

Originally

(from Carol Ann Duffy *Selected Poems*, here treated as unseen poetry)

Analyse the effectiveness of the techniques employed in the following poem.

The best approach, I suggest, is to give an overview of the poem in the first paragraph, describing its form and briefly what you think it is about as a whole. You should then go on to identify the techniques used in detail and relate these to your interpretation of the meaning. Remember, there is more than one interpretation - the examiner wants to see that you have thought carefully about the relationship between the techniques used and the meaning, and it is this that will tell him/her how good you are at literary criticism. When reading the following critique, highlight the literary terms that have been used during the analysis. Which other words or expressions are used to ensure the comments are analytical?

This poem is written in blank verse in three stanzas, each of a uniform eight lines. It is a philosophical critique of journeys and moving on, both physically and spiritually. The register of the poem is intimate, but aimed at an audience of intelligence and sensitivity. It is paradoxical that the author seems to long nostalgically for the past and the stasis and security of being protected against the harshness of life, and yet realises that reluctantly one must face up to the necessity of experiencing changes in community and environment. This leads to a deep-seated interrogation of where she is from and ultimately who she is.

The first stanza contains a series of “connections” between certain words using assonance, rhyme and half-rhyme. For example, “fields” in line 2 connects with “wheels” in line 3, “Home, Home” of lines 4 and 5 relate to “rooms” of line 6, and finally and more strikingly, “more” of line 7 and “paw” in line 8. The effect of these is to emphasise the order and the familiarity of the “home” being left behind; all these pairs of words are nostalgic reminders of times gone by. By the second stanza, the rhyme is gone completely, showing the unfamiliarity of the new world.

Another device used by the author is to contrast scale, for example, the feeling of belonging to “our own country” compared with the personal familiarity of a “red room.” This “red room” may even be a metaphorical reference to the womb, the ultimate symbol of absolute dependence and originality. Later in this stanza, we see a build-up of increasingly personal locations, almost as if a camera is zooming in: “as the miles rushed back to the city, the street, the house, the vacant rooms...” There is a crescendo up to this point. “Vacant” not only describes the rooms, but also the emptiness of this crescendo: it leads nowhere. This is further increased by the phrase “where we didn’t live any more.” The diction here is simple and bare, and designedly so, to emphasise the futility and uselessness of hanging on to something which belongs to the past. There is alliteration in the first stanza (“fell through the fields”) which, together with the rhythm, add to the lyrical quality. There is also contrast (“our mother singing // our father’s name.”) This gives us an impression of a balance of warmth and love, and of all being well. There is imagery used too, to striking effect (“I stared // at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.”) This is a childhood comfort as much as the location is. The oxymoron used suggests that the intimacy of the surroundings is also just an illusion, and the child has been deceived.

The second stanza has become starker and more direct. Instead of the unreasonable child-like need for stability, portrayed by “bawling “Home, // Home””, there is now a more considered appreciation of emigration. The syntax is mimetic of the different types of emigration: “Some are slow...” is a long meandering sentence, punctuated by commas, emphasised by the rhythmic alliterative accent on the sibilant consonant (“Some...slow...standing...stays.”). “Others are sudden. Your accent wrong.” are strikingly short, direct and clipped, emphasised by the short consonantal sounds (“c” and “t”) and here again, the contrast between the two types of emigration is marked. The language is also starker and uglier, “big boys eating worms,” for example, to portray the unsavoury reaction to the new, strange surroundings. The simile of “anxiety” and “loose tooth” suggests uneasiness of which one is always conscious.

The last stanza shows a dulling of the senses. The syntax is again significant. The three commas in the first line, together with the diction, shows the author’s search for a sense of comfort and familiarity. Even now, she cannot find the words she wants to sum up her nostalgia. She starts with “forget” a definite and pronounced word, then moves to “don’t recall”, a much weaker expression and finally ends with “change.” This inherent self-doubt is accompanied by a tone of self-condemnation: the alliterative sibilant “s” sound in “seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only a skelf of shame” is a clear indication that the poet is angry that her brother simply blends into his new surroundings, copying the disgusting local habits to gain anonymity. However, it is ironic that at this moment of absolute contempt, the poet herself uses a northern dialect word, probably remembered from her childhood, showing that nothing can completely obliterate one’s past. Once again, it is the rhythmic accent of these sibilants that conveys the sense of disgust so convincingly. The simile of the snake, itself a hissing creature associated with threat and danger, is onomatopoeic, and speech and voice are, perhaps, the most marked symbols of foreignness. Once these are gone, there is nothing to indicate the past life. There is an ambivalence to this powerful image, however, as a snake’s shedding its skin is a natural and necessary process, and perhaps there is a resigned acceptance that such changes are a natural way of recapturing a sense of belonging.

The interrogative rhetorical technique (“Do I only think...”), without answers, builds in a crescendo of longing. The word “only” indicates the poet has lost much more than those concepts in her somewhat emotive list, the rhyme of “first space” and “the right place” the most emotively nostalgic moment of the poem. However, the form of the poem is significant. The exposition and interrogation of the concepts of identity and belonging in the first two stanzas can never be resolved in the third. Indeed the author has a crisis of identity, and the hesitation mimes this lack of identity.

The deeply personal and subjective nature of the poem is its underlying appeal. The coldness and objectivity of analysis of the second stanza cannot be maintained and this only leads to a tone of contempt, resignation, and an inability to answer basic questions concerning identity. Overall, the poem is about emigration, both physical and spiritual, from that which is familiar, warm and secure to that which is unfamiliar, foreign and hostile. It is a necessary process, but this necessity fails to make it any easier to bear.