

About the Poem

- Written by **Carol Ann Duffy** (1955–).
- In this **dramatic monologue** we hear the voice of a woman who has become consumed with jealousy as she suspects her husband is being unfaithful.
- In an **extended metaphor** she is likened to the Greek mythical figure Medusa, whose head of snakes turned anyone who looked at her into stone. In the myth, Medusa's head of snakes was punishment for falling in love. Perseus killed Medusa as part of a quest.
- The woman's jealousy and battle with her husband is destructive, but she seems to relish the power she has, even though it will destroy her.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Jealousy and possession:** The woman can't let go of her doubts about her husband but is determined to have him to herself, even if she destroys them both in the process.
- Youth and beauty:** She describes how she was once beautiful and compares herself to her husband's 'girls'. In contrast, she now describes herself in negative terms.
- Violence and love:** Her words have a threatening tone and her actions become increasingly violent. Her husband is linked to Perseus, foreshadowing her destruction.

Mythological figure wronged by both men and women.

Medusa

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp.

Suggests it's her thoughts that cause the damage.

My bride's breath soured, stank
in the grey bags of my lungs.

Metaphor highlights the danger that she poses.

I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued,
yellow fanged.

There are bullet tears in my eyes.
Are you terrified?

Suggests he is attractive but vain and untrustworthy. Links him to Perseus.

Be terrified.
It's you I love,
perfect man, Greek God, my own;
but I know you'll go, betray me, stray
from home.
So better by far for me if you were stone.

Increasingly emphatic verbs and larger objects reflect mounting threat.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,
a dull grey pebble fell
to the ground.
I glanced at a singing bird,
a handful of dusty gravel
spattered down.

Key Features

Clusters of three

Questions

Verbs

Form, Structure and Language

- Although this is a **free verse** poem, the **repetition, end rhyme** and **clusters of three** create a strong rhythm and link key ideas together.
- The tone is **unambiguous** from the first line with its **three negative emotions** and **sibilance** mimicking the hissing snakes.
- The question at the end of the second stanza and its echo in the next line create a **threatening tone** which continues as the woman uses her powers.
- The **verbs** become more **emphatic** and the objects she turns to stone become bigger reflecting an escalation in the threat she poses and her enjoyment of the power.
- Pathos** is created through her **negative descriptions** of herself and the understanding that the man she loves will destroy her.
- The **ambiguity** of the last line, which is isolated from the rest of the poem, is threatening and may create **pathos** if taken as a desperate plea.

I looked at a ginger cat,
a housebrick
shattered a bowl of milk.
I looked at a snuffling pig,
a boulder rolled
in a heap of shit.

Reflects her negative attitude/perceptions.

I stared in the mirror.
Love gone bad
showed me a Gorgon.
I stared at a dragon.
Fire spewed

This is what she symbolises.

from the mouth of a mountain.

And here you come
with a shield for a heart
and a sword for a tongue
and your girls, your girls.

He is armed against her, ready for battle.

He has been unfaithful. Suggests youth and beauty.

Wasn't I beautiful?
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

Emphasises what she has become.

Look at me now.

Ambiguous tone. Is she a threat or to be pitied?

Types of stone

Mythology

Sibilance

Quick Test

- How are we encouraged to feel sympathy for the woman?
- Explain the significance of the last line of the poem.
- Why do you think she describes her husband as 'Greek God'?

Brendon Gallacher

Use of the past tense shows this is a memory recalled.

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.
He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.
His father was in prison; he was a cat burglar.
My father was a Communist Party full-time worker.
5 He had six brothers and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

Shows her feelings of ownership of him.

Suggests she is making sense of her father's job.

He would hold my hand and take me by the river
where we'd talk all about his family being poor.
He'd get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.

She sees him outdoors, away from her family home.

Creates a realistic, personal tone.

A wee holiday some place nice. Some place far.
10 I'd tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher.

Locates the incident in a specific place and suggests negative feelings about it.

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.
And she'd say, 'Why not have him round to dinner?'
No, no, I'd say, he's got big holes in his trousers.
I like meeting him by the burn in the open air.

Naive/childlike to think this detail would put her mother off.

Gives a story-like feel.

