

Living Space

- by Imtiaz Dharker -

Activities

A

Students need to know that the poem describes a particular place, Mumbai, and the image may help to promote their understanding of the poem's sense of place. The overcrowding, poverty