in the clouds') and of his own plight and doom ('a soul worth saving')

Stanza 3

- 9 'So when will you come?' – reader put on the spot
- 10–12 'Do you think you are watching, watching / a man shaking crumbs / or pegging out washing?' – invites us to consider our own response, to move beyond overwhelming and enthralling images and acknowledge the victims

Stanza 4

- 13 'trying and trying' – use of 'and' breaks pattern of poem and suggests determination
- 15–16 Considers the psychological impact of the situation, the burning building, on the speaker; he is defiant but there is an ebbing of hope

Stanza 5

- 17 'A bird goes by' – illustrates height of the building
- 20 'wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling' – list of verbs suggests long, plummeting fall of people jumping from the building

Stanza 6

The stanza suggests the immensity of the event and the personal, implying perhaps that it is an attack on everyone

- 23 'gills' – the vertical bars on the side of the building are suggestive of fish gills, fitting with the theme of breathing

Stanza 7

25 'But tiring, tiring' – end stopped line to indicate finality

26 'wailing' – implies mourning starting already?

28 'my love' – second person address becomes personalised; 'flagging' – ambiguity: waving or tiring?

Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poem shows how, in the modern world, conflict isn't confined to a battlefield, and terrorism intrudes on everyone's life. The longer poem establishes the speaker's 'master of the universe' character, a financier looking down from his office, but he is trapped in the burning building, and the tone of the extract is desperate and pleading.

The poem is a dramatic monologue – Armitage imagines a character from the TV footage, and invites the reader, who is already a witness to this event, to also see it from the personal point of view of a victim. The dynamic of the poem, with the persistent address to 'you' and its question 'Are your eyes believing', implicates the reader in this man's fate and also the larger situation of how this impinges on all of our lives.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *First person and present continuous tense* used to give a pressing sense of urgency. The immediacy of the event is heightened by the insistent repetition of the present participles.
- *Use of different types of line* for various effects. In the final stanza all lines are end stopped indicating finality, that he has reached the end. In contrast other verses use enjambment, to disorientating effect, suggesting the enormity of the situation – both the dizzying height, the scale of the event and facing up to death. Caesuras are also used to powerful effect: 'The depth is appalling. Appalling' highlights the terror of the situation.
- *Use of repetition*, of verb forms and particular words and sounds to emphasise ideas and situations, asks the reader to contemplate the speaker's situation, to look twice, not turn away.
- *Use of questions* throughout makes the reader ask why. What has caused this? Why does mankind behave like this? What is our own role and response to this? Has conflict become a media spectacle for entertainment – the intention of the terrorists?

Targeting C

Consider the meaning of the title. How does this add to the meaning of the poem?

Targeting A/A*

Does the poem succeed? Do the domestic images, for instance in the third stanza, help us to understand? Do they accuse the reader of naïvety?

Compares with...

'The Right Word' – perpetrators of terrorism versus consequences

'Bayonet Charge' – first person, dramatic monologue and experience of conflict

'Belfast Confetti' – first person and civilian victim of terrorism

Mametz Wood

Owen Sheers

Background and Context

In 'Mametz Wood', Owen Sheers (1974–) uses powerful imagery to explore his response to the unearthing of a World War 1 war grave in which twenty men had been buried with their arms interlinked. The poem was published in 2005, so is reflecting on that conflict almost 100 years later, and encourages the reader to consider the loss of men in war since then.

Mametz Wood was an encounter in the Battle of the Somme, which took place from July to November 1916. The 38th (Welsh) Division were ordered to take the wood, which was heavily fortified by the Germans. The wood was eventually captured after six days of fighting, with over 4000 men killed and injured.

Mametz Wood

<i>Begins in the past tense</i>	For years afterwards the farmers found them – the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades	<i>Dash signals a pause for impact before revealing who 'them' refers to</i>
<i>Suggests need for healing</i>	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,	<i>Alliteration and consonance highlight metaphors for fragility</i>
<i>Links past with present</i>	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.	
<i>Second use of 'now'; poem shifts to present tense, and the significance of WW1 today</i>	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.	<i>Personifies the earth, making it a watchful guardian</i> <i>Importance of not forgetting</i>
<i>Insistent reminder of the present</i>	This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave, a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm, their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre	<i>Ironic simile, literally a foreign body (see also Brooke's 'The Soldier')</i>
<i>Shocking and poignant that the boots are more durable than the men</i>	in boots that outlasted them, their socketed heads tilted back at an angle	<i>Shocking image for the skulls</i>
<i>Grotesque / disturbing aside, hints at lack of voice</i>	and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.	
<i>Poet offers his interpretation of what is being described</i>	As if the notes they had sung have only now, with this unearthing,	<i>Musical image rather jarring</i>
<i>Implies the message could be easily missed</i>	slipped from their absent tongues.	<i>Repetition of 'now' again, asks what this means for us</i> <i>Final powerful image of loss</i>

Themes and Ideas (A01)

'Mametz Wood' offers a modern perspective on a conflict powerfully chronicled in poetry, reflecting on how this haunts us almost a century later. Sheers makes his view clear in the opening stanza, calling the soldiers 'the wasted young', and shows the brutality of war not through the horror of combat, but as the earth gives up the broken bodies. The central images of death are shocking and horrific, in the unnatural angle of their eyeless skulls and their missing jaws, evoking sadness and anger.

Sheers develops an idea of the land being wounded and in need of healing, suggesting war is a crime against nature and the earth suffers. Later the earth is personified as a 'sentinel' watching and reminding us of what we have done. Although the fighting is briefly alluded to in Stanza 3, the poem then shifts to the present tense, implying the consequences echo down the years. The poem asks us about the meaning of war now – what message are these skeletons, with their missing jaws and 'absent tongues' trying to give us? Ultimately, the poem is not just about WW1, but also all the deaths in war since. It seems to ask whether we have learnt anything, and was their sacrifice worthwhile?

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Imagery* The fragility of the archaeological metaphors used to describe the bones of the soldiers implies the frailty of these same men in battle. The 'relic' of a finger perhaps hints at a kind of sainthood. Other images hint at the innocence of the men – 'where they were told to walk, not run' is more reminiscent of school than the army, and the 'nesting' machine guns have cruelly usurped the birds that ought to be in the wood.
- *Change of tense* is used to bring the poem into the present, forcing the reader to consider what the discovery of these bodies means today. The repetition of 'now' continues this and asks what the relevance of these deaths is to us. Their 'absent tongues' seem to be asking why we are still fighting.
- *Image of skeletons and juxtaposition of images* of life against those of death ('linked arm in arm', the 'socketed heads tilted back at an angle') simultaneously evoke ideas of laughter, camaraderie and violent death; 'sung', 'absent tongues' and 'dance-macabre' heighten the sense of energy and life, the tragedy of loss and the waste of life.

Targeting C

Explore the effect of the metaphors, highlighted by alliteration, in the second stanza, identifying as many connections between the two parts as possible.

Targeting A/A*

Sheers personifies the earth. What messages is the earth giving us through its actions in the poem?

Compares with...

'Poppies' – contemporary poem, mourning loss
 'Futility' and 'The Falling Leaves' – World War 1, death and loss

The Yellow Palm

Robert Minhinnick

Background and Context

Minhinnick (1952–) chooses a loose ballad form to lyrically recount a journey through Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, and to show the impact of conflict on the city and its people. 'The Yellow Palm' was published in 2008.

Under Saddam Hussein there were many human rights abuses within the country, notably against the Kurds. From 1980 to 1988 Iraq was at war with its neighbour Iran. In 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait, which led to the Gulf War. Most recently, in 2003, an American-led coalition, including British forces, invaded. Minhinnick is a Welsh poet who visited the city in 1998 while making a film. During his visit he was told about the many varieties of palm trees in the city and their importance for food and shade. He was also told how the palm trees had suffered from pollution and warfare.