15 Then one day after we'd been friends for two years,

Pathetic fallacy – the weather reflects the events that will follow. She is inside, a place where Brendon doesn't belong.

one day when it was pouring and I was indoors,
my mum says to me, 'I was talking to Mrs Moir
who lives next door to your Brendon Gallacher.
Didn't you say his address was 24 Novar?'
20 She says there are no Gallachers at 24 Novar.

Lots of detail emphasises the significance of the event.

There never have been any Gallachers next door.'
And he died then, my Brendon Gallacher,
flat out on my bedroom floor, his spiky hair,
his impish grin, his funny, flapping ear.

Separated from the rest of the direct speech increases the impact of the revelation.

Reinforces the idea of loss/mourning and emphasises his 'realness' to her.

25 Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher.

Details of his appearance, bringing him to life.

Wistful in tone.

Key Features

Repetition

Possessive pronoun

Outside

Dialect

Direct speech

Childlike

About the Poem

- Written by **Jackie Kay** (1961–).
- The **first person** narrator recalls an imaginary friend from her childhood and describes the differences between his life and hers.
- She tries to keep him separate from the rest of her life, but her mother doesn't understand this and encourages her to include him in her life.
- When it's revealed that Brendon is an imaginary friend, he dies and is lost to the girl forever.
- The poem has **autobiographical** elements as there are similarities with Kay's own childhood.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Childhood:** Brendon represents the freedom that children crave and which is often absent from the adult world. The narrator's ideas about poverty show a childish innocence.
- Mourning/loss:** The poem mourns the loss of childhood innocence and the friend.
- Imagination:** The qualities and life that the narrator has given Brendon may reveal her naive desires or might represent the lives she imagines for the families her father works to protect. The mother's need for facts and her inability to embrace imagination destroys Brendon.

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is an **elegy**. Elegies are associated with mourning, showing us how important and real the loss of Brendon was.
- The **first three stanzas** begin with a focus on Brendon, emphasising his importance to her.
- Repetition** and the **possessive pronouns** used by the narrator and her mother emphasise her feelings of ownership.
- Direct speech** highlights the contrast between the adult's and child's view of the world.
- The use of **dialect** makes the poem feel very personal.
- The **childish language** and **half rhyme** create a wistful tone and impression of a memory recalled from childhood. The narrator looks back at both Brendon and her younger self with sad fondness.
- The grief at Brendon's loss is shown through **pathetic fallacy** and is made clear in the last line of the poem.

Quick Test

- What are elegies usually associated with?
- Why might the girl have created Brendon?
- What is the significance of the weather the day Brendon dies?
- Why might the mother want to know more about Brendon?

Imperative but no sense of what is required.

Give

There are no private places for him.

Suggests he is drawing attention to himself. Links to the third stanza.

As the value increases, so does the level of danger or showmanship. Suggests he degrades himself for money.

Perhaps reminding us of our social responsibility.

Could refer to the act of begging or a figure of speech reflecting his desperation.

Of all the public places, dear,
to make a scene, I've chosen here.

Of all the doorways in the world
to choose to sleep, I've chosen yours.

5 I'm on the street, under the stars.

For coppers I can dance or sing.
For silver – swallow swords, eat fire.
For gold – escape from locks and chains.

It's not as if I'm holding out
10 for frankincense or myrrh, just change.

You give me tea. That's big of you.
I'm on my knees. I beg of you.

May suggest tenderness or be patronising.

Reference to the film *Casablanca*, suggesting their meeting will cause pain.

Alliteration draws attention to the romanticised image, revealing its naivety.

'Holding out' could refer to the physical act of begging, or to waiting for something better. 'Change' could mean money or a difference in perception/treatment.

Lines broken by caesura reflect him shutting down and becoming resigned to the situation.

Key Features

Ambiguity

Repetition

Biblical reference

Monosyllabic

Filmic reference

Alliteration



About the Poem

- Written by **Simon Armitage** (1963–).
- The poem is narrated through the voice of a homeless person who is sleeping in a doorway.
- The man challenges our perceptions by talking directly to us and describes the attention-grabbing stunts he performs for change.
- He doesn't appreciate the token gestures that he is offered and wants something more.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- **Social responsibility:** We have a responsibility to help vulnerable people but we need to listen to what they want rather than making assumptions or token gestures.
- **Homelessness:** Our assumptions about homelessness are presented and challenged. The character in the poem wants to be seen and heard more than he wants money.

