

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 6 – Comparing 'The Emigrée' and 'Tissue'

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TESTAMENT: Yo, welcome to the Bitesize Poetry Podcast. I'm Testament, I'm a writer, rapper and poet. And in this series, I'll be comparing poems and looking at language, form, structure, theme and context, the main things you need to know for your exam. Make sure you've got a pen to make notes cos I'm gonna be giving you some really good quotes to use.

And if you haven't listened to the first few episodes in this series, you really should. There's some super useful tips to analyse poetry, and to make you feel more confident about getting your head around all those texts. So, make sure you go check them out. But now if you're good to go, let's go.

TESTAMENT: In this episode we're comparing two poems, 'The Emigrée' by Carol Rumens and 'Tissue' by Imtiaz Dharker. We're going to tell you a bit about each poem, and we're gonna compare three key points: The theme of identity and conflict, the language – both use light and sunlight imagery – and the context.

And guess what, I'm joined by Imtiaz Dharker, the poet herself, so you know this episode is gonna be worth your time. Imtiaz, hello.

IMTIAZ: Hello Testament.

TESTAMENT: Imtiaz, tell us a bit about your poem first. We've got all this paper, important paper like maps, but also paper that seems unimportant like shopping lists. What would you say the poem is about.

IMTIAZ: I was just exploring the idea of what causes arguments and how to resolve them. And whether there was any way to avoid conflict that comes from political differences or religious differences or, differences about how you're going to live or what your identity is. All of these are things that people fight over.

TESTAMENT: So, the title 'Tissue', it seems to have a double meaning here. Paper but also it can mean skin as well, is that right?

IMTIAZ: I began to think about the fragile tissue, like the fine slips of grocery shops, which are part of everyday life. And we ignore all those everyday parts of life as if they don't matter. We throw them away, all the bits of tissue. I move on from that by the end of the poem to human skin, and how that is thrown away in times of conflict, in times of war.

Human tissue, human skin, is treated as if it's something that doesn't matter.

TESTAMENT: So, you're layer by layer taking us from tissue meaning paper to something really real and I guess more important, which is skin.

IMTIAZ: And I move towards you, your skin. This isn't an impersonal thing, I'm talking about us.

TESTAMENT: So, let's talk about 'The Emigrée' by Carol Rumens. In that poem the speaker's remembering the country that they left as a child, and they've got this really clear vivid strong memory of the place. But they can't go back now because it's a country in the grip of war.

IMTIAZ: I love this poem. Carol Rumens is talking about the country that's been left behind. And there's a whole feeling of longing there in that idea of something left behind but, what does she remember? I left it as a child but my memory of it is sunlight clear.

TESTAMENT: So, for our first key point we're thinking about identity and conflict. In 'The Emigrée' Carol Rumens is writing here in the first person, so writing from the perspective of an emigree, someone who's left their country. She writes, "I have no passport", what does this tell us?

IMTIAZ: For someone who's come from a place where there is conflict there is huge instability in having no passport.

TESTAMENT: Mm, it's a simple statement but it's so powerful. It's using an absence of a document to say that you can't return to that place, but also you haven't got a clear identity anymore. Let's turn back to your poem Imtiaz, 'Tissue', because there's so many details and meanings there. Can you read your first stanza for us?

IMTIAZ: "Paper that lets the light shine through, this is what could alter things. Paper thinned by age or touching".

TESTAMENT: I love the line, "Paper thinned" by age or touching, ah, what do you want the reader to think about there?

IMTIAZ: What is the thing a person wants? To be paid attention to. When you pay attention to it you may be touching, you're looking at it. And I'm also suggesting that it's something like skin as well, because skin thins with age or touching, skin is a thin and delicate thing.

TESTAMENT: Okay Imtiaz, so the next key point we're gonna focus on is the language that you and Carol Rumens have chosen in your poems. Here in both poems, we've got light imagery. Each stanza in Carol Rumens's poem ends with the word sunlight. What does that do?

IMTIAZ: It gives emphasis, but also the feeling of return. When you come back to the word it's like almost as if she's returning to the country that she's lost.

TESTAMENT: What a great poetic device repetition is. When a poet repeats something, something is going on and it's worth looking at. And your poem 'Tissue' Imtiaz we've got this other quote that relates to sunlight. Ah, you write, "sun shines through the borderlines". What are you saying with this line?

IMTIAZ: The light is literally shining through, breaking through the barriers and the maps and the borderlines. Breaking through all the things that can separate people, that they find to use to separate themselves from each other. So, the light is a kind of hope.

TESTAMENT: And for our final key comparison we're gonna think a little bit more about the context that these poems were written in. Carol Rumens is British, she's from London. People writing about her poems have often noticed that she writes about the idea of elsewhere. Can we talk about that for a bit, what is writing about elsewhere?

IMTIAZ: I think all of us have a history, an idea of something left behind. Very often that thing left behind is the thing that people see as their identity, as their real identity.

TESTAMENT: This is not autobiographical even though she's written it in the first person.

IMTIAZ: Poets do that all the time. You use the I and you can take on the voices of other people and have dramatic monologues and be someone totally different. That's the beauty of imagination and words and making things up. Very often the reader thinks the I is the poet. It doesn't have to be.

TESTAMENT: That's fantastic. So this is a first-person poem, it's a dramatic monologue. If we want to back that up in our exam we can use the quote, "I. I left as a child, I have no passport". I like the way that, although that it's first person which makes it feel personal and specific, she never actually names a country or the city where the emigrée is coming from.

So really it could be applied for anybody fleeing a war zone or thinking about refugees, it's kind of general. You yourself have experience of living in different countries, don't you? Did you bring any of that history to 'Tissue'?

IMTIAZ: Yes, I always say that I don't want to be put in a box or labelled. So there's always that trying to break out of things, trying to break out of ideas that people have of what your identity is. The assumption that you are certain things because you look a certain way, or sound a certain way.

TESTAMENT: So, we're thinking about conflict, which applies to both poems. And borders come up in both poems, leaving countries is crossing a border, and you directly refer to borderlines. What do you want to say about borders?

IMTIAZ: For me the borders are the – the thing that people can use very often as a symbol of separation. And being able to pass through that, being able to let the sunlight break through that, is a way of dealing with, ah, the whole complex city of borders.

TESTAMENT: Let's wrap things up, and let's go over the quotes one more time. Imtiaz in your poem 'Tissue' we've got all this paper, paper that constructs meaning and identity, our lives. But identity isn't stable, ah, it changes as it goes through our lives and we can peel off the layers through each stanza. And we've got a really great quote about paper here. And the line is, "Paper thinned by age or touching".

In 'The Emigrée' we have a missing document, something telling us about place and identity and belonging – "I have no passport". 'The Emigrée' is a first-person poem, and there's a really easy quote to back that up, it's just the word 'I'. Both have the imagery of sunlight, sunlight gives us hope. What's the word that ends every stanza in 'The Emigrée'?

IMTIAZ: Sunlight.

TESTAMENT: Yep sunlight. And in your poem we also have, please give us the line.

IMTIAZ: "The sun shines through their borderlines".

TESTAMENT: Thank you, Imtiaz for helping the sun shine through. Showing us all the ways poets use language and imagery to create meaning and emotion in us. And thank you for listening to this Bitesize Poetry Podcast. Remember there's more about the poems we've talked about today on the Bitesize website. There are loads more Bitesize revision podcasts you should check out. And you can search Bitesize on BBC Sounds.