

Tissue - Imtiaz Dharker

This is not an easy poem to 'explain' and one sometimes wonders why certain poems are chosen for anthologies. Perhaps in order to 'stretch' students or, more charitably, to encourage them to appreciate the qualities of poetry which cannot be pinned down or paraphrased. Remember, once again, it is the Examining Body that chose the poem, not the poet, so any frustrations should be directed appropriately.

You might want to ask your students how they would describe the poem overall.

Give them some words to help – here are a few to start with:

Delicate / Subtle / Clever / Obscure / Ambiguous / Strange

One piece of contextual information students may find helpful: the writer has also worked as a film-maker. Ask them to imagine the poem as a series of scenes from a film or a film trailer. A series of surreal images fading one into the other... How would they describe the feelings this evokes? What colours do they see? (The poem has no colour apart from sepia!)

Fragility and transience are ideas for them to hold onto. Even the poet's attitude seems fragile, hesitant, lacking decisiveness: 'could alter things'; 'I might...', 'an architect could'. Ask students to think about things that appear fragile can be strong, e.g. a silk scarf, the stem of bindweed, a hair (try breaking one). Skin is both fragile and immensely strong; paper too. Some buildings appear strong but, sadly, are not.

The great majority of nouns define things that are man-made. This does not suggest a poem about the natural world vs human activity. It has more to do with different types of human creation, which may or may not last. What contrasts of this kind can they find? Let them also look for light /dark and light / heavy. *Below is a noun collection they could work with.*

And whose skin is indicated by 'turned into your skin'? Is this a usage common in English where it actually means 'one's skin' (as presumably in line 5)? Given that it stands alone, it does seem that the poet intends it to be significant!

Postscript

The often very useful Bitesize seems to fall into the trap of finding everything significant – or bending everything to supply something meaningful. The following extracts contain examples of what I mean and what **I would encourage students to avoid.**

Tissue is mainly constructed in unrhymed, irregular quatrains. *This form can be seen to represent the irregularity of life and the flimsy nature of the tissue paper the poem refers to.*

The poem lacks regular rhyme and its rhythm is unsteady, as if to mirror the fluttering of tissue paper. *The poet uses enjambment, running meaning between lines and across stanza breaks. This adds to the flowing, delicate nature - both of paper and of the human lives the poet compares the tissue to.*

The speaker emphasises the delicacy of the paper *by using adjectives* throughout the poem. The paper is described as 'fine', 'thin' and 'transparent'. The effect of light is also emphasised with 'luminous', 'daylight' and the way the 'sun shines through'.

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