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is written in the **first person** and **present tense** which makes it very personal and immediate. It's very hard for both the reader and the person the man addresses in the poem to ignore this direct approach.
- The **opening** of the poem is **ambiguous**. We may think an adult is talking to a child, or that a couple is arguing. How we interpret those lines influences the way we see the relationship between the characters: tender or patronising.
- The **regularity of the syllable** count of each line suggests the man's restraint and control.
- As the man becomes despondent and resigned to the situation, he becomes **monosyllabic**.
- Repeated references to **choices** challenge the belief that homeless people have a choice about the way they live.
- **Alliteration** draws our attention to a romantic image that seems out of place.
- The **biblical** reference to the wise men in line 10 reminds us of our social responsibility.
- A **filmic reference** and **colloquialisms** create a light tone but as the poem progresses, it becomes more pleading and desperate.

Quick Test

- 1 Why have the words 'chosen' / 'choose' been repeated in the first two stanzas?
- 2 How does the language suggest that our attempts to help are sometimes patronising?
- 3 Which line has a romantic image, and why might it have been used?
- 4 The final line of the poem is ambiguous in its meaning. How could it be interpreted?

Ozymandias

The traveller has described the statue to the narrator, who in turn describes it to us.

Suggests the rest of the statue will also be consumed.

Could refer to the face of the statue or be a political comment. The heart and hand here represent the artist – his talent and his compassion.

Changes in metre emphasise these words, and the poem's message.

Oxymoron accentuates the destruction of the statue.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown

And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:

10 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The vagueness of the land combined with the distance from the traveller make it clear Ozymandias's achievements belong in the past.

The sculptor had a clear understanding of Ozymandias's character.

Describes the artist creating the statue. 'Mocked' can mean copied or scorned.

Caesura highlights this sentence and strengthens the contrast between Ozymandias's words and the reality.

Alliteration highlights the barrenness of the desert and contributes to the tone of futility.

Key Features

Change in metre

Alliteration

Ozymandias's character

Synecdoche

Destruction/Decay

Oxymoron

About the Poem

- Written by **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822).
- The narrator of the poem recounts an anonymous traveller's tale.
- The narrator re-tells the traveller's description of the remains of a vast, ruined statue of Ozymandias, the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II.
- The statue is a **metaphor** and reveals the Pharaoh's character and the foolishness of his pride.
- In effect, the poem focuses on two voices – those of the traveller and Ozymandias, and two characters – the artist and Ozymandias.
- The poem can be seen as an analogy: time will challenge any great civilisation or ruler.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- **Death and mortality:** The desert symbolises the passing of time that erases all traces of Ozymandias and reminds us that death comes to us all.
- **Power:** Ozymandias's power was absolute. The face of the statue and the words on the pedestal reveal his character. We feel no sympathy for him.
- **Pride:** The vast size of the statue reflects Ozymandias's pride. The **futility** of his pride is demonstrated by the ruin of the statue and his achievements. His name is significant as it is derived from the Greek, 'ozium' (air) and 'mandate' (rule) and means he is 'ruler of nothing'.
- **Art:** The achievements of the sculptor outlive those of Ozymandias.

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is a **sonnet** written in **iambic pentameter**. Traditionally sonnets are associated with love poetry, but here political ideas are explored.
- The poem can be divided into **three parts**. The words of the traveller create a picture of Ozymandias in the first and last part. The middle part introduces the idea of art enduring using **synecdoche** to represent the artist.
- The use of **oxymoron** highlights the destruction of the statue.
- The broken statue **symbolises** that power and achievements are weakened by time. The **irony** is that the artist's work remains.
- Ozymandias's words would have inspired **awe and fear**, but now they cause **despair** as they are evidence that even the power of the mighty is temporary.
- Ozymandias's self-given title, 'king of kings', reveals his pride and contrasts with the literal translation of his name.

Quick Test

- 1 How do the setting and narrator contribute to our sense of Ozymandias's diminished power?
- 2 What does the poem suggest about the nature of power?
- 3 How does the poet create a negative impression of Ozymandias's character?
- 4 What is the effect of the last two lines of the poem?