Exploring the Poem

GLOSSARY

dinars – the Iraqi currency

muezzin – man who calls worshippers to prayer

salaam – Arabic for peace, also used as a greeting

Stanza 1

- 1 Reference to 'Palestine Street', in Baghdad, sets scene
- 2 'funeral' – first image introduces death and its accompanying grief to the poem.
- 6 'poison gas' – gives an echo of other conflicts (WW1, gas chambers, gassing of Kurdish people in Iraq). No blame is attached, we are just given an objective presentation of grief

Stanza 2

- 10–12 'faithful' – the focus in this stanza is on the devout nature of the city's inhabitants, which is corroded by warfare. Witness the 'despair' of the muezzin, and the supposed sanctuary of the mosque being defiled by bloodshed

Stanza 3

- 14 'blind beggars' – even the soldiers are presented as victims
- 17 'salutes were those of the Imperial Guard' – act of generosity rewarded with threatening gesture
- 18 'Mother of all Wars' – recalls Saddam Hussein's threat to America if they invaded Iraq in the Gulf War

Stanza 4

- No people in this stanza, just a sensual description of the city with the smell of the river
- 23 'barbarian' – personification, the city is under attack from the sun
- 24 'armistice' – hint of irony, that the city is supposedly living in peace, which the sun doesn't respect

Stanza 5

27 'a slow and silver caravan' – a metaphor for the missile
 29–30 'child turned up his face / and blessed it with a smile' – deliberate image of innocence, with cruel irony in the fact that the child 'blessed' the apparently magical flying bomb with a 'smile', emphasising these are peaceful and innocent people

Stanza 6

Begins by celebrating the beauty and bounty of the city; ends in chilling ambiguity, suggesting the alternative paths for the future of Baghdad

Themes and Ideas (A01)

The ballad form, with its simple language and frequently tragic theme, is well suited to presenting a view of the city, and its people, crumbling under almost constant conflict. The simplicity of the form, with its repeated refrain at the start of each stanza (frequent in ballads), has a quietly powerful impact.

There are six vignettes of life in the city which accumulate to show the slow destruction of the city, made more poignant by the glimpses of beauty and peace that appear throughout: in Stanza 1, women with beautiful lilacs mourn the death of a man; in other stanzas the peace of prayer and cultural heritage of the 'golden mosque' are despoiled with blood, the blind beggars are ghosts of war and a Cruise missile entrances a child.

All this in a city where the sense of assault is so pervasive that even the 'barbarian sun' seems to be attacking them. The rich imagery of the final stanza is undermined by the ambiguity of the final lines: is the child reaching for the dates or the Cruise missile, and does the child receive the 'fruit' of the tree or the 'fruit' of the weapon? Minninnick leaves that decision to the reader, but the innocence symbolised by the child appears to be being destroyed through conflict.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- **Structure** The poem is a loosely-formed ballad of six-line stanzas rather than four, alternating longer and shorter iambic lines, and an *abcdbd* rhyme scheme. The choice of this simple and traditional form is reassuring, helps to make the content accessible, perhaps even make a foreign city and culture familiar, and allows time to reflect on the disturbing content and imagery.
- **Sensual imagery** – look carefully at the verbs showing what the poet does. This suggests a place full of colour, life and movement, and a tangible tension with the destruction and devastation which is also there.
- **Ambiguity** Minninnick presents the reader with many contradictory details. In Stanza 4, the smell of the Tigris 'lifts' the air, then 'down ... fell the barbarian sun'. In Stanza 3, the act of giving is rewarded with a military salute. Is the city rising or falling, or is its future perhaps in the balance?

Targeting C

The poem is full of colour. What impression do the colours give of the city?

Targeting A/A*

Consider the voice of the speaker and the tone it gives the poem. How does this contribute to the impact of the poem?

Is this an optimistic or a pessimistic poem? Find evidence for either interpretation of the poem.

Compares with...

- 'Belfast Confetti' – city/civilians under attack
- 'Come On, Come Back' – sadness and loss of innocence
- 'At the Border, 1979' – civilians and Iraq

The Right Word

Imtiaz Dharker

Background and Context

In 'The Right Word' Imtiaz Dharker (1954–) uses the subtleties and connotations of language to explore perceptions and values, and challenge how we see and define our world. Born in Pakistan, Dharker was brought up in Glasgow and now lives in London, Wales and India. As such she belongs to many communities and has been said to see things from an outsider's perspective. The poem, published in 2006, is one of ideas; it calls to mind Peter Ustinov's aphorism: 'Terrorism is the war of the poor and war is the terrorism of the rich'.

Separate, apart, different

A pejorative term suggestive of imminent danger

Darkness and gloom, sense of things hidden, but also not seeing clearly

Present tense; this is happening now

The poet's voice, a question – full of doubt

Someone who doesn't belong to an authorised military organisation, but who is aggressively defending their cause

Metaphor, alliteration, assonance: suggests shifting, moving, but also a sense of being used to stake territory; asks a question – do words clarify or lend a spurious authority?

A plea but ambiguous, both as a poet and in the face of all these dangers

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.

Ironic and devastating for a poet; also hints at our fear of the 'martyr'

Begins to mellow the term, as moves to a more unifying view

Vulnerability, fear

The poet begins to make a connection

A different perception – innocent

Addresses reader directly, and starts to find some resolution

Repetition of 'too', and change of meaning this third time

Involves the reader, asking a difficult question: can we recognise something in the 'terrorist'?

'in' repeated, inclusive, and contrast to earlier 'outside'

Respectful, in the end there is no danger; are perceptions the most dangerous things?

Themes and Ideas (A01)

Dharker's poem explores the meaning and value of the labels we conveniently give to things, and reflects on the nature of writing and communication. The irony of the title is that there is no 'right word' and the poem considers the power of language to represent and even cause conflict by defining people and positions by our terms rather than understanding their views. As such it is about ideological conflict as much as physical conflict, with competing parties holding different interpretations of the same event.

Beginning with the word 'terrorist', a very loaded term in today's world – and the word she wishes to analyse – Dharker offers a number of alternatives to undermine glib assumptions that this might be 'the right word', or indeed the only word available. The title, initially a confident statement, becomes tentative and questioning, and by the end of the poem Dharker offers a different way of seeing the world. The terrorist is introduced 'Outside the door, / lurking in the shadows', a concrete and an ambiguous place which suggests the threat of terrorism that hangs over society today.

Dharker challenges that description, and offers various others ('freedom-fighter', 'guerrilla warrior', 'martyr') which encourage the reader to reflect on the use of terms that label and stereotype people and can deny more thoughtful attempts at understanding. Towards the end of the poem Dharker offers more personal, but also indisputable, names for the person 'Outside the door' – 'child', 'boy' and 'son'. These are inclusive rather than divisive terms, which stress relationships and connections rather than fear and threat. She ends the poem on a positive note, inviting the person outside the door into the house where, treated with respect, he behaves with respect, taking off his shoes. Dharker is making a plea for us to be inclusive, to be understanding – in many ways it is the word 'outside' which is the problem.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure* The poem has an underlying structure of three-line stanzas, established in the opening stanza, which shows Dharker is focusing on a single idea. She breaks the pattern to emphasise her point – how hard it is to find a word to describe someone that all parties will find acceptable.
- *Repetition and contrast* of ideas allows words to accrue meaning. 'Outside', repeated insistently at the start of a number of lines and sentences, becomes threatening, and is contrasted with repetition of 'in' at the end of the poem, signifying a shift from problem to solution, from political to personal.
- *Second person* ('for you', 'your son') involves the reader in this debate. It is of relevance to us all and we all have a responsibility and potential to resolve problems rather than perpetuate them.

Targeting C

Examine the way Dharker uses adjectives and verbs to illustrate the connotations of the different labels, for example the freedom-fighter 'taking shelter', the martyr 'defying', 'stands'.

Targeting A/A*

Consider the poet's use and effect of metafiction (in this case the poet appearing in the poem to comment on the poem they are writing).

Compares with...

