

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 5 – Comparing 'Remains' and 'Kamikaze'

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TESTAMENT: Yo. Welcome to the Bitesize Poetry podcast. My name is Testament. I'm a writer, rapper and poet, and your guide to this series. I'm showing you how to write about poetry in your GCSE English literature exam. Make sure you check out the first three episodes in this series, where we cover the fundamentals of what you need to know.

But today, we'll be looking at 'Remains', by Simon Armitage and 'Kamikaze', by Beatrice Garland.

We're going to talk through what these poems are about and give you three points of comparison. The theme, the psychological effects of conflict, the use of the first person and third person, and tone. And we're lucky enough to be joined by the writer of 'Remains' himself, Simon Armitage.

SIMON: Hi, there.

TESTAMENT: So Simon, 'Remains' is such a powerful poem. Can you tell us what it is about?

SIMON: 'Remains' is a poem about post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. So, people who've seen or experienced things which are very damaging to them psychologically, and they struggle to get over it.

TESTAMENT: So how does this manifest for the soldier who's the subject of this poem?

SIMON: Well, the soldier in the poem was a real soldier, and I actually took a lot of his verbatim testimony. These are the things that he was actually saying to me, his little verbal mannerisms and his phrases, and I brought them straight into the poem. And he told me the story of how he'd been involved in a shootout. He'd ended up killing somebody. And the guilt of that, and the memory of that, the trauma of that incident, stays with him. It remains with him.

TESTAMENT: So, I want to turn now to 'Kamikaze', by Beatrice Garland. This is a poem about a kamikaze pilot, someone who supposed to die as part of a mission.

SIMON: So, this is about a man who sets out on a suicide mission and decides not to go through with it. And he then has to live with the shame and dishonour of not killing people, which, when you put it in those terms, sounds incredibly bizarre. And it's his family, actually, who shun him.

TESTAMENT: For people who don't know, this is World War Two, these kamikaze pilots would be sent out in a plane with loads of explosives on it, and they would fly them into normally the enemy ships for

the Japanese Empire. By doing so, you're honouring the emperor and honouring your family and you're honouring your culture.

[music]

TESTAMENT: Remember, there's loads more about both these poems on the BBC Bitesize website, so make sure you check those out. So, the first key comparison we're gonna dig into is the psychological effects of conflict. In your poem, Simon, we have someone haunted by violence, unable to function in society. It's an internal crisis. And in 'Kamikaze' we have someone who's turned their back on violence, but find themselves shamed and shut out of society. So that's more of an external crisis. Simon, can you read a section of your poem for us?

SIMON: "And he's carted off in the back of a lorry. End of story. Except not really. His blood shadow stays on the streets and out on patrol, I walk right over it, week after week."

TESTAMENT: Thank you. Well, that line, his blood shadow stays on the street. That line, Simon. It's a strong, haunting image, a shadow. So, is that shadow one of the meanings of the title, 'Remains'?

SIMON: I think the word remains echoes through the poem. There are the remains of the dead man on the ground. But there are what remains of those remains in the soldier's head when he comes home. That phrase blood shadow. When we interviewed the young soldier, that's what he said. He used those words. This man had bled out on the pavement and left the outline impression of his own body. And as soon as he said it, I knew I was going to use it in the poem. It's a readymade compound image. It's a very, very strong phrase.

TESTAMENT: Can you just define what is a compound image?

SIMON: Uh, it's a very compact form of language that creates a picture of something. So, without having to describe it in literal or graphic terms, it speaks for itself. I think an image also does something a little bit subconsciously. It triggers something emotionally in us, as a response. Rather than just comprehending it or understanding it, we actually feel it.

TESTAMENT: I'm just going to read two lines from 'Kamikaze'. "They treated him as though he no longer existed. As though he no longer existed". Now this is a simile, really, which shows the lasting after effects of the decision which the kamikaze pilot made.

SIMON: If he had carried through the mission, he wouldn't have existed. Uh, he decides not to, so he does still exist, but he's being treated as if he doesn't. It's interesting to me in the poem that the moment when he seems to decide to turn round is when he thinks of his own father and the fishing boat that he might have been sailing down in the sea. He does see the beauty of the world underneath him. And presumably that makes him think of his own life, and the value of his own life, and the value of the lives of others as well.

[Music]

TESTAMENT: The next key point I want to talk about is perspective. Simon, your poem, 'Remains', is first person narrative, someone telling the story from their own point of view. What did this allow you to do in this poem?

SIMON: I want you, as the reader or the listener, to experience the poem as if he's standing in front of you, telling you an anecdote or a story. One of the ways in which I've done that is to use fairly colloquial language. This is, you know, for want of a better phrase, street language, language that you would use with your friends. It's not grand, lofty, poetic language. It's very casual.

TESTAMENT: In 'Kamikaze' the use of perspective seems a little bit more complicated, cos it begins in the third person. They treated him as though he no longer existed, and it seems to be quite distant. And then we shift into the first person, and we realise that the narrator is actually really close to this kamikaze pilot, and we get this sense of familial relationship. It's talking with a family member that you actually know. We hear about my mother. Why is that distancing being used, do you think?

SIMON: Sometimes as a writer, you feel as if you can be a bit more daring with the language if you stand at distance from the subject, so you don't get over emotionally attached to it. And I think that's what's happened here, really a certain amount of detachment, because they're not too close to the story.

[music]

TESTAMENT: Finally, we're going to compare the end of both poems, and we can really tell a lot about the tone, I think, from both of them, because they both have quite bleak, seemingly hopeless, endings. The last line of your poem, Simon, is "His bloody life in my bloody hands". Let's talk about that. Why the repetition, bloody?

SIMON: I suppose there's something dramatic going on there. He's using strong language, but it's literal. He's got blood on his hands. That's what we say when people are guilty.

TESTAMENT: And then there's the bleakness of how 'Kamikaze' ends, where the kamikaze pilot wondered which had been the better way to die. So there, at the end of 'Kamikaze', we have the word die. Although the kamikaze pilot hadn't chosen a physical death, or maybe he has died in another way, in a more metaphorical way, at the end of the poem.

SIMON: It's a very powerful line at the end of "Kamikaze," because what he's experiencing there, because he chose a path of peace, is a social death.

[music]

TESTAMENT: Okay, let's wrap up what we've learned. We have two poems about the psychological and social impacts of war, the horrors of killing. Even when you haven't gone through with the killing yourself. Both talk of how society pushes individuals into war, and the writers skilfully show different ways that people are affected. Let's go through the quotes again. In your poem, Simon, we have the soldier who is damaged by what he has seen and done. What is the image he's haunted by?

SIMON: The quote is, "His blood shadow stays on the street".

TESTAMENT: If you can only memorise one bit for your exam, that compound image, blood shadow, that's a really, really useful tool for you. In 'Kamikaze', we have a pilot was sent on a one-day mission to sacrifice himself, but doesn't go through with it. And his society shuns him and ignores him for not going through with it. Simon, can you give us the quote that sort of shows that this is kind of a living death.

SIMON: "As though he no longer existed".

TESTAMENT: Excellent in 'Remains', Simon, what perspective are you using?

SIMON: First person

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TESTAMENT: And 'Kamikaze', we seemingly start with the third person narrative, which then definitely shifts to first person in the final two stanzas. Thank you, Simon Armitage, and thank you very much for listening to this Bitesize poetry podcast. We've got plenty of other podcasts covering science and a lot of the other texts on the English curriculum.

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