About the Poem

- Written by **Robert Browning** (1812–1889).
- In this poem we hear the voice of a Duke describing a portrait of his late wife to a visiting servant, who is helping arrange a marriage between the Duke and his master's daughter.
- The Duke unwittingly reveals the true character of both himself and the Duchess through the things he says.
- We learn that the Duke had his wife killed as he suspected she was unfaithful to him.
- The Duke boasts about the beautiful objects he owns, unaware of the effect of his words.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Violence:** The Duke's lack of remorse at having his wife murdered is shocking.
- Power and control:** The Duke is obsessed with maintaining his power over his wife. He is so powerful that she is killed at his request.
- Jealousy:** The Duke is jealous of the attention that his wife gives to others and wants to be the only person in her favour.
- Pride:** The Duke is proud of his name and feels the Duchess doesn't respect its value. The manner in which he describes his possessions also reveals his pride. Ultimately, it is his pride which leads him to have his wife killed.

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That's **my** last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The **depth and passion** of its **earnest glance**,
But to **myself** they turned (since none puts by
10 **The curtain I have drawn for you, but I**)
And seemed as they would ask me, **if they durst**,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called **that spot**
15 **Of joy** into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff
20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up **that spot of joy**. She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; **she liked whate'er**
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
25 Sir, 'twas all one! **My** favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

Key Features

Duchess's qualities Possessive pronouns Self interruption

Positive description. Compare with lines 13–34.

A positive image, framed in a negative light by his perceptions.

Self-interruptions suggest spontaneity, although it is a rehearsed speech.

Implies she was unfaithful, or at least, looked at other men.

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is a **dramatic monologue** which is presented as a conversation. The **first person** narrative allows us to fully understand the Duke's actions and motivations, perhaps even where he doesn't recognise them himself.
- His **descriptions of his wife** reveal a kind woman, which make us sympathetic towards her and show the depth of the Duke's need to control her.
- Repetition** suggests the Duke's preoccupation with certain ideas and behaviours.
- The continued use of **possessive pronouns** reflects the Duke's selfish and proud personality.
- The poem is organised into **rhyming couplets** but because the lines are not **end-stopped** the rhyme isn't obvious. This pushes the poem on, as the Duke relentlessly pursues his next marriage.

She rode with round the terrace – **all and each**
30 **Would draw from her alike the approving speech,**
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked
Somehow – **I know not how** – as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd **stoop** to blame
35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech – (which I have not) – **to make your will**
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let
40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
– E'en then would be some **stooping**; and I choose
Never to **stoop**. Oh sir, she **smiled**, no doubt,
Where'er I passed her; but who passed without
45 Much the same **smile**? This grew; **I gave commands**;
Then all **smiles** stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of **mine** for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is **my** object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

She is gracious and grateful, but the Duke sees this as a flaw.

Reveals what he values – status.

Suggests a measure or set of standards which must be met.

Implies that altering your behaviour is demeaning.

Caesura in these two lines highlights the sinister euphemism.

The reference to his future wife as 'my object' is chilling considering the content of the conversation.

Repetition (power) Repetition (joy/happiness) Control

Quick Test

- How does the poem's structure reflect the Duke's present concerns?
- Why do we learn about the Duke's actions from his own mouth?
- What is the effect of the repetition in lines 34–43 and 43–46?
- Why does the poem end with the Duke describing another piece of art?

The River God

The opening is deceptively simple.

I may be **smelly** and I may be **old**,
Rough in my pebbles, **reedy** in my pools,
But where my fish float by I bless their **swimming**
And I like the people to bathe in me, especially **women**.

Near rhyme emphasises his seediness.

'But' introduces a more dangerous side of his personality. The full rhyme highlights his lack of empathy.

5 But I **can** drown the **fools**
Who bathe too close to the weir, **contrary to rules**.
And they take a long time drowning
As I throw them up now and then in the spirit of clowning.

10 O I may be an old **foul** river but I have plenty of go.
Once there was a lady who was **too bold**

Colloquialism seems conversational and reintroduces a lighter tone.

Suggests cause and effect, as though his actions are justified.

She bathed in me by the tall black cliff where the water runs cold,
So I brought her down here
To be my **beautiful** dear.

15 Oh **will she stay with me will she stay**
This **beautiful** lady, or will she go away?

The repetition within this question reveals the River God's insecurity.

This image appears tender but is in fact quite sinister. It suggests the River God is unaware of the true nature of his actions.

She lies in my **beautiful** deep river bed with many a weed
To hold her, and many a waving reed.

Oh who would guess what a **beautiful** white face lies **there**

20 Waiting for me to smooth and wash away the **fear**

The half-repeated phrase, 'Hi yih', suggests the River God is losing power/strength.

The caesuras add emphasis to these imperatives.

She looks at me with. Hi yih, do not let her

Go. There is no one on earth who does not forget her

Now. They say I am a **foolish old smelly** river

But they do not know of my wide original bed

These negative qualities seem to be echoes of criticisms the River God has heard and is responding to. It is ironic that his power creates an even more negative impression.

Reintroduces the idea of the threat and danger he poses.

25 Where the lady waits, with her golden sleepy head.

If she wishes to go I will not forgive her.

Key Features

Near rhyme

Repetition

Colloquialism

Caesura

Control/Power

Negative qualities

About the Poem

- Written by **Stevie Smith** (1902–1971).
- The river is **personified** and is given the persona of the River God. It is this voice that we hear in the poem.

- The River God seems to be old, smelly and helpless but as the poem progresses a seedy, dark and dangerous side is revealed.
- He has a weakness for women and takes one for a companion, but his insecurity makes him question whether he will be able to keep her.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Power:** Like the gods in Greek mythology, the River God is powerful but also petty, jealous and vengeful. He meddles in human lives with no thought for the consequences.
- Isolation:** The River God is lonely. His only companion has been taken by force and he knows that he has a tenuous hold on her.

- Revenge:** He punishes those who don't play by his rules and threatens to take revenge on his companion if she leaves him.

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is a **dramatic monologue** written in **free verse**. The **first person** account reveals more about the River God than he intends.
- At first the **tone** of the poem appears light-hearted but it becomes **sinister** and **macabre**.
- The mix of **enjambment**, **end-stopped** lines and the **varied rhythm and rhyme** mimic the ever-changing currents and moods of the river and his unpredictable character.

- Repetition** of the word 'beautiful' shows his fascination with the woman and his fixation on her appearance.
- The **rhyming couplets** create a jaunty air, but this doesn't disguise the dark tone that's created by the pleasure the River God takes in tormenting people.
- The description of people as 'fools', and the **rhyme** linking 'clowning' and 'drowning' show the River God's lack of **empathy**.

Quick Test

- How would you describe the tone of the first two lines?
- Why might Smith have chosen a god to represent the spirit of the river?
- In which line does the River God use a gentle image to hide the truth about what has happened to the woman he has taken?
- What is the effect of the last line of the poem?

Casehistory: Alison (head injury)

About the Poem

- Written by **U. A. Fanthorpe** (1929–2009).
- In this **dramatic monologue**, we hear the voice of Alison, a woman who has suffered a head injury.
- Alison looks at a photograph of herself when she was young and describes the girl in it as if she were a stranger.
- Alison remembers nothing of her past and even has to be reminded daily that her father is dead.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Youth and age:** Alison looks back on a time of innocence. The girl in the photograph looks happy and her future is full of promise.
- Mourning and loss:** Alison mourns for the person she once was and the promise her future held. She is also in a constant state of mourning for her father.
- Personal identity:** We define ourselves through our memories and our relationships with the people around us. Alison has lost both of these things and can only create a sense of herself by comparing her present life to the details of her past that she gets from her photo.

The third person suggests that what follows is being recorded to form part of her medical notes.

Introduces the idea of Alison's confused identity.

Juxtaposition emphasises the contrast between the images. The simile highlights the beauty and grace of her body as it was previously.

Caesura here highlights the importance of this emotion.

Casehistory: Alison (head injury)

(She looks at her photograph)

I would like to have known
My husband's wife, my mother's only daughter.
A bright girl she was.

Enmeshed in comforting
5 Fat, I wonder at her delicate angles.
Her autocratic knee

Like a Degas dancer's
Adjusts to the observer with airy poise,
That now lugs me upstairs

10 Hardly. Her face, broken
By nothing sharper than smiles, holds in its smiles
What I have forgotten.

She knows my father's dead,
And grieves for it, and smiles. She has digested
15 Mourning. Her smile shows it.

Key Features

First person

Third person

Pathos

I, who need reminding
Every morning, shall never get over what
I do not remember.

Consistency matters.
20 I should like to keep faith with her lack of faith,
But forget her reasons.

Proud of this younger self,
I assert her achievements, her A levels,
Her job with a future.

25 Poor clever girl! I know,
For all my damaged brain, something she doesn't:
I am her future.

A bright girl she was.

This phrase may echo advice she has been given to help manage her condition.

Repetition is used throughout and may represent repeated attempts to relearn/remember things.

Pathos is created through her distance from her achievements (line 23/24) and the inescapability of the situation (line 27).

Isolation emphasises finality.

Form, Structure and Language

- The **regularity of the stanza length** and the **shortness** of the majority of the lines may reflect the repetitiveness of Alison's life and her need to break things down into manageable tasks.
- Use of both the **first person** and **third person** to describe herself highlights Alison's confusion.
- Juxtaposed** images of her past and present life emphasise how much has changed for Alison and the difficulties of her present condition.
- The tone is **matter-of-fact** and lacks any self-pity, perhaps reflecting the tone of clinical notes suggested by the title.
- Pathos** is created through Alison's admiration of her younger self and her understanding of what the future holds for the girl in the photograph.
- There are lots of references to **pain and injury** to remind us of Alison's accident and the lasting damage it has caused.
- Riddle-like statements in the first, sixth and seventh stanzas suggest Alison's confusion and her lack of a clear personal identity.

Quick Test

- What do you think the purpose of the first italicised, bracketed line is?
- What ideas about identity are presented in the poem?
- What is the effect of the last line of the poem?

On a Portrait of a Deaf Man

About the Poem

- Written by **John Betjeman** (1906–1984).
- The voice recalls memories of the poet's father, a deaf man.
- His father was a kind man who enjoyed simple pleasures.
- The voice can't separate the pleasant images of his father from images of his dead body and it is these images that he is left with.

Ideas, Themes and Issues

- Mourning and loss:** The voice is haunted by images of his father's decaying body.
- Memories:** He has affectionate memories of times he shared with his father and the things his father enjoyed.
- Faith:** In the final **stanza**, he questions the existence of God as he can't accept the Christian message of life after death when he sees only physical decay.

On a Portrait of a Deaf Man

Oxymoron creates a sense of a character barely contained.

The kind old face, the egg-shaped head,
The tie, **discreetly loud**,
The loosely fitting shooting clothes,
A closely fitting shroud.

The image of food links to the image of death through the open mouth. The link feels natural, if shocking.

5 He liked old City dining-rooms,
Potatoes in their skin,
But now his mouth is wide to let
The London clay come in.

Suggests closeness and pride.

10 He took me on long **silent** walks
In country lanes when young,
He knew the names of ev'ry bird
But not the **song it sung**.

The images are linked through 'looked' and 'eyes'.

15 And when he could not hear me speak
He smiled and looked so wise
That now I do not like to think
Of maggots in his eyes.

Key Features

Oxymoron

Decay

Repetition

On a Portrait of a Deaf Man

Form, Structure and Language

- The poem is an **elegy** written in **ballad** form. This mixture of forms may reflect his inability to separate **sentimental** memories of his father from his grief over his loss.
- The simple, **uncomplicated language** reflects the tastes of his father and doesn't soften the images of death and decay.
- The **juxtaposition** of past and present highlights the contrast between the father's enjoyment of life's simple pleasures and graphic images of decay.
- The tone is **nostalgic** where memories of the father are described and **matter-of-fact** where images of death and decay are presented.
- The father's kind, warm personality is revealed through affectionately recalled memories.
- The **images of decay** become increasingly **explicit**, adding to the horror we feel at the realities of death. This culminates in the **final stanza** where **sibilance** reveals his anger as he directly addresses God.

He liked the **rain-washed Cornish air**
And **smell** of ploughed-up soil,
He liked a **landscape big and bare**
20 And painted it in oil.

This stanza's focus on the senses and lack of images of death bring the father to life.

But least of all he liked that place
Which hangs on Highgate Hill
Of soaked **Carrara-covered** earth
For Londoners to fill.

Alliteration increases the impact of the description of the cemetery.

25 He would have liked to say good-bye,
Shake hands with many friends,
In Highgate now his finger-bones
Stick through his finger-ends.

The father's warm personality is clear.

The image of shaking hands links with this image of decay.

You, God, who treat him thus and thus,
30 Say 'Save his soul and pray.'
You ask me to believe You and
I only see decay.

The final line's bleak tone suggests the speaker will not find any solace.

Sibilance

Alliteration

Sensory details

Quick Test

- How does the first stanza prepare us for the stark contrasts in the stanzas that follow?
- What details in the poem paint the picture of a kind man?
- How is the final stanza different from the rest of the poem?