

Comparison between *Storm on the Island* and *Exposure*

'The Great War was senseless; senseless in its outbreak, senseless in its prosecution, senseless in the slaughter of what became a lost generation.' Although war poet Rupert Brooke was referring to World War 1, in a sense these ideas can be applied to many other conflicts such as 'The Troubles' - a thirty year conflict of political violence in Northern Ireland. In both 'Exposure' and 'Storm on the Island', the characters are victims of the elements. Owens' 'Exposure' depicts a platoon sitting in the trenches in World War 1 waiting to be attacked, only to be slowly killed by nature, especially the cold. However, in 'Storm on the Island', the islanders think they are well prepared and then realise that the storm is far more powerful than they could prepare for, which could be seen as an extended metaphor for 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland.

The title 'Exposure' is, perhaps, misleading, causing readers to assume, maybe, that the soldiers are 'exposed' to the enemy soldiers. In fact, the poem is very much devoid of action; 'Exposure' focuses on soldiers who were exposed to harsh weather conditions during their days and nights of waiting in the trenches. Other Owen poems, such as Spring Offensive and Futility also explore nature as enemy. It is one of Owen's recurring themes.

Conversely, by having no article to begin the title, Heaney generalises so that 'Storm on the Island' could describe any storm on any island; there is a sense that Heaney is not writing about one storm in particular, but about many similar storms. Interestingly, however, the first eight letters of the title spell the word Stormont - a reference to the government buildings of northern Ireland in Belfast. Additionally, the word 'island' sounds similar to 'Ireland'; thus the poem could be seen to be working on two levels: as a description of a storm and as an extended metaphor for the political situation in Northern Ireland.

In terms of language, 'Exposure' features textured language that appeals to our five senses, especially our sense of touch and hearing. Owens' use of alliteration, sibilance and fricatives, for example, in 'merciless iced east winds that knife us . . . streak the silence', not only intensifies the soldiers' sense of isolation but also maintains the atmosphere of death's close proximity. Additionally, the poem's use of heavy, assonance, patterned musicality and rich vocabulary ('snow-dazed... sun-dozed'; 'glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed / With crusted dark-red jewels') indicates a writer who owes an immense technical debt to Keats' odes. The poem could almost be regarded as a disguised tribute to Keats.

In contrast, two of the most noticeable aspects of the language in 'Storm on the Island' are its change in tone and use of direct address. Heaney begins his poem with the islanders expressing a solid sense of confidence; the short, simple independent clause, 'We are prepared', exudes an almost unbreakable feeling of assuredness, before compounding this with a list of the reasons: 'we build our houses squat / sink walls in rock and roof...' Additionally, the repetition of the

consonant 'r' sound emphasizes confidence, as if they are ready for conflict. The alliteration also forces us to focus on the meanings of the words which are being alliterated; 'rock' signifies strength which supports the speaker's confident attitude from the first line; 'roof' signifies protection, thus they protect each other with strength. However, there is a contradiction in line 6, when after establishing that 'there are no trees', the narrator says they 'might prove company'; suddenly the tone changes from line 6 and begins to allude to a feeling of loneliness and fear.

The form of 'Exposure' is ambiguous and thus, it can be interpreted in a number of ways; it appears to be a hybrid form of a ballad, elegy, interior monologue and autobiographical poem. For example, if we perceive the poem through the lens of an elegy, we could focus on its sense of lamentation and mourning for the soldiers who suffered and died in World War 1, as well as other wars; it can also be seen as expressing a feeling of loss in a broader sense of human morality, especially because the soldiers are essentially abandoned to the elements by the society they are serving. Another fact supporting this idea is that Owen believed English poetry was not fit to speak of heroes and because, 'My subject is War, and the pity of War', his common form of choice was the elegy. Therefore, we could say that Owen is lamenting or mourning war and its brutal yet futile nature, the dehumanisation of the individual, and is expressing the feeling of loss of human morality at the expense of a pointless war.

Similarly, there are two main ways we can see the form of 'Storm on the Island'; it is generally considered to be a dramatic monologue or free form poem but seems to not conform fully to either; perhaps, it is a hybrid form combining elements of both. For example, dramatic monologues explore the experiences, emotions, needs etc that all people share, especially considered as a situation from which it is impossible to escape; the general condition of human life including psychology, sociology, politics, etc. In 'Storm on the Island' the first-person perspective allows us to experience the speaker's growing realisation of the savage power of nature, and this development is emphasised by Heaney's use of the present simple tense to give us the impression almost that the scenario is unfolding in front of our eyes.

In conclusion, both poems explore, in a literal sense, humanity's powerlessness against the forces of nature, however, they both use nature as a vehicle through which the poets want us to explore the wider consequences of conflict. Owen did not believe, like many war poets before him, of the "glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power," of war. He believed that war was pointless, and this is the recurring theme throughout his poetry: the futility of war; the use of natural elements helps to emphasise the pointlessness of war because it causes the soldiers to die slow and painful deaths and, thus the brutality of nature intensifies the sense of futility of war that Owen was so keen to portray. There is a connection, in this sense, to Heaney's poem because it appears to expose the consequences of hubris; the characters in 'Storm on the Island' knew what was coming but fooled themselves into believing they were 'prepared' for it - at first, they are smug, then the storm hits and they realise how unprepared they are for the savage power of nature. Owen was keen to dispel the myths about war being glorious and exciting; he wanted to 'expose' the reality, that war is futile, unjust and horrific beyond all comprehension, while Heaney appears to expose Ireland's lack of awareness of their preparation for 'The Troubles' - the poem can be read as an extended metaphor about the conflict in Ireland. Ultimately, both poems can be read

as exposés about the realities of war, that it is horrific and brutal beyond all comprehension. While we may be deceived about notions of honour and glory as Owen was in his youth, and as much as we may believe that we can prepare ourselves for conflict, the viciousness of war is something that can only be truly understood when we are caught in the middle of it. Both poems seem to offer the typical warning inherent in tragedies, that it is better to learn from the mistakes of protagonists in these texts and understand that war should be avoided, almost at all costs.