

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 11 - Comparing 'Cozy Apologia' and 'Living Space'

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TESTAMENT: Hey! Welcome to the Bitesize poetry podcast. I'm Testament, a writer, rapper and poet, and your guide to this series. We'll be comparing poems and looking at language, form, structure, theme and context. Make sure you've got a pen to make notes because I'm gonna be giving you some really good quotes to use. And if you haven't listened to the first three episodes in this series, you really should. There we give you useful tips to analyse poetry. If you're good, let's go!

TESTAMENT: In this episode we're comparing 'Cozy Apologia' by Rita Dove and 'Living Space' by Imtiaz Dharker. And to help us do that – I can't believe it – we've got the acclaimed poet and writer of 'Living Space' herself, Imtiaz Dharker here with me. Hello!

IMTIAZ: Hello, Testament. I'm happy to be here.

TESTAMENT: Today we're gonna be looking at three key points: the style – the conversational tone both poems share; the language – both use the language of faith; and we're starting with theme, because these poems share a similar theme, which is happiness or hope in uncertain situations, or potentially dangerous situations. Both are about houses, or homes, but are they safe houses? Imtiaz, tell us about your poem 'Living Space'. It describes a makeshift place to live.

IMTIAZ: Yes, well, I was living in Mumbai in India and working with people who live in the huge migrant colony that's there at the edge of the city. And people have made places to live out of corrugated sheets and tarpaulin and things left over from other people's lives. It's a place that looks as if it's held up with sticks and string and scaffolding. And to me that began to look like an image of the whole world.

TESTAMENT: And you talk about this fragility in-, in this line, "These eggs in a wire basket." Did you actually see those-, those eggs?

IMTIAZ: I did. And in the middle of it all, in the darkness, there were these eggs, these beautiful, perfect eggs.

TESTAMENT: So this imagery is two things at once. It's a detail from something you actually saw in real life but it's also imagery as a metaphor for life continuing in these really difficult circumstances. In 'Cozy Apologia' by Rita Dove, the speaker of the poem is addressing someone that she loves – she's talking to her loved one. And they are inside in a house together, while outside a very real and dangerous hurricane is coming their way

IMTIAZ: The hurricane is on its way, and that's a threat of chaos. In my poem the chaos is there and it's permanent; in this poem it's a threat that's on its way.

TESTAMENT: So when we compare these poems we're looking at the idea that there is something positive, something joyful or hopeful, even if it's imperfect. Now, remember, you always need quotes to back-up your answers. I loved that line in your poem, Imtiaz, 'Living Space', where you end the first stanza and it says, "The whole structure leans dangerously towards the miraculous."

IMTIAZ: There's a... a double edge to all of these things. Yes, there's hope; there's also danger.

TESTAMENT: It's such a beautifully balanced line, 'cause on-, on one part of the line he's-, it's "leaning dangerously" and on the second part of the line it's "towards the miraculous". So you've got danger and then you've got this lovely miracle, this hope.

IMTIAZ: And actually, both of these poems are about a world that's off balance or about to go off balance.

TESTAMENT: Both writers here, yourself and Rita Dove, are using juxtaposition. And juxtaposition is deliberately placing together of words that have different feelings. And sometimes putting those things together creates a new feeling. It might be a good idea to pull out the words "dangerously" and "miraculous", or to write out that whole line, 'cause that is a really good key to unlocking what the poem is about.

Let's think about 'Cozy Apologia' by Rita Dove. So, this poem, it's a house. This is a different kind of house. Do you think it's a messy house? What kind of house is this?

IMTIAZ: It's a place where there's a kind of happy untidiness. But people have their places in it. "You're bunkered in your Aerie, I'm perched in mine." So they're comfortable in those spaces. Look at the title of this poem: 'Cozy Apologia'. I mean, it's almost as if she's laughing at herself for being contented. And she's saying, "Still, it's embarrassing, this happiness." You know, it's almost like how dare we be contented when the world is in a mess and there's a storm coming up and everything's the way it is. She's taking that storm but she's linking it up to the kind of storms of being young and a teenager. She's going back to that: "Brings a host of daydreams." And she remembers the bad boys, the "worthless boys", that she was involved with.

