



A level English Literature – feedback from summer 2019

Paper 3 (9ET0/03)

2019 Question 2: Read the poem *Two Trees* by Don Paterson on page 2 of the source booklet and reread the anthology poem *Giuseppe* by Roderick Ford (on page 4).

Compare the methods both poets use to explore unusual events.

First two pages of the student's response:

In the poems, *Two Trees* by Don Paterson and *Giuseppe* by Roderick Ford, both poets explore unusual ideas by beginning these poems with almost mythic, dreamlike imagery, infused with a certain more morbid sentiment. These poets then shatter the ways in which they have created this veil between the truth and the poem by ridding (or partially ridding) the poem of that previous fantasy for a more bleak realism. However, this attempt then reveals itself to be false in-itself, and the poets realise that their interests demand the myth of poetry.

Both poems begin with an almost fairy-tale or mythic quality in order to present their particular unusual ideas. In Don Paterson's poem, this is reflected by the title: "*Two Trees*". This name has a simplicity to it and a reference to natural imagery which evokes notions of stories found in children's books. This sentiment is carried through in the poem's first line, beginning as many traditional stories do: "One morning, Don Miguel got out of bed". Paterson's simplistic beginning, with reference to a character name, and day beginning "out of bed" is very much a purposeful device to create a fairytale like atmosphere. This is enhanced by Paterson's use of iambic pentameter in the first line, giving it an almost sing-song, nursery rhyme quality and in keeping with the traditional nature of the opening. Paterson's evocation of fruit "orange to his lemon tree", draws reference to the importance of fruit in traditional stories like the Bible or Snow White. Natural imagery abounds here, and Paterson creates a semantic field around nature, from fruit to earthy imagery, like that found in the second line: "with one idea rooted in his head". Paterson's use of "rooted", playing on the double meaning of a tree's roots and stuck really captures the earthy texture found in the first stanza. The line also conjures up Paterson's interest in the subconscious and the way it makes us do things that he continues to explore in the second stanza. However, this mythic quality, as is so often the case, is mixed with dark undertones. The speaker's (Paterson's) statement that Miguel did "lay open their sides, and lash them tight" has a visceral, and violent tone with the particular evocation of cutting something open and binding something. This darkness is continued even as the tree begins to bear fruit, Paterson writing how there appeared "two lights in the dark leaves", and how the limbs got "tangled" in each other. Paterson's obvious contrast between "light" and "dark" here and his notion of the trees being wrapped into each other and bearing much fruit shows how he is mixing a lighter tone with a more sinister one. This is appropriate to the fact the tree is seen as "Magic"; this inevitably is both sinister and exciting, and is appropriate to his investigation of the human mind; it is a complicated, "tangled" thing. It is this skilful, mythic beginning which Paterson will then subvert and through this bring out his unusual ideas.



Similarly to Paterson's poem, Roderick Ford also begins his poem in a way that calls forth myth and legend. He begins as Paterson does, by distancing himself from the subject of the story: "My Uncle Giuseppe told me". Both poets choices to reference a third party in the content of the poem both adds to the mythical element, but also highlights the way in which story-telling passed from one to another inherently shrouds the truth. However, Ford goes further than Paterson in also distancing himself from the story in both time and geography: "in Sicily in World War Two". Similarly to Paterson's poem, there is a clear beauty in the first stanza of the poem, his reference to "the courtyard behind the aquarium" creating a surreal image of dryness and water. This mixed with the line: "where the bougainvillea grows so well" draws the flower's vibrant colour to mind and invokes a dream like quality. This is only enhanced by the fifth line about "the only captive mermaid in the world". The fact she is "captive" inherently adds a corrupted nature to this poem — there is a restrained, "captive" element to this poem -- and this is made dramatically the case with the subsequent line: "was butchered on the dry and dusty ground". Ford's use of iambic pentameter here reveals the way in which his Uncle Is not willing to face the true atrocity of which he is clearly referencing; he hides it in poetic form and story-telling device, but at the same time invokes the violence through language. Ford's use of "butchered" and "dry" and "dusty" have a violence and barrenness to them, but this bleakness is still infused with the beauty of the picture he has created. This mixing of violence and beauty creates a disturbing, mythic quality as Paterson's mixing of the sinister and beautiful also does. As such, what both poets reveal is the way in which we shroud the truth for different ends, whether to dramatize an event — as in Paterson — or to hide from the past as for *Giuseppe*. Both techniques inherently involve a certain shrouding of the truth, and it this unusual idea that both poets present.

In Paterson's poem, the second stanza opens in a similar way to the first, continuing in its mythic style. This is shown through Paterson's reference to "dream" and the new man's "dark malicious whim"; this reference to the subconscious demonstrates how Paterson is treating these tree's as metaphor's for the men who manipulated them. However, here the beauty of the first stanza is lost, and one is left with a bleak and violent series of events. Paterson writes about their separation with the same violence that bound them together, "take his axe", "split the bole". However, suddenly, Paterson subverts the mythic quality his poem has been engaged in and writes: "And no, they did not die from solitude"; the first four lines of this stanza had utilised enjambement, and his abrupt full-stop and proceeding use of caesura after "And no" is a clear stylistic representation of the way in which he is shattering the image he has created; it is half-way through the second stanza where the poem turns; it is a kind of volta. Here, there is a stark realism, he lists the ways in which a dramatic continuity is not possible utilising anaphora in lines six and seven: "nor did their". The poem begins to turn back to a kind of humanisation with his references to the trees being "shackled" — drawing a connection with their enslavement to the man — and his line "the other's empty intricate embrace" turning the trees into separated lovers. However, he shatters this again, and writes how "They were trees and trees don't weep or ache or shout". Paterson is dissecting the poet's method here, tearing apart the false imagery we use in order to create stories to tell ourselves. He suggests that the sadness of this story can only be dimmed by its shrouding in myth. However, the last line can be read in two ways: "And trees are all this poem is about". Is Paterson being particularly fallacious here and leaving something open? Suggesting that the poetry actually tells us something more; it tells us something about the human conscious? The poem can be seen as an evocation of William Blake's poem of the Gardener in which his foe "lay outstretched beneath the tree" and in which the nurturing of a tree is a clear allegory for the human mind. Paterson



leaves it deliberately open, leaving the realism and the myth in harmony, perhaps they can co-exist? This is suggested by the last lines sparse language and yet its persistence of iambic pentameter; there is still a sing-song nature to this line. As such, Paterson presents his unusual idea of the subconscious and the way it makes us do things through his mixing of mental imagery, nature and poetry, and through his subversion of his first style with a subsequent deliberate refusal to make clear what the poem is truly saying.