'Flag' – perceptions and definitions, use of structure to reinforce meaning

'At the Border, 1979' – perceptions and definitions

'Poppies' – women / mothers

At the Border, 1979

Choman Hardi

Background and Context

This autobiographical poem, published in 2004, recounts a childhood incident and uses the child's point of view to query the concept of borders and, in the context of the cluster, their capacity to cause conflict and anguish. Hardi was born in 1974 in Kurdistan, Iraq, and has experienced the vagaries and absurdities of borders. She came to England in 1993 as a refugee. She studied at Oxford, University College London and the University of Kent, and has done research on the impact of conflict and forced migration on the lives of Kurdish women. The border is deliberately unspecified in the poem, but the incident occurred on the crossing from Iran into Iraq.

Exploring the Poem

Title

The date suggests a real event but doesn't tell us what it is, nor where the border is

Stanza 1

1 'It is your last check-in point in this country!' – the poem opens with direct speech, suggesting the excitement of moving from one country to another, and the common belief that simple things will be different in a different country

Stanza 2

4–5 'continued / divided' – identifies the central idea, with the enjambment accentuating the paradox and asking whether the other side of the border is similar or different
5 'thick iron chain' – significant image, strong and firm

Stanza 3

Contrasts the childish innocence of the sister with the officiousness of the guards, drawing attention to the absurdity of the border in reality

Stanza 4

11 '*We are going home.*' – direct speech and italics emphasises importance
12 'She said' – the mother's love of her home is clear, but the reported speech carries a hint of irony; the poet doesn't accept or present this at face value
12–14 Repetition of comparatives ('much cleaner', 'more beautiful', 'much kinder') has the effect of undermining the mother's message, exposing it as opinion and prejudice

Stanza 5

15 'rain' – undermines special excitement of returning home; in reality they are standing in the rain
16 'I can inhale home' – another absurdity, figuratively the reader can comprehend the meaning, but literally it is ridiculous; this ambiguity shows the oddity of the concept of border and the emotional heft of home

Stanza 6

20 'autumn soil continued' – the clear-sighted child compares the two sides and sees the lack of difference

Stanza 7

25 'the chain was removed' – finally the chain, the border, is removed
26–27 two concluding images are juxtaposed: a man kisses his 'muddy homeland' while the girl sees a different chain which 'encompassed all of us', uniting rather than dividing, and exposing the smallness of the iron chain national border

Themes and Ideas (A01)

Hardi's poem uses a child's innocent perspective to cast fresh eyes on the world and highlight the absurdities of both the behaviour of adults and the artificial nature of borders that are the cause of so much conflict. Recollections of a border crossing, subjective comments and more factual descriptions are juxtaposed to question the purpose and value of the border to which the adults attribute such significance and weight.

The poem plays with ideas of similarity and difference, continuity and division, asking whether it has any real physical meaning on the ground, or if it exists purely as a concept, something within people's minds. Finally the border, as an obstacle, is literally 'removed' so they can pass across it. Hardi ends the poem by seeing a different chain, the 'same chain of mountains' which exists on both sides of the border, and which holds everyone together rather than keeping them apart. Man's sketchy lines and chains are made to seem trivial in comparison.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Imagery* – The powerful image of the chain is effective: it literally represents and embodies the border, but also implies that people are enslaved by borders. At the end Hardi shows us that chains can be removed, the earlier 'thick iron chain' is shown to be impermanent, and the bigger, more powerful mountain chain is shown to hold people together rather than separating them.
- *Use of direct speech* – This allows Hardi to realistically present and challenge a range of views – these are all beliefs, just as the poet holds a belief. '*We are going home*' is *italicised*, emphasising the introduction of the concept of home, and possibly because it has been the mother's mantra.
- The *paradox* of the land that 'continued / divided' is emphasised by the use of *enjambment*, which forces the reader to reflect on what they are being told.

Targeting C

Consider how Hardi uses repetition to draw attention to central themes in the poem. Identify which words are repeated and the effect they have.

Targeting A/A*

The poet's voice questions the concept of home as a particular place, but look at other characters' voices in the poem. Consider how home is shown as important and the reasons why this is the case.

Compares with...

'Flag' – arbitrary and man-made things that can cause conflict

'next to of course god america i' – reflection on belonging and national identity

Belfast Confetti

Ciaran Carson

Background and Context

'Belfast Confetti', published in 1990, uses a striking extended metaphor to explore the impact of living in a city in conflict. Carson was born in Belfast in 1948, and embodies many of the divisions of that city: his first language is Irish but he writes in English; his first name is Catholic (as he is) but his surname is Protestant.

In this poem he is writing about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles were the period from the late 60s to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, when competing ideologies, mainly Catholic nationalists seeking independence from Great Britain, and Protestant unionists wanting to maintain a link with Great Britain, fought both politically and on the ground. British troops were used to help keep the peace but they were a symbol of repression to the Republicans, provoking much conflict. The riot squad in the poem are presumably from the British armed forces.

Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland and was the scene of frequent bombings and bloodshed. 'Belfast confetti' is a local term coined to describe the nuts and bolts with which home-made bombs were filled as shrapnel.

Belfast Confetti

<i>Abrupt opening – like the explosion</i>	Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation marks,	<i>Introduces punctuation metaphor and, literally, typesetting metal used in bomb</i>
<i>Enjambment throughout poem suggestive of disjointed nature of life in city in conflict</i>	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>Ellipsis used illustratively, suggesting gunfire</i>
<i>Feeling of being trapped</i>	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>His unclear orders were responsible for the Charge of the Light Brigade</i>
<i>Metaphor for Belfast; ironic that he knows the place so well but feels lost</i>	I know this labyrinth so well – Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street –	<i>List of streets, also references to battles in Crimean War, siege of Odessa – a reminder of British colonial history, seeking territory</i>
<i>Asks himself a question</i>	Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end again.	<i>Interrogation, everyone under suspicion</i>
<i>List: Saracen – armoured personnel carrier; mesh for windscreen; body armour – used by British forces</i>	A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies. What is	
<i>He feels under attack ... but from the bomb or the people policing the streets?</i>	My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question marks.	<i>Interrogation, everyone under suspicion</i>

Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poem brings together a public event and a personal response to show how conflict affects the individual: an explosion in Belfast with the armed forces' response to it, and the speaker's own response as the explosion interrupts his thoughts and, in a broader sense, his life. These two aspects of the poem are united in the extended metaphor of punctuation that runs throughout. The bombs and explosions interrupt or punctuate Northern Irish life and the speaker's thoughts are interrupted and halted, just as punctuation can interrupt a sentence. Punctuation also organises writing, so can suggest authority's attempts to control the city – marking where the explosions happen on a map and closing in.

There is the idea that, as peace has been disrupted, so has language and communication in 'A fount of broken type'. The central punctuation metaphor is also very neutral, carrying more visual than connotative meaning and leaving the tone of the poem ambivalent. There is evidence of the speaker's feelings of shock, as 'Suddenly' the poem abruptly begins; irritation and frustration ('I was trying to complete a sentence') as the explosion makes life difficult for him and everyone in Northern Ireland; and an element of anger and uncertainty in the series of questions at the end which are voiced by and to the speaker, but also indicate his concern about Belfast's future.

What is notably absent from the poem is outright condemnation of the explosion or a focus on casualties – life here is made to seem difficult and frightening but not impossible.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Metaphor* The punctuation metaphor plays with the shape of the marks, the 'exclamation marks' suggestive of the flight and piece of shrapnel, alongside the screams and shouts of shock and surprise they conventionally indicate. The 'asterisk' hints at an explosion, with lines exploding out of its centre. The hyphenated line and ellipsis are comic book incarnations of gunfire...
- *Punctuation creates increasingly short sentences* within the long lines as the poem continues and roads are blocked off following the explosion, giving a sense of entrapment.
- *Lists* are used to suggest a blur of impressions and perhaps the chaos after the incident. The street names are allusions to past wars and the images of the British armed forces give a sense of alienation and paranoia in the unfamiliar language of military equipment.

Targeting C

The poem uses lots of enjambment: what is the effect of this? How does it relate to the events and feelings of the poem?

Targeting A/A*

Consider how Carson uses questions. Compare the question he asks himself with the questions he has been asked and repeats, putting them into the first person. What is the effect of this? Look at the questions literally and metaphorically.

Compares with...

'Out of the Blue' – civilian's experience, impact of conflict / terrorism

'The Yellow Palm' – impact of conflict on city and its people

Poppies

Jane Weir

Background and Context

'Poppies' is a poem of dense imagery which portrays a mother's feelings towards her son, and more broadly the devastating consequences of conflict beyond the battlefield. Jane Weir (1963–) has two sons and lives in Derbyshire. She is a textile designer, and has drawn on this knowledge for much of the imagery of the poem. 'Poppies' was commissioned by Carol Ann Duffy, as Poet Laureate, to appear in a collection of contemporary war poetry in *The Guardian* in 2009.

Poppies

<i>The poem focuses on specific, but unnamed victims</i>	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,	<i>Military image intrudes upon recollection</i>
<i>Hints at pain</i>	spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade of yellow bias binding around your blazer.	
<i>Mundane incidents of family life, with hint of wound and pain in 'bandage'</i>	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	<i>Alliteration highlights mother hiding her emotions</i>
<i>Playfulness of the rhyme, carefree (Eskimos traditionally rub noses in greeting)</i>	of my face. I wanted to graze my nose across the tip of your nose, play at being Eskimos like we did when	<i>Only use of 'we'; elsewhere a very separate 'I' and 'you'</i>
<i>Metaphor, the process of felt making, applied to her crushed, compacted and intense feelings</i>	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,	<i>Irony – usually it's the son/soldier who is brave – highlights the poet's focus on the mother and other victims</i>
<i>Enjambment emphasises imminent separation perhaps?</i>	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	<i>Sense of emotional release, tears from her heart; contrast with earlier restraint ('steemed', 'resisted')</i>
<i>Image of departure from home and also abruptness of death</i>	and you were away, intoxicated. After you'd gone I went into your bedroom, released a song bird from its cage.	
<i>Suggestive of graveyard</i>	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.	<i>Another military image highlighting mother's vulnerability</i>

Simile, the shape leant against memorial, also perhaps two halves of wishbone equate to mother and son

On reaching the top of the hill I traced the inscriptions on the war memorial, **leaned against it like a wishbone.**

Another sensory image, also seeking

The dove pulled freely against the sky, **an ornamental stitch.** I listened, hoping to hear

Metaphor of dove suggests peace would make world a better, more beautiful place

Innocent, seeking reassurance your playground voice catching on the wind.

Themes and Ideas (A01)

'Poppies' explores the relationship between mother and son from the mother's perspective, showing her overwhelming love and the anxiety she feels when he leaves. Weir places this bond in the context of war by framing the poem with images of conflict, and particularly fallen soldiers: 'Armistice Sunday', 'poppies' and 'the war memorial'. As a mother there are always leavings, from a son starting school to the devastating grief of losing a son in battle.

Images of parting occur throughout the poem ('you left', 'you'd gone'), becoming at the same time gentle euphemisms for death, made all the more poignant by the vibrancy and optimism of the imagery used to describe her son, and the irony that she cannot cling on to him when the world is 'overflowing like a treasure chest' full of excitement and experiences. 'Poppies' is a blur of images and sensations – of cherished memories and the lonely anxiety of the present. The mother conceals her feelings ('steeled the softening' and 'resisted'), only to be released later, 'a song bird from its cage', perhaps the relief of releasing trapped tears. It is this which leads her to thoughts of those whose sons have been killed and to the war memorial, exposed and vulnerable without her coat, and in her shared grief with other mothers. The dove metaphor 'an ornamental stitch' is ambiguous, perhaps suggesting peace would make the world more beautiful, or possibly that peace is not important enough, a mere ornament. At the end, she listens, wanting the reassurance of hearing her own son's innocent voice, in a poignant reminder that many mothers listen forlornly, never to hear their son's voice again.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- **Imagery** – The poem is dense with imagery. Textiles feature strongly, with the central metaphor of felt, indicative of the woman's compressed, compacted feelings. The 'tucks, darts, pleats' hint at the swooping, gut-wrenching lurch of her emotions and link with the 'ornamental stitch' at the end – it is also, perhaps, an umbilical image connecting mother and son.
- **Juxtaposition** – Weir juxtaposes military images with domestic ones, the incongruity of 'blockade' and 'blazer', with its connotations of school uniform, hints at the intrusion of war into her life; 'without a winter coat or reinforcements' suggests how vulnerable she feels.
- **Tone** – The poem is an elegy. Much of its sad, despairing tone derives from the past tense, which highlights the sense of loss, and the use of the first person throughout pushes the reader into seeing the mother as a victim of warfare as well as the child.

Targeting C

What do the glimpses of domestic life in the second stanza suggest about a mother's relationship with her child?

Targeting A/A*

Consider how Weir uses symbolism to convey large concepts in the poem – 'poppies' and 'dove'. Is there a specifically female perspective on war? Compare the presentation of war and its consequences with some of the poems by men in the cluster.

Compares with...

'The Falling Leaves' – female perspective and domestic response to war
 'The Right Word' – a mother's view
 'Futility' – death and the loss of a carefully nurtured life

Futility

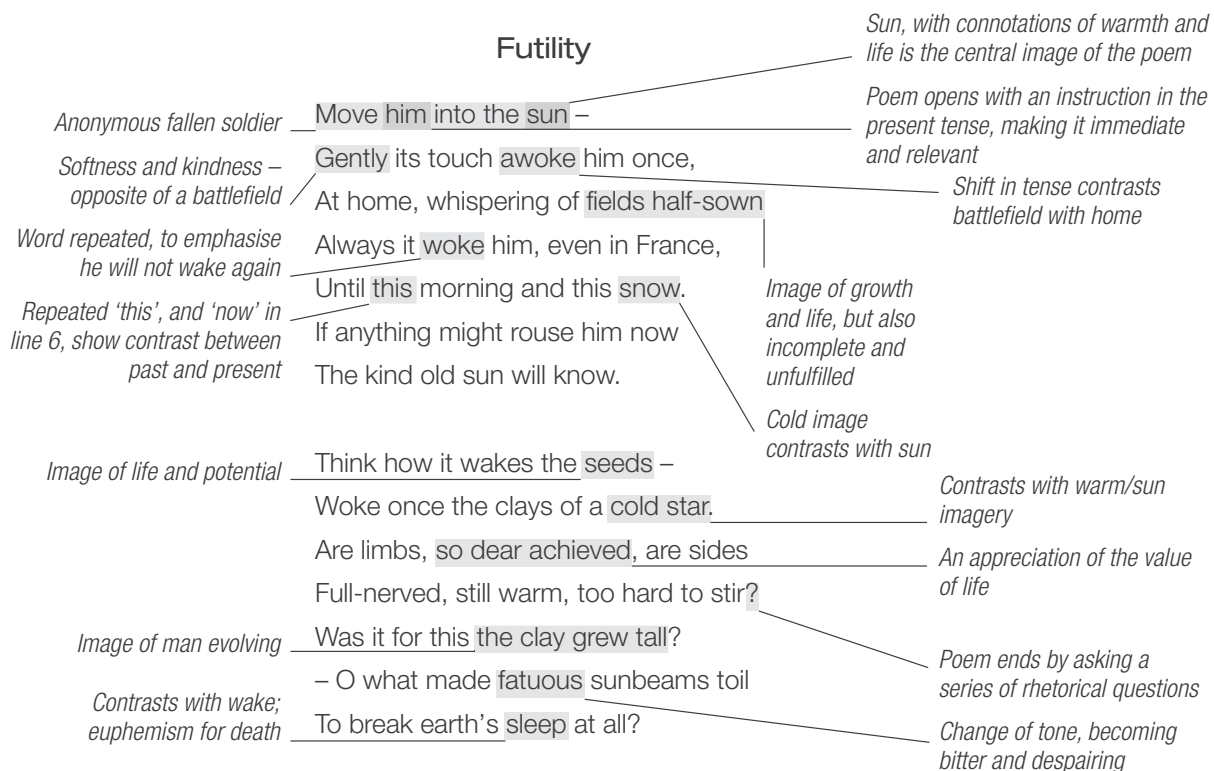
Wilfred Owen

Background and Context

'Futility' is a lyric poem published in 1918, expressing the thoughts and feelings of the speaker in a deeply personal way. Owen uses the sun as a central metaphor to express his grief for a fallen comrade and his despair at the pointlessness of war.

Owen is the best known of all the war poets to emerge from the First World War. He enlisted in the army in 1915, aged 22, and was sent to fight in France. Suffering from shell shock after being blown through the air and landing on the dead body of another soldier, he returned to Britain to convalesce and met Siegfried Sassoon, who influenced his view of war and helped him with his poetry. Owen returned to the front line in 1918 and was killed a week before the end of the war. Owen's mother received the telegram informing her of her son's death as the church bells were ringing to announce the end of the war.

Wilfred Owen was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery in action. His aim in his poetry was to show the reality and horror of war – in his words, the 'Pity of War'. 'Futility' was one of just five of his poems to be published in his lifetime.



Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poet's view of the 'conflict' of war is clearly and bitterly stated in the title, alongside the bitterly ironic sense that all growth and life is futile as it is so quickly ended. The poem itself – despite its apparent simplicity – has a rich texture and a subtlety of mood and tone which make its message very moving and powerful, rather than blunt and heavy handed.

Within a formal structure the poet begins by speaking directly to the soldiers, telling them to move a fallen colleague into the sun. It is an act of kindness and doomed hope (in a brutal, unforgiving place) that the sun, which can make seeds grow with its benign power, may have the same benevolent effect on the wounded man. This same sun brought life to our dead planet; if it had such power surely it can do so again.

Owen then asks a series of questions, which grow larger in scope and bitterness, ending with him angrily dismissing the 'fatuous sunbeams'. The conclusion is one of despair at the situation he is in, and dismay as he reflects on the pointlessness of war and of life itself, if human beings create situations like this.

In its simple language and imagery, 'Futility' is an eloquent lament for the loss of a colleague, and opens a door to a much larger reflection on the loss of humanity.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Rhyme* – Owen uses pararhyme (half rhyme) throughout the poem: 'sun/sown', 'once/France', 'snow/now/know'. These deliberately imperfect rhymes give a suitably disconcerting tone to the poem, contributing to the poet's belief that something is wrong.
- *Rhetorical questions* – The use of these in Stanza 2 indicates a sense of confusion and puzzlement – seeking some kind of understanding, and also challenging the whole concept of war.
- *Imagery* – This is simple and powerful. The sun is a warm, positive, life-giving force; one which literally brought life to earth: 'Woke once the clays of a cold star'. It is also personified as 'kind', something that is there to nurture and support, and wise ('will know'). Against this background, the act of war and killing is made to seem ridiculous. The 'fatuous sunbeams' are almost blamed at the end for ultimately bringing all this pain and suffering to earth, by bringing it to life.

Targeting C

Look at the effect of repetition and contrast in the poem. How does Owen highlight the tension between the desire for life and the presence of death, and the pain this brings.

Targeting A/A*

Think about what *isn't* said here. Owen was on the frontline, but 'Futility' is about grief and loss, not about explicit violence and horror. Does this make the poem more or less effective? Compare it with some of Owen's other war poems.

Compares with...

'The Falling Leaves' – WW1, death and grief

'Mametz Wood' – WW1, soldiers and death

'Poppies' – mourning and loss

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Alfred Tennyson

Background and Context

In this famous poem published in 1854, Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) recounts the story of a brave but suicidal charge made by the Light Brigade in the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War (1853–1856). Indeed, it is the poem that has immortalised the incident. Lord Cardigan, acting on instructions, led 673 cavalrymen in an attack on a valley. The entrance to the valley was overlooked on either side by batteries of guns and there were more guns at the far end. In minutes, 247 men were killed or injured. The Charge became known for the recklessness of the commanders in sending the men to their deaths.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

<p><i>Repetition and powerful dactylic rhythm emphasise movement and energy</i></p> <p><i>Direct speech – the order</i></p> <p><i>Capitalisation personifies death and repetition intensifies image, and courage of the men</i></p> <p><i>Rhetorical question implies unequivocal bravery</i></p> <p><i>Elision maintains rhythm</i></p> <p><i>Anaphora emphasises their role</i></p> <p><i>Allusion to psalm ('the valley of the shadow of death') where faith instills courage in the face of death</i></p> <p><i>Anaphora suggests being surrounded</i></p> <p><i>Assonance and alliteration evoke noise of battlefield</i></p> <p><i>Aggressive personification – threatening and dangerous</i></p> <p><i>Refrain suggests unflinching nature of soldiers</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p>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.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p>'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.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p>Cannon to right of them, Cannon to left of them, Cannon in front of them Volley'd and thunder'd; Stormed at with shot and shell, Boldly they rode and well, Into the jaws of Death, Into the mouth of Hell Rode the six hundred.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p>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.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5</p> <p>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.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">6</p> <p>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!</p>	<p><i>Onomatopoeic, suggesting speed</i></p> <p><i>Change of tone</i></p> <p><i>Repetition of 'not', and variation of final line, highlight the sacrifice made</i></p> <p><i>Echoes Stanza 2 but now in retreat</i></p> <p><i>Alliteration draws attention to the fact that soldiers are now referred to as heroes</i></p> <p><i>Repetition of 'left' and variation again highlight sacrifice</i></p> <p><i>Rhetorical question – Tennyson bestows glory on them</i></p> <p><i>Repetition of this line from Stanza 4 draws attention to ambiguity: at the men's courage, at why the charge took place</i></p> <p><i>Final line is an epitaph for the men.</i></p>
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Themes and Ideas (A01)

Tennyson's memorable poem celebrates the courage of men in battle, while quietly criticising their commanders. He recounts the story of the Charge in six irregular stanzas. More importantly, he seeks to recreate the intensity of the charge through his unrestrained use of poetic devices, particularly the driving rhythm of the verse, echoing the thunder of the horse's hooves as they hurtle towards the 'valley of Death'.

The first stanza is full of irresistible movement and energy ('onward', 'forward'), as they charge towards battle. In the next stanza Tennyson reflects on the stoic character of the soldiers, acknowledging the soldiers' sense of duty and discipline: 'Theirs but to do and die'. This stiff upper lip was a Victorian virtue, but one which makes for difficult reading nowadays.

The men are always referred to collectively ('theirs', 'the six hundred') and it is perhaps this that makes the poem so different to others in the cluster. Tennyson sees a glory in war, in collective action and noble aspirations; he shows the attack and the fighting, not the individual, the private fear, the casualties and corpses. Together, the brigade come under fire in the third stanza, engage the enemy in the fourth, and those that survive retreat from the valley in the fifth, no longer 'soldier[s]', but now 'hero[es]'. The final, shorter stanza reads as an epitaph for the Light Brigade, lauding them with plaudits: 'glory', 'honour', 'noble'. Even the punctuation in the final stanza, particularly the exclamation marks, suggests glory rather than disaster.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Rhythm* – This gives the poem its energy, recreating the surge of the cavalry charge. The poem has a dactylic meter, a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables – the line falling away can be seen to suggest the fall of the men.
- *Anaphora* – There is much use of anaphora, the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of lines, both to emphasise ideas ('Theirs not to') and to evoke the battle ('Cannon to' suggests the guns all around them). Each stanza ends with a variation on the phrase 'six hundred', powerfully emphasising the sacrifice made and the transformation into 'noble' heroes.
- *Personification* – Tennyson personifies Death, capitalising it, ('valley of Death', 'jaws of Death') and making it the enemy, which heightens the bravery of the men.

Targeting C

Identify techniques Tennyson uses to suggest the action and movement of the battlefield. Find examples of alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia.

Targeting A/A*

To what extent does the poem suggest reservations about the Charge? Consider the ambiguity of the repeated line 'All the world wonder'd', and 'wild charge' in the final stanza. At one point Tennyson removed the line 'Some one had blunder'd' and had to be persuaded to put it back into the poem.

Compares with...

'Bayonet Charge' – account of battle and experience of the battlefield

'Futility' – death in battle: noble or futile?

'Come On, Come Back' – contrasting tone in the aftermath of battle

Bayonet Charge

Ted Hughes

Background and Context

Ted Hughes was born in 1930 and died in 1998. 'Bayonet Charge' comes from his first collection *Hawk in the Rain*, which established him as a poet with a unique voice. Hughes' father was a soldier in World War 1, one of just 17 men in his regiment to survive Gallipoli, and his memories of this event had a profound impression on his family and childhood. Hughes has written of World War 1 as the 'big, ever-present, overshadowing thing', and early in his writing wrote many poems about it. 'Bayonet Charge', published in 1957, imagines a soldier's experience in battle.

See page 267 for more on Gallipoli

Exploring the Poem

Stanza 1

- 1 'Suddenly' – abrupt beginning with the speaker's sudden realisation of where he is and what he is doing – in the midst of a terrifying, life threatening charge
- 2 'In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy' – warfare presented as an uncomfortable, unnatural, visceral thing
- 3 'Stumbling' – movements are clumsy
- 6 'rifle numb as a smashed arm' – violent and brutal image, showing war as an unnatural thing and ironically suggesting weapon is useless
- 7–8 'patriotic tear' – stanza ends indicating the motive that brought him to war, but the delicate 'patriotic tear' has transformed into a knot of 'molten iron', a burning, abject terror at the heart of his being

Stanza 2

- 9–11 continues the breathless dash of the first sentence, mirroring the charge, to end with a question asking what has brought him here, 'the hand pointing that second?'
- 12–15 'like / Statuary' – freeze frame contrasts with other stanzas, in its stillness; also the calm, quiet nature of the similes; caesura creates pause giving time for both the soldier and the reader to ask why he is there and highlighting the return to the chaos of the battlefield, where even the earth is under attack ('shot slashed furrows')

Stanza 3

- 16 'Threw up a yellow hare' – the appearance of a scared and injured hare alerts the soldier to the terrifying exposure of his situation and he continues his charge
- 20–21 'King, honour, human dignity, etcetera' – this list of noble motives for warfare and patriotism is sharply undermined by the addition of 'etcetera', exposing them as merely words, an idea reinforced by the simile 'Dropped like luxuries' – they are fine in theory, but useless encumbrances in the reality of war. Ultimately, the only thing which may save the soldier is his fear and instinct to escape the danger and horror of the battlefield

Themes and Ideas (A01)

Hughes' poem imagines the thoughts and feelings of an unnamed everyman soldier in battle, using muscular, physical imagery to bring the experience to life. He traces just a few moments of the soldier's desperate run.

He seeks to recreate both the traumatic physical nature of the bayonet charge and the extreme, almost paralysing, emotional intensity of fear boiling inside the soldier. The personal discomfort indicates that war is an awkward, unnatural thing to do, an idea heightened by the way the physical world is assaulted 'smacking the belly out of the air'. Alongside the absolute fear the soldier experiences are other subtler emotions such as 'bewilderment', and the simile 'Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs' suggests he is lost, lonely and vulnerable. Hughes also skewers mankind's supposed higher principles – patriotism, honour and dignity – as any pretence of nobility is stripped from the soldier when confronted with the terrifying reality of warfare.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Vocabulary choice* – Hughes uses onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance and the senses to bring the images to life. 'Stumbling across...' is an awkward line to read, evoking the sensation of running across a muddy field. 'Bullets smacking the belly' is a violent image emphasised by sound and alliteration. The assonance of 'lugged' and 'numb' draws attention to the simile and its meaning.
- *Metaphor* – The central clock metaphor asks why he is here, now – 'the hand pointing that second' – and why every soldier is in this situation. The individual soldier becomes insignificant, a tiny part of a much bigger machine, 'stars and nations', destiny and politics. The second stanza is a frozen moment – 'like / Statuary' – searching for a reason but finding none.
- *Imagery* – The poem is full of imagery: the injured hare, 'in a threshing circle' because it can't run, is an image of dying, and brings the soldier back to the charge as he sees his possible fate. The phrase 'its mouth wide / Open silent' suggests desperation, despair, pleading ... but it is silent, lost in the clamour of battle, the soldier's senses are numb and there is no assistance. It contrasts with the soldier's affirmatory 'yelling alarm' as his fear saves him.

Targeting C

Identify and examine the similes in the poem. How do the connections Hughes makes help to reveal the soldier's state of mind?

Targeting A/A*

Explore the values being examined in the poem. How does Hughes dismiss the conventional concepts used to justify and explain fighting for one's country?

Compares with...

'The Charge of the Light Brigade' – experience of conflict/battle

'Come On Come Back' – consequences of battle

'Flag' and 'next to of course god america i' – patriotism

The Falling Leaves

Margaret Postgate Cole

Background and Context

The First World War is familiar to us through the poetry of Owen, Sassoon and others; but here we get a very different voice. Margaret Postgate Cole (1893–1980) went to Girton College, Cambridge, where she was influenced by left-wing thinkers and renounced the Anglican faith of her upbringing for socialism. In the First World War she was an avowed pacifist (her brother was jailed as a conscientious objector). Later she whole-heartedly supported the Second World War. Not located at the actual front, 'The Falling Leaves' is perhaps gentler in its imagery than much war poetry, but no less moving in its sentiment. It was written in 1915.

The Falling Leaves
November 1915

Date and reference to 'Flemish clay' at the end are the only hints that this is a WW1 poem

This is happening now, adds urgency and relevance

A peaceful scene; it is an irony that this leads to thoughts of death, but perhaps stillness suggests death

Adverbs apply to leaves, snowflakes and soldiers

Picks up on earlier alliteration; contrast between energy of line 4 and decay of this line

Killed – a deliberate archaism? Does this shy away from the brutality of war?

Repeated simile here suggests soldiers will melt and disappear, be lost and forgotten

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.

Introduces first hint of death

Alliteration highlights quietness and tranquility

Violent phrase, particularly in the context of the poem, suggests obliteration

Simile suggests fragility and multitude

Acknowledges soldiers' bravery, but shown in abstract terms as a 'multitude'

Themes and Ideas (A01)

'The Falling Leaves' uses an extended metaphor, arising from the poet's own observations, to portray the consequences of war from afar. The poet sees leaves falling from a tree on a windless day and it is this image which triggers thoughts of soldiers falling in battle. The strength of the poem lies in the subtlety of its imagery. The scene is autumn, when all is fading and dying, setting an appropriate tone. On closer inspection the scene becomes unnatural: there is no wind, the leaves are just 'dropping', which implies the unnatural act of war. The leaves are compared to snowflakes, both small and fragile, which obscure the sun, clearly intended to suggest the sun at the height of its strength disappearing. There are also connotations of both the young men in battle disappearing and a sense of darkness descending upon the world in the midst of the Great War – and more personally on the lives of grieving families. Both images also imply the uncountable numbers of deaths and as such quietly condemn this senseless waste.

In the second half, where the metaphor is developed, Cole's thoughts run to the 'gallant multitude', an ambiguous phrase that embraces all soldiers, not just those on 'our' side. Their 'beauty' lies in their youth and innocence which is 'strewed' around, suggesting it has been carelessly discarded. The poem returns to the snowflake image, this time directly applied to the soldiers, as they fall to earth. The reader recalls the 'thickly, silently' falling leaves / snow earlier.

The poem is quite abstract in its treatment of conflict, particularly in comparison with others in the cluster. It is interesting to consider the effectiveness of its portrayal of conflict from this more oblique viewpoint.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure* – The poem is written in a single, long sentence, suggestive of the poet's developing train of thought. There is a turning point halfway through the poem marked by the semicolon at the end of line 6, where Cole moves from describing the scene before her to thoughts of the soldiers. This change is reflected in the new rhymes in the second half of the poem.
- *Imagery* – This is very evocative. Snowflakes appear twice, initially as a simile for the leaves, implying beauty, fragility and something transitory, and then as a simile for the falling soldiers. There is a sense of silence, the soldiers are unheard and unappreciated, and the feeling that they are disappearing, like snowflakes on soil. This is certainly the case for loved ones waiting at home.
- *Repetition* – Cole uses repetition to pursue ideas: 'no wind' the first time is descriptive of the unnatural leaf fall; the second time, used metaphorically, it refers to how the soldiers might naturally die, thereby highlighting their unnatural deaths.

Targeting C

Look at the vocabulary used in the poem and think about how this changes. Think about how and why the language becomes more complex.

Targeting A/A*

Look for patterns of words and sounds across the two parts of the poem. How do the images in the second part connect with those in the first part? How do these connections develop the themes of the poem?

Compares with...

'Poppies' – woman's perspective, loss and grief
 'Futility' – WW1, loss and grief, home versus 'at the front'

'Come On, Come Back'

Stevie Smith

Background and Context

Stevie Smith was born in 1902 and died in 1971. Many of her poems are melancholic and exhibit a preoccupation with death, perhaps due to her time in a TB sanatorium as a child. 'Come On, Come Back', with the heading 'Incident in a future war' presents as an imaginary war, but combined with specific references it considers no particular war – and all wars – through the story of Vaudevue.

Exploring the Poem

GLOSSARY

Memel Conference – site of an imagined conference to assess effectiveness of weapons. Memel is a town in Lithuania, which has been a disputed territory and was taken by Nazi forces, leading to an exodus of Jews.

Stanza 1

- 2 'Austerlitz' – site of a famous victory for Napoleon, linking past and future (from the heading) to suggest the poem is about all conflict
- 3 'girl soldier Vaudevue' sits on the battlefield, abandoned and alone, the name futuristic and gender surprising

Stanza 2

Vaudevue is a victim of 'M.L.5.' (a name suggestive of Zyklon B, the gas used in concentration camps). This unspecified weapon is cruelly efficient – 'first / Of all human exterminators' – the shocking image making it seem a cold killing machine. The effect of the weapon is to kill the memory, and with it all sense of identity and humanity

- 6 'Memel Conference' – reference heightens the suggestion of 20th century atrocities

Stanza 3

- 14 'rutted meadow' – Vaudevue embarks on a journey across a broken landscape to a lake, which is also a journey towards her death

Stanza 4

- 18 'as a child, an idiot, as one without memory' – the striking list of similes, all indicating innocence and a lack of self-awareness, show how war has diminished and destroyed her
- 19 'strips her uniform off' – removing her identity as a soldier, to plunge into the welcoming/threatening lake: it is both 'black' (line 24) and 'white' (line 22), 'adorable' (line 20) and 'ominous' (line 27)
- 20 'the icy waters' – offering oblivion

Stanza 5

The waters 'close above her head' and death has taken her in its 'icy-amorous embrace'. There is an ambiguity to death here, it is frightening, but also perhaps an escape from pain and suffering

Stanza 6

Meanwhile, an anonymous and distinctly unthreatening 'enemy sentinel' finds her clothes, and awaits her return

- 39 'Whittling a shepherd's pipe' – makes it an almost pastoral scene

Stanza 8

With his pipe he plays ‘the familiar tune’ – ‘Come on, come back’ – an imaginary song, popular with the troops, the sentiment of which is clear from the title

The final lines are in the past tense, emphasising Vaudevue has gone, and the final ‘Come on, come back’ is a forlorn call

Themes and Ideas (A01)

This elusive and elliptical narrative allows the reader to reflect on the aftermath of war and its impact on humanity in a new and surprising way. Vaudevue, the only soldier named in this cluster, gains the reader’s sympathy appearing lost and alone, and is revealed as the victim of an undefined weapon, ‘M.L.5.’, which has destroyed her memory. Vaudevue’s question ‘why am I here?’ resonates through the poem – there is no one there to answer her; but it is also an appeal to the reader and, more generally, humanity, although its meaning is ambiguous. Is it an existential plea? A rhetorical cry against war? An ironic suggestion that there must be a something or someone she is fighting for?

With no memory Vaudevue has no identity, and there is no indication of physical injury, so Smith seems to be exploring the damage war does to the mind and the soul.

At the end of the poem conflict is made to seem particularly futile. It is her enemy who mourns her loss and plays a lament for her, and the opposing troops are presented as similar rather than different – the song is ‘Favourite of all the troops of all the armies’. ‘Come on, come back’ can easily be understood as a universal sentiment of all those involved in conflict.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Imagery* – The image of the lake is the most developed and ambiguous part of the poem. Representing her mind and symbolising death, it is both welcoming and threatening; ‘adorable’ and ‘ominous’; a paradox apparent in the personification of its ‘icy-amorous embrace’. The blankness of her mind is frightening, but there is also something desirable in death, perhaps an escape from horror, pain and suffering.
- *Structure* – The poem is a simple narrative in free verse. The long sentences allow Smith to amass a number of ideas and images around the central figure and permit the reader to make connections and associations.
- *Repetition* is used to identify key ideas – ‘ominous’, ‘white moonlight’ the ‘embrace’ of the water – but leave them ambiguous. The reader must ascribe meaning to what is ominous.

Targeting C

Look at the contrast between harsh and gentle imagery in the poem. There appears to be a tension between the positive and negative. What reasons are there to see it as an optimistic or a pessimistic poem?

Targeting A/A*

What does the poem gain by being set ‘in a future war’?

How does the poem compare with ‘real’ war poems?

Compares with...

‘Out of the Blue’ – an imagined voice, a victim

‘Bayonet Charge’ – the soldier’s experience

next to of course god america i

E. E. Cummings

Background and Context

E. E. Cummings (1894–1962) was an American poet. In 1917 he enlisted in the Ambulance Corps and was sent to the war in Europe. After the end of the war the pull of France was great and he returned to Paris to mix with artists and thinkers of the modernist movement. Modernism sought to break with the past, finding new forms and ways to express the experience of living in an urban, technological and violent world. As part of the avant-garde, Cummings' poetry often eschews conventional syntax and punctuation. It is a myth, however, that Cummings wrote his name using lower case letters, although he did use a lower case *i* for his poetic persona. This poem was published in 1926.

Exploring the Poem

Most of the poem is a speech, perhaps being given by a politician, designed to appeal to an audience.

- 1 'of course' – an assumption suggesting blind, unthinking acceptance
- 2 'love you land of the pilgrims' – the speaker states his love for his country; this is a romantic reference to America, referring to its history, the Pilgrim Fathers who celebrated the first thanksgiving with native Americans; however the image is undermined by the common idiom 'and so forth', creating a blasé tone
- 2–3 'oh / say can you see by the dawn's early' – the incomplete first line of 'The Star-Spangled Banner'
- 3–4 'my / country 'tis of' – from another patriotic song, 'My Country 'Tis of Thee', again incomplete here, suggesting insincerity
- 7 'thy sons acclaim your glorious name' – the speaker personifies the country and praises it directly, giving it a character and identity. The speaker's message, however, is riddled with contradictions – 'every language even deafanddumb' suggests noise and silence, then the language that is given 'by gory, by jingo, by gee' is a series of meaningless expressions, mocking the speaker's patriotic platitudes
- 9–11 'what could be more beaut-/iful than...' – the word broken at the end of the line challenges its meaning, and although the question is formed as rhetorical, the answer is far from clear; despite the alliteration of 'heroic happy dead' and the courageous simile 'rushed like lions', the 'roaring slaughter' of war is defiantly not beautiful
- 12 'they did not stop to think' – an unwitting echo of 'Their's not to reason why' in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'
- 14 The final line is different, describing the speaker's actions, not words and using deliberate punctuation. Cummings makes the reader focus on the glass of water. Is the speaker rushing off stage, or perhaps trying to wash away his words?

Themes and Ideas (A01)

Cummings combines the old and the new, using a traditional sonnet form but forgoing conventional syntax, to write a poem exploring the nature of patriotism, out of which the reader has to tease meaning. What punctuation there is, is very significant: the first 13 lines are a speech – or at least what is recalled of a speech, because the meaning is undermined by the poet's rendering of the speaker's words.

The speechmaker's intention is patriotic: he declares his pride in his country and the brave men who fight for it. Cummings, however, gives a distorted version of the speech, using fragments of phrases, idioms and meaningless exclamations ('by gorry / by jingo'), to create an ironic perspective which challenges the original meaning, and forces the reader to question the patriotic values. The poem is full of rhetorical devices and patriotic allusions, but towards the end we begin to see these as empty words. The rhetorical power of phrases such as 'these heroic happy dead' ironically highlights the emptiness of the words as the alliteration leads us into the oxymoron 'happy dead'.

The speech ends in ambiguity: is 'they did not stop to think' criticism or praise? The speech has a final rhetorical question, claiming that liberty must be fought for. It is a claim many would agree with, but the speaker is a 'voice of liberty' and the reader is left feeling very uncomfortable with his sentiments.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Punctuation* – Speech marks crucially identify the speech, while the question mark could be for the final question or may be seen to question the whole speech. The unpunctuated rush of words maybe contributes to their meaninglessness, spewing out in a torrent rather than being considered. 'He spoke.' is a clear contrast, the full stop making the reader ask why there are none earlier.
- *The use of capitals* is provocative: 'america' and 'i' are not capitalised, while 'He' is. This puts the 'He' at the centre of the poem and prompts the reader to ask who he is: a politician? Should we trust him? Writing 'america' in lower case has been interpreted as unpatriotic.
- *Imagery* contrasts noise and silence: war is 'roaring slaughter'; the dead are silent. There is tension in the final line of the speech, too, between 'voice' and 'mute'. We are left wondering whether the speaker's is an important voice or empty noise.

Targeting C

Examine how Cummings creates a particular register (selecting particular emotive words and using particular devices) to help suggest who the speaker might be.

Targeting A/A*

Examine Cumming's attitude and intention in writing the poem. How far is the poem satirical? Does he acknowledge any important values?

Compares with...

'Bayonet Charge' – patriotism in theory and practice

'Flag' – patriotism, symbols and causes of conflict

Hawk Roosting

Ted Hughes

See pages 90 and 114 for more on Ted Hughes

Background and Context

The second poem by Ted Hughes in this cluster, 'Hawk Roosting', comes from the collection *Lupercal* (1960), and is one of his well-known animal poems. Hughes was recognised for his affinity with the natural world, and here he views the world through the eyes of a hawk. The hawk inhabits a cruel and brutal world, and many readers have drawn analogies with human nature. Interestingly, in the recent Iraq War, the Americans who promoted a military intervention in Iraq were called hawks.

Exploring the Poem

Stanza 1

- 1 'I sit in the top of the wood' – focus solely on the hawk's view of the world; it is from the hawk's perception of itself and the world that the reader draws an idea of the hawk's nature or character. The hawk is at the top of everything, where it believes it belongs
- 2 'no falsifying dream' – shows it is fully alive in a real world; there are no illusions or deceptions, the hawk does what is necessary to succeed
- 3 'Between my hooked head and hooked feet' – repetition highlights its cruel shape, its very appearance designed for dominance

Stanza 2

Everything is there for the benefit of the hawk – even the personified earth looks up to the bird, emphasising its strength and power

Stanza 3

- 10 capitalisation of 'Creation' turns the hawk into a godlike power, the ultimate product of all God's work
- 12 'I hold Creation in my foot' – now he commands everything, taking precedence over God

Stanza 4

- 13 'revolve it all slowly' – such is the hawk's arrogance, that from its perspective it turns and controls the world
- 14 'it is all mine' – arrogant attitude of ownership; the hawk believes this gives it the right to 'kill where I please'

From here on, the imagery becomes increasingly bloody and brutal ('tearing off heads', and in Stanza 5 'the allotment of death'). The hawk has ultimate authority, the power of life and death, and to retain that authority it mercilessly chooses death every time

Stanza 5

- 20 'No arguments assert my right' – perhaps the most significant line of the poem in terms of conflict. The hawk just is powerful, and draws pride and satisfaction from its unchallengeable position. It will do whatever has to be done to maintain that position, because it perceives that as its right. Such is the natural order of things ... which may apply to mankind, with his nations and empires, as much as it does to the hawk

Stanza 6

- 21 'The sun is behind me.' – again placing the hawk in a position of pre-eminence, literally and metaphorically – high in the sky with everything supporting it
- 21–24 This is a series of statements, emphasised in their authority by end stopped lines which pre-empt argument. Finally, the hawk takes command of time itself, in an assertion which may smack of hubris

Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poem is a dramatic monologue for which Hughes creates a very distinctive voice. The hawk is dominant, powerful, arrogant and cruel. Knowing it is the best and revelling in this knowledge, it opens with a confident 'I' and the bold declaration of its status.

There are two ways of interpreting this poem in terms of the cluster. One is that the hawk represents the natural order of life – the unseeing, unfeeling law of natural selection which states that the strongest will survive – and that this is an inescapable part of human nature as well. From this perspective the desire for power and dominance are primal instincts, essential for survival, but the cause of conflict in the animal and human worlds.

If humans are seen as analogous with the hawk, they have an arrogance that leads them to see themselves as the dominant species on the planet – they exploit the natural resources of the earth for their benefit, and they have assumed godlike powers; the allotment of death equating to mankind's wars. The final stanza then becomes a hopeless indictment of man, in a bleak view of existence.

Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Register* – Hughes uses a particular register to create the hawk's voice, mixing simple, direct language ('I sit in the top', 'tearing off heads') with much more sophisticated vocabulary ('The convenience of the high trees!', 'The allotment of death'). This combination implies both the brutality, in the straightforward physical words, and the authority, in the more conceptual presentation of ideas, of the hawk. Language can be used as a way to assert power.
- *Repetition of personal pronouns* ('I', 'me', 'my', 'mine') throughout the poem emphasises the hawk's arrogance and its self-centred view of the world. It also opens the way to an alternative interpretation where the pronouns are generic and can be applied to man.
- *The images and position* of the hawk highlight its power: above everything, and always in control. Everything centres on it – the hawk 'revolves' the world and the sun 'is behind'. Does this suggest the hawk casts a shadow?

Targeting C

The monologue focuses relentlessly on the hawk's point of view, giving its attitude or philosophy, but the reader doesn't have to accept this. How is the hawk's attitude right? How is the hawk's attitude wrong?

Targeting A/A*

Is the hawk infallible? Does it contradict itself in the opening stanza? Can the reader accept as true the statements in the final stanza?

Compares with...

'Hawk Roosting' is very different from other poems in the cluster, which generally are upset by conflict and seek to question it, whereas 'Hawk Roosting' perhaps tries to explain it. Consider what other poems say about human nature in comparison with 'Hawk Roosting'.

Conflict

Comparison Grid

	Battle / experience of conflict	Death and mourning	Soldiers	Civilians	Causes of conflict / symbols	Patriotism	Sadness and loss of innocence	Women's point of view	First person	Anti-war message
'At the Border, 1979'				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
'Bayonet Charge'	✓		✓							✓
'Belfast Confetti'	✓			✓					✓	
'The Charge of the Light Brigade'	✓	✓	✓			✓				
'Come On, Come Back'	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓
'The Falling Leaves'		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
'Flag'					✓	✓				✓
'Futility'		✓	✓				✓			✓
'Hawk Roosting'		✓			✓				✓	
'Mametz Wood'		✓	✓				✓			✓
'Next to of course god america i'		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
'Out of the Blue'	✓			✓					✓	
'Poppies'		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
'The Right Word'				✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
'The Yellow Palm'		✓		✓			✓		✓	✓