Literature Paper 2 Section B: Anthology Poetry
Learning compendium
'War Photographer' Duffy

Key ideas

*The poem describes the experience of a war photographer. It describes his return home to England where he develops the photographs he has taken and which will be published in a Sunday supplement (a magazine which is included with the Sunday newspaper).

*As the war photographer develops the photographs he relives some of the traumatic experiences he has witnessed.

*He is troubled that no-one at his home in England seem to care for more than a moment by the awful scenes of human suffering he has photographed.

*The poem is political. At the time 'War Photographer' was written, Duffy was friendly with Don McCullin and Philip Jones Griffiths, two very well-respected war photographers.

* Duffy is fascinated by what makes someone do such a job and as such has carefully crafted the 'voices' of war photographers into the poem. Duffy said, 'Those photographs are in the background but I'm more interested in the photographer... in the dilemma of someone who has that as a job... to go to these places and come back with the images.'

*W. Eugene Smith a war photographer explained how he viewed his role. "...and each time I pressed the shutter release it was a shouted condemnation hurled with the hope that the pictures might survive through the years, with the hope that they might echo through the minds of men in the future -- causing them caution and remembrance and realization. Know that these people of the pictures were my family - no matter how often they reflected the tortured features of another race. Accident of birth, accident of place -- the bloody, dying child I held momentarily while the life -- fluid seeped through my shirt and burned my heart -- that child was my child."

STOP-CHECK!

1. Where does the majority of the poem take place?
2. What happens to the photographer as he develops the photographs he has taken?
3. Why did Duffy write the poem?
4. How did W. Eugene Smith see his role as a war photographer? Rewrite in your own words.

Form and structure

3rd person narrative

Through the use of 3rd person narrative, the poet takes us inside the man's thoughts, commenting on the indifference to war by the western media and its readers. ('The reader's eyeballs prick/ with tear between the bath and pre-lunch beers…they do not care.')

Regular structure and rhyme scheme

The poem has a regular 4 stanza structure with each stanza consisting of 6 lines. Each stanza may be viewed as a single frame of a photograph and each stanza reveals more detail about how the war photographer feels about his work.

The poem also has a regular rhyme scheme: a,b,b,c,dd. The regular structure could represent the order he is giving to the chaos he has witnessed in the photos and/or representative of the routine/ process he follows each time he develops the photographs. For example stanza 2 lines 7-9 'He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays/ beneath his hands, which did not tremble then/ though seem to now.' Despite the fact that he is struggling with mental anguish and possibly physical effects of PTSD, he knows that he must develop the photographs he has taken.

Use of enjambment

Enjambment reflects not only the gradual reveal of a photograph during development but the ongoing and long-lasting effects of war on those who are directly involved (the subjects of the photos) and the photographer himself. The narrative of the poem seems to run on through this mechanism, representing the way that the photographer's mind is running away with him, as he remembers the suffering he has witnessed and considers the significance of the situation.

'Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost.'

The use of caesura makes the reader focus closely on the photograph the photographer is developing. Due to the use of enjambment, the reader experiences the emotion of the photographer and it helps us to understand the torment caused to him as he develops the photographs. The use of the metaphor 'a half-formed ghost' suggests the photographer is haunted by the scenes of suffering he has witnessed and photographed. Moreover war and conflict are shown as depersonalising human relations. (The photographer describes the man as a 'stranger') and how innocent people are caught in the middle of conflict and robbed of their identity.

STOP-CHECK!

1. Why is 3rd person narration used?
2. Why does the poem have a regular rhyme stanza structure?
3. Explain, in your own words, how enjambment is used.

Language

Presentation of the War Photographer – use of religious references

(Stanza One)

Stanza one describes how seriously the photographer takes his job. There is a feeling of reverence as he develops the photographs.
'…in his darkroom he is finally alone'
The tone seems reflective, quiet and still in comparison to the conflict/ war zones he has visited. It could also be viewed as respectful.

'…the only light is red'
The reference to the red light could be a reference to the red light in Tebernacle Catholic churches.

"a priest preparing to intone a mass" reflects the important role the war photographer plays in society in sharing the truth with the masses/ public. The use of alliteration helps to create a tone of reverence and creates a quiet, solemn tone.