TESTAMENT: Right. So "Big Bad Floyd", this big storm, she's kind of belittling it by giving it a bit of a cheeky name. She even says that it's-, it's not driving up the coast of America, it's "nudging". So what's useful to know about this poem is that it's written about a specific hurricane – Hurricane Floyd – which damaged the east coast of the USA in 1999. People even died in the storm. But here the poet tries to make it less scary by calling it "Big Bad Floyd." That's a good quote. And also the line, "Today a hurricane is nudging up the coast." Who can be scared of a hurricane that's just nudging along?

TESTAMENT: Next we're going to talk about the style of the poems, because something else they both share is tone. Here the tone is conversational. Imtiaz, one of the things I love about this poem is

that it sounds like we're just chatting. Quote: "There are just not enough straight lines. That is the problem." It just sounds like you're chatting to someone over a cup of tea, doesn't it?

IMTIAZ: Exactly. How do I deal with this? How can I solve this?

TESTAMENT: In 'Cozy Apologia' the speaker is addressing their partner, and then through the poem we get all these details that seem to say that this is a relationship that has been there for a while, for a long time. So this is a comfortable – or, like the title says, a "cozy" relationship. So it's conversational because she's talking to someone she's cozy with. Imtiaz, let's have a look at the penultimate line, the line before last, which is, "To keep me from melancholy," brackets, "[call it the blues]." I like how she puts "call it the blues" in brackets, like it's a-, a cheeky personal joke? It's almost like it's not said out loud but it's almost in private between her and her lover.

IMTIAZ: Yes. Well, there's a tone right through the poem of almost humorous, you know?

TESTAMENT: Mmm.

IMTIAZ: A laughing at herself, laughing at themselves, laughing at this embarrassing happiness they have. And so when she says "melancholy [call it the blues]" it's almost like a-, a private joke, a conversation between the two of them.

TESTAMENT: So, if you were writing about this conversational tone you could include the quote from 'Living Space': 'That is the problem.' And from 'Cozy Apologia' you could use the line, in brackets: '[call it the blues]'.

TESTAMENT: For our final point, let's talk about language. Both of the poems use the language of faith, of religion. Imtiaz, we've already said that your poem has the word "miraculous" in it, and also faith directly comes up because your poem even ends on the line "the bright, thin walls of faith." A beautiful line. "The bright, thin walls of faith." Why did you use those lines?

IMTIAZ: Again I was just thinking of how fragile this egg is and how fragile the hope is.

TESTAMENT: Mmm.

IMTIAZ: And I'm using faith in a very broad sense, not in a very, er, tightly religious sense of religious faith. I'm talking about the faith that gives people the hope to carry on.

TESTAMENT: Mmmmm. And turning to 'Cozy Apologia', we have the line: 'We're content, but fall short of the Divine.' So there's a language of faith there again.

IMTIAZ: Again she's not making huge claims for what they are. "We're content, but fall short of the Divine." She's not saying it's a perfect relationship, she's not claiming that their happiness is perfect.

TESTAMENT: Okay, so, before we go, let's recap what we've talked about today. We've got two poems that share the theme of happiness or hope in tricky situations. We've got two homes that aren't perfect. In 'Living Space', quote: 'There are just not enough straight lines. That is the problem.' And in 'Cozy Apologia' we have people 'bunkered' against the coming storm. Both poems share a conversational tone and quite direct language. 'Cozy Apologia' is addressed to you. And both use the language of faith. Imtiaz, how does your poem end?

IMTIAZ: "The bright, thin walls of faith."

TESTAMENT: Stunning. You've gotta file-save that one. And for our final quote, here's one from Rita Dove: "We're content, but fall short of the Divine."

TESTAMENT: Well, I'm feeling content, and I'm feeling confident you can pass your exam. Remember, you can listen again to help memorise those quotes. Thanks for listening to our BBC Bitesize podcast. There's loads more to help with your revision. Just search Bitesize on BBC Sounds. Bye. [brief fading-out of music]