

Six Women Poets – Carol Rumens – a discussion worksheet on two of her poems

Two of the selection by Carol Rumens concern her father, one focuses on his life, the other on his final illness and death.

A Dream of South Africa

1. Make a list of the facts that are revealed about the father in this poem (what he did for a living, where he worked etc).
2. Now mark every reference or image or connection with the sea. What is the significance of these?
3. Look at stanza 4. What was his dream? How did he like to imagine himself?
4. What conclusion does the poet come to about her father's life in the final stanza?

December Walk

Look at the structure of the poem. Why is it divided so clearly into two parts?

I think the poem's 'success' comes from the use of images, visual and otherwise, and the impressions made by these. Have a look at them and consider the effects they create.

'He was **like frozen washing**,
the arm my hand clutched
a brittle stick, '

**'his complexion, white as a china-
doll's'**

'he groped the few yards
around the hospital block
as if it were stony miles'

'Perhaps he was right
and **this was a great journey**.
Perhaps **a lifetime of hopes
and conclusions was arrayed
along that gravel strip'**

'Outside the day was still, breath-white
- the shroud he would be sewn in.'

'The organ takes up the pretence,
**and the chrysanthemums, trembling
their frilly gold Baroque**
through the icy chapel air.'

he **'lost all the weight of himself'**

'words **melting off his back
like snowflakes'**

'...a willingness, **flat and English
as the whited winter sky**,
to be always disappointed.'

**Notice the weather references and also
the use of literal details such as 'the
dark suit that wasn't his'; 'a shred of
tissue'; the 'plain pews'.**

Six Women Poets – Carol Rumens – discussion worksheet.

Read both poems several times before considering the following questions.

'Gifts and Loans'

1. How and why does the relationship begin – give details and evidence from verse 1.
2. What is the meaning and significance of the word 'delicately' in line 5?
3. What do we learn about the way these two talk about their families in verses 2 and 3?
4. Explain lines 16 and 17.
5. How do they imagine their relationship could develop? Which two words make clear to the reader the contrast between the dream and reality?
6. Explain fully from your understanding of the last stanza why their relationship does not develop into something more than friendship.
7. Comment on the significance of the word 'haunts' in the final line.
8. The style is narrative and appears very 'free' partly because of the amount of enjambement. Count the number of syllables in each line. What do you discover? Are there any exceptions? If so, why?
9. What makes this a poem rather than a very brief short story?
10. Does the title have a deeper meaning than the obvious reference to the loaned book and gifts of fruit?

'A Marriage'

1. This poem belongs with 'Gifts and Loans' and concerns the same couple. What difference in perspective do you notice?
2. In stanza 1, what does 'he' bring back to London after the weekend? Which two words, linked by alliteration, reveal something about his marriage?
3. What do 'rosewood' and 'broadloom' refer to and what do they tell us about the man's home?
4. What kind of relationship does he now enjoy with his grown-up children? What is the telling word here?
5. Which details in stanzas 4, 5 and 6 make the picture of his marriage seem rather like a painting and almost too good to be true? Whose perspective is this, do you think?
6. What do the metaphors in stanza 7 suggest about the character of the man and about the relationship between him and the narrator?
7. How does the narrator protect herself from wanting more from this relationship?
8. Consider the role of apples in the whole poem.
9. Now compare the two poems. Differences in tone, attitude, style and effect? Which do you prefer and why?