'spools of suffering set out in order rows' -extended metaphor- the War Photographer preaches to his congregation. There is also a sense of ritual as he does the same thing over and over. Alternatively it could echo the array of troops going into battle and, later, their graves.

"All flesh is grass" – Biblical reference- reinforcing the idea of the darkroom as his church. Alternatively it could be viewed as humanity being reduced to something so fragile, which is helpless and easily destroyed by war. War is implied to be something overwhelming beyond the scale of ordinary life.

Presentation of the War Photographer's editor and the readers

The poem describes the readers of the newspapers who see the photographers as dispassionate and desensitized to the images they see.

'The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers' This suggests that the reader is only momentarily moved by the photos and/or the photos caused only a small reaction (verb- 'prick').

The editor views the photos as a 'job': a way in which to pull in more readers.
The readers and editor do not understand the true horror and agony of the photos.
"A hundred agonies in black-and-white" This is a metaphorical representation of the victims' pain. The metaphor also amplifies the immense amount of suffering that we don't know about and the photographer is trying to educate the reader through his photographs. (This is also seen in stanza two where the photographer describes the conditions of war which are juxtaposed with English weather).

"They do not care." The war photographer seems detached from his home as he looks over England from the plane. The use of the pronoun 'they' creates the sense that the war photographer feels society in general in England do not show any empathy or compassion to the terrible suffering his photographs reveal.

Presentation of Rural England and War Zones(Stanza Two)

Although he refers to England as his physical home, we have the idea that the war/conflict zones he visits are at 'home' in his head (in the metaphorical sense.)
There is a clear contrast between Rural England and war zones e.g.
"running children in a nightmare heat" couplet places emphasis on the children's vulnerability. ("Nightmare heat"- metaphor – the innocent are not only attacked by humans but by the conditions of their country as well.) This contrasts with the "simple weather" of England, represents how safe, straightforward and predictable life our lives are.

STOP-CHECK!

1. Explain the aspects of the poem in stanza one which link to religion.
2. Why does the photographer seem detached from England and the people there?
3. How is a contrast created between rural England and the different war zones mentioned?

Feelings and attitudes

Pain- The poem explores different types of pain. The photographs taken depict real physical pain. The woman who has lost her husband displays emotional pain. The photographer suffers from mental pain as he develops the photographs at home.
Detachment- In order to do his job the war photographer has to be able to detach from his emotions when he is in war zones. However, when he returns home his detachment is replaced by memories of the horrific images he has photographed. These memories create strong emotions and he feels detached from his life in England where others do not react to the terrible scenes he shows them.

Themes

Reality of war: The poem is a depiction of the terrible reality of war, particularly on innocent civilians.
War zones and non-war zones (contrast between the two): Through the perspective of the war photographer the reader is able to contrast the two different situations.
Memory: The poem explores the impact of memories upon an individual.

STOP-CHECK!

Create spider diagrams for each 'feeling and attitude' and theme, explaining how each one is represented in the poem. Use the other sections to help you.

Compare with…

'Poppies'- Different perspective of war, memories and political
'Exposure'- Harsh realities of war and political
'Remains'- The impact of memories and PTSD and an individual experience.
'London'- political poem, injustice and suffering

STOP-CHECK!

Without looking, write down the poems you could compare with 'War Photographer' and how you could compare them.

Key quotations

'spools of suffering set out in order rows'

'Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost.'

'A hundred agonies in black- and –white
From which his editor will pick out five or six'

'The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears'

STOP-CHECK!

1. Learn the key quotations.

Challenge: can you learn the other quotations referred to on the compendium?

Glossary

Spools – a reel on which film, magnetic tape, thread, or other flexible materials can be wound.
Intone: recite or sing a prayer or chant
Mass – Catholic ritual that is central to their religion.
Beirut: the capital of Lebanon in the Middle East
Phnom Phen: the capital of Cambodia in South East Asia
Solutions – mixture (liquid).
Dispel: get rid of
Sought: looked for
Sunday Supplement: the magazine which comes with the Sunday newspaper
Impassively: blankly, without emotion

Useful You Tube videos

The NTS English teachers recommend you watch one of the following videos in order to develop your knowledge further or gain a different perspective.
Mr Bruff video link = https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeZCOlUMQxI
OR
Stacey Reay video link= https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVWQRJcCeJk