

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 4 – Comparing 'Exposure' and 'Extract from The Prelude'

ANNOUNCER: BBC Sounds: music, radio, podcasts.

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TESTAMENT: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize poetry podcast. I'm Testament, a writer, rapper and poet, and in this series I'm talking poetry. In this episode we're comparing 'Exposure' by Wilfred Owen and an extract from 'The Prelude' by William Wordsworth. We're looking at language, form, structure, theme and context – some of the things you will need to write about in your exam. Make sure you've listened to the first three episodes in this series on BBC Sounds 'cause this is where we take you through the basics.

[music plays]

TESTAMENT: Today, though, I am joined by poet extraordinaire Owen Sheers, who is gonna help us compare the poems. What's up, Owen? Are you good?

OWEN: Hey, Testament. I'm very good. Thanks for having me here.

TESTAMENT: Absolute pleasure. We're gonna talk through three key points today: the theme of the power of nature; technique – both poems use personification to show that power; and how the narrators in each poem respond to that power. Right, first, let's just quickly run through what these poems are about. Both 'Exposure' and 'The Prelude' are autobiographical. They are based on the poet's lived experience. Wilfred Owen, who wrote 'Exposure', was a war poet and died in World War I. Owen, what happens in 'Exposure'?

OWEN: 'Exposure' is about a group of soldiers in the First World War in the trenches. But what Wilfred Owen writes about is not a moment of fighting; it's a moment of waiting. And it's in the middle of winter. So what they're really suffering from is that extreme cold and that fear of what's to come.

TESTAMENT: I'm gonna talk now about William Wordsworth. William Wordsworth was a romantic poet. The Romantic Movement happened in literature, art and music in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and one of its main themes was nature and the power of nature. Remember to check out the Bitesize website for loads more information on the Romantic Movement. You don't need to know everything about 'The Prelude'. Owen, can you tell us what happens in this extract?

OWEN: So, essentially, we've got Wordsworth as a young boy. He borrows/steals a boat.

TESTAMENT: Cheeky.

OWEN: Very cheeky. On the lake. And at the start of this extract, you know, nature feels quite safe. But as he rows out across the lake the mountain peaks start to rise above him. And he finds it quite frightening.

[music plays]

TESTAMENT: Okay, now we've got some context, let's get into our first key point, because while 'Exposure' is a war poem and 'The Prelude' is a romantic poem, both of these poems are about the power of nature. The first quote I wanna talk about is from the first line of Wilfred Owen's 'Exposure': 'Merciless iced east winds.'

OWEN: It's a really strong first line, isn't it? Because it sets us immediately in that cold winter landscape. It's the sound world of this first line. If you listen to that, "The merciless iced east winds."

TESTAMENT: There's a lot of "sss" going on.

OWEN: A lot of "sss". It feels like those really cutting winter winds.

TESTAMENT: And in 'The Prelude' we've got the speaker out in nature, but nature is something huge and scary. This is a great quote: "The grim shape towered up."

OWEN: Yeah. And it comes in the middle of this extract. And it's as if the line itself suddenly rises up. He says "towered up." You see all of your associations with towers, but you feel as if all the towers you've ever known have suddenly got movement. So, you know, even as I'm talking to you I'm sort of leaning back 'cause it's as if something huge is rising in front of me.

[music plays]

TESTAMENT: [makes rapping sounds] Okay. So, for our next key point we're staying with the mighty power of nature. And we're building on that, because both poems share a technique. They both use personification to show this power. Owen, can we dig more into personification?

OWEN: This is a device that poets use. And what they do, essentially, is they give something that isn't human, like a cliff or the wind, they give this non-human element human qualities.

TESTAMENT: I love the personification in 'Exposure'. You've got "air that shudders". You've got "mad gusts". Obviously, gusts of wind, but they can't be mad or, you know, lose sanity. You know what I mean? "Mad gusts." And then, of course, that first line that we talked about, "the merciless iced east winds that knife us." It's like a person, isn't it?

OWEN: That personification, it builds on itself. So first of all the wind is "merciless," which—

TESTAMENT: What does "merciless" mean?

OWEN: To act without mercy. So, with real intent to cause harm. And this is—

TESTAMENT: And no-, no kindness there being shown.

OWEN: Exactly. No kindness. Kind of a relentless cruelty. But then it-, the line continues to say that the wind is "kniving" us. "The merciless iced east winds that knife us."

TESTAMENT: Ouch.

OWEN: Yeah, exactly. So you're feeling that pain. But also what's interesting is that you're probably coming to this poem knowing it's about the First World War; you're expecting the violence to come from the fighting in the war. And here it is: it's coming from the wind. 'Cause really, we know the wind isn't choosing to be cruel, it's not choosing to hurt them. But in the poet's way of describing this moment it feels as though everything is out to get them.

TESTAMENT: And in 'The Prelude', about halfway through, something really interesting happens. And nature, which has been fairly normal so far, suddenly changes. And we get this mountain that turns into a person and starts coming for him. We get lines like, "Up reared its head." So, lifted his head. And "towered up." And this great quote, "Strode after me." Imagine that. A mountain striding after you. To be clear, a mountain hasn't actually turned into a person. This isn't a horror movie. This is a literary device.

OWEN: So he's rowing out into the lake. And as he does, the mountain appears – as you say, appears – to rise up. It's not really rising up. Wordsworth uses personification in all the ways that you've spoken about to really turn the volume up on that sense of awe and fear. You know, so the idea of it striding after him I'm sure is again the poet projecting their own guilt upon the mountain. And the way that he describes it that really works for me is using this word "towered". It's a very powerful, visual word, isn't it? But it's a moment that also marks a turn in the poem, doesn't it? A shift—

TESTAMENT: It's like there's a-, it's like a gear shift. It's like all of a sudden it's one kind of speed or tone and then... twitch.

OWEN: It is, it is. And if you want to in your exams, there's a really useful word that you can use here, which is "volta". So "volta" is the Italian word for a turn. And it's become the term that people use for that shift in a poem.

[music plays]

TESTAMENT: For our final comparison we're gonna talk about how the narrators in both these poems feel about the power of nature – because they have different responses, don't they?

OWEN: Yeah, they do. I think from the very start of 'Exposure' you can tell that they feel hopeless. And that it isn't just them. You know, all the way through the poet is using the collective pronouns of "we" and "our" and "us". Whereas in 'The Prelude' there's a shift. At the start there's a real confidence in the young Wordsworth as he nicks the boat, you know, and he feels quite comfortable in nature. But then as he rows out into the middle of the lake there's a real shift and he experiences that awesome power – that dark awesome power.

TESTAMENT: Yeah, there's a great quote near the beginning of 'The Prelude' which sort of shows this sort of young arrogance. The speaker says, "Proud of his skill." But this pride crumbles when faced with nature. Let's pick out some lines from 'Exposure', because in that first stanza we've got the word "wearied" and towards the end we've got the line "we turn back to our dying." It's pretty heavy.

OWEN: It is. The volume is turned up on that. Now, of course, on the one level, you know, dying is natural, everything dies. But because of everything that's gone before we have to feel that there's a sense of pointlessness. These soldiers aren't just living in fear of the fighting and in the pain of the natural weather but essentially they're facing their own death.

[music plays]

TESTAMENT: Okay, so to wrap things up, let's go over what we've learnt today. Both poems are autobiographical. 'Exposure' is a war poem and 'The Prelude' is a romantic poem, but both share the central theme of the power of nature. In 'Exposure' the speaker is being battered by what?

OWEN: "The merciless iced east winds."

TESTAMENT: And in 'The Prelude' we've got this huge mountain.

OWEN: "The grim shape towered up."

TESTAMENT: Both use personification to create images that show this power. Again, "The merciless iced east winds that knife us." And the mountain that gets a head and legs in 'The Prelude'?

OWEN: "Strode after me."

TESTAMENT: Yeah, "strode after me." And finally, in "Exposure", the speaker submits to this power all along. They are...?

OWEN: "Wearied."

TESTAMENT: While in 'The Prelude' the speaker starts off "proud of his skill," but ultimately they have to acknowledge the power of nature. Thank you, Owen. That was awesome.

OWEN: Thank you, Testament.

TESTAMENT: And thank you for listening to this Bitesize poetry podcast. And if you want to be proud of your skill, we've got plenty of podcasts to help sharpen you up. Just search Bitesize on BBC Sounds. Peace!