

'The troubles' and contemporary Irish poetry

English and history at GCSE and Key Stage 3

- A. Five contemporary Irish poems
- B. Tasks on individual poems
- C. Assignments on two or more poems



'A British Army Soldier
with a rifle and a radio'

Enemy Encounter by Padraic Fiacc

This poem is showing the two sides, how both the Irish and the British soldiers feel about each others' presence. The Irish are showing no fear but you can tell that there is some uncomfot. The soldiers feel the same uncomfot and they feel out of place here. This poem is sad because it is a shame that they can not do something to get on with each other as they both feel uncomfotable about each others' presence.



'A bomb shatters the silence of George Street,
sending clouds of dust down chimneys.' The Disturbance by Tony Curtis

My overall view of Ireland [from these poems] is that it is a very nice area and that the people are also very nice but because of the events that had taken place, attitudes have changed. Many blame peace keepers for the trouble and we know this from the above poems. The whole series of events that have taken place have been too much for many as it would be for me. I would not be able to settle down in Ireland and if I had to I would not feel safe.

A. Five contemporary Irish poems

These five poems of different levels of accessibility deal with ‘the troubles’ and have been selected (i) to help students develop an imaginative insight into recent events in Northern Ireland and (ii) to suggest a way of using scarce resources and time in schools by encouraging English and History teachers to work together in teaching key areas of the curriculum.

The poems have been successfully tested with GCSE and Key Stage 3 classes. They have enhanced understanding and enjoyment of poetry and offered some insight into the nature of the various conflicts and tensions that go to make up the modern ‘Irish question’.

1. Voices

Damien Quinn

Another bloody day has passed
and it’s reported
in shades of grey

as numerous as the dead,
too numerous to count.
The camera crews

are having a field day
filming green landscapes,
winter-dulled, windswept,

death-drabbed; and grey unprosperous
villages where black flags
slap the gables

of the waking homes;
Bandit Country, somebody
said

as if we were captured
in celluloid
just south of the Rio Grande.

Libelling us with labels or
slandering us with word-
sorcery. Tit-for-tat

tragedies earn them a living
but fools can flaunt
their failings

much too much,
make others believe.
Yet I’ve got

little else
to offer
but my words:

jejune at best,
inane at worst,
conceived in the mind’s

parish of lies.
Shaped by tribal traits,
stories of histories

hatching, parables and
prayers and the
knowledge of the wedge

hammered home centuries
ago by outsiders
to keep the peace,

to separate like from like,
to create separate voices
echoing in the wilderness.

2. Northern Haiku

Tony Curtis

- 1
On an Antrim bog
a wall divides the wet land,
planted in the past.
- 2
Under the grey sky
hills, woods, rivers, bogs, small fields -
Ulster unionists.
- 3
A bridge on the Foyle,
a soldier's gun trained on me-
teaching nothing new.
- 4
Car windows misted,
waiting for a face that wears
its religion out.
- 5
Shot twice in the head.
Once in each astonished eye.
History is blind.
- 6
The quick skedaddle.
Having killed, where do they go?
Four pints please, Paddy.
- 7
Over the dark Foyle
the bark of the kalashnikovs,
an old Derry air.
- 8
After the bombing
Maguire was in Malone's pub
and Madden's garden.
- 9
Billy on his horse.
Giddy-up the I.R.A.
Photo-fit finish.
- 10
Squaddies at check-points
dream of Newcastle Brown Ale:
drink rain, shit and hate.
- 11
The twelfth of July,
King Billy's supporters sit
supping their Guinness.
- 12
Punishment shooting -
pleads remorse and forgiveness.
Jeans gone at the knees.
- 13
Witches, have pity,
freeze the present 'til stragglers
catch up from the past.
- 14
Protestant prayers,
Popish prayers. Funerals.
We go the same way.
- 15
A man out ploughing,
in one field he furrows from
Ireland to England.
- 16
A field day for art,
poetry, painting, drama,
the siege of Derry.
- 17
A blackbird's sweet song
lost in the wildness of hills,
prayer for the dead.

3. Postcard from Fermanagh

Bill O'Keefe

Chopper clatter bursting
Through the treetops
Above the chalet clearing
At eggs and bacon breakfast

The scout, nosing the forest
The gunship, a hawk shadow

Good day, sir
Do you have any identification?
In a soft lilt,
In a battledress

Later, a red Orion
Disgorges a black SWAT squad

Island Enniskillen
Still fortified, enchants
We are coming back here
Next year - sooner, perhaps

Where else can peace be enjoyed
So much, as on a front line?

4. Enemy Encounter

Padraic Fiacc

Dumping (left over from the autumn)
Dead leaves, near a culvert
I come on
 a British Army Soldier
with a rifle and a radio
Perched hiding. He has red hair.

He is young enough to be my weenie
-bopper daughter's boyfriend.
He is like a lonely little winter robin.
We are that close to each other, I
Can nearly hear his heart beating.

I say something bland to make him grin,
But his glass eyes look past my side
- whiskers down
 the Shore Road Street.
I am an Irishman
 and he is afraid
That I have come to kill him

5. The Disturbance

Tony Curtis

A bomb shatters the silence of George Street,
sending clouds of dust down chimneys.
In seconds the dull thud dies away,
only a milk bottle rolling over the pavement
disturbs the silence with its circular sound -
Unshaven men in pyjamas stand like convicts
framed in the doorways of their cells,
or lean out windows like old farmers
on wooden gates, staring over concrete fields.
whose walls hold nothing in.
Women half dressed, still warm from sleep,
hold children's hands and let tired faces hang
like flowers withering after daylight or water.
While behind them kettles whistle
and toast burns under the grill.
Along another quiet road,
a man, pedalling on old bicycle,
whistles a familiar Irish air
as he creaks up a hill towards home,
the morning paper in his pocket,
secure, folded like a job well done.

B. Tasks on individual poems

1. Voices

Damien Quinn

What has just happened?

Why are the camera crews having a field day?

What does the poet feel about the camera crew?

What do you think the poet wants to do? (stanza 9)

Why does he think he will succeed no more than the camera crew?

(Jeune means immature and awkward.)

How does he describe the nature of the troubles?

Has he in fact failed or succeeded in making you learn about the experience of life in the North of Ireland?

2. Northern Haiku

Tony Curtis

The last line in a Haiku is always the eye opener, the line that stops you and makes you think. Each Haiku has 17 syllables.

Chose seven Haiku. Explain what they make you think and how they are written which helps to give them power.

For example, Haiku 1:

The first two lines are about a real physical feature, a wall built on typically Irish marshy soil.

The last line reveals it is also a political boundary dividing a place which should be whole - the land is the same on both sides.

This boundary was created by the past, by history. It is sad that the present has been harmed by the past.

All this is contained in three lines, which are made more effective because of the alliteration of P.

Why has the poet chosen to use the Haiku form?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in the North from these poems?

3. Postcard from Fermanagh

Bill O'Keefe

What is the person telling the story of the poem doing in Enniskillen?

What is the narrator doing in the first stanza?

How does that contrast with the first line?

How is the first line made to surprise you?

What is the phrase 'nosing the forest' telling you about the scout? (stanza 2)

Why does the poet use a metaphor, to compare the gunship with a hawk? (stanza 2)

How does the last line of stanza 3 contrast with the first 3 lines? (How is the soldier talking to the narrator?)

How does the word 'disgorges' make you think of the Red Orion?

What do you think the poet means by the last stanza?

Would you want to return to Enniskillen?

What have you learned of the experience of living in Northern Ireland from this poem?

4. Enemy Encounter

Padraic Fiacc

How is a mood created in the first stanza?

How do you know what the poet feels about the soldier?

How do you know what the soldier feels about the poet?

Why is it a sad poem?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in the north of Ireland from this poem?

5. The Disturbance

Tony Curtis

Why are the men compared to convicts or farmers?

Why are the women compared to flowers?

What effect would a bomb have if it exploded in your street?

What effect has the bomb and the troubles on their lives?

How do you know what the man who detonated the bomb feels?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in Northern Ireland from this poem?

C. Assignments on two or more poems

GCSE

1. Which three or four poems make you think the most about ‘the troubles’ in Ireland?
2. How do they achieve this?
3. What do the poets or narrators feel about the situation?

KEY STAGE 3

Look at the poems ‘The Disturbance’ and ‘Enemy Encounter’.

Both poets have something to say about living in Northern Ireland during ‘the troubles’.

1. What does each poet want to say?
2. How do they choose to say it?
3. Which poet do you like best and why?

HINTS

You may work together with a partner.

Look at all the relevant poems.

Choose the ones you want to focus on.

Do preparatory work, using the tasks on each poem as a starting point.

Respond to these tasks at length, always using quotations to help you understand all the meaning of the poem.

Throughout, try to comment on *how* the poem is written: verse form, rhyme, dialect, speech, imagery, repetition, alliteration, etc.

Use this preparatory work to help you with the assignment. You may have several ideas which are not covered by the tasks and suggestions.

Ireland
in
Schools

Promoting
mutual
understanding
between the
peoples of
Britain and
Ireland through
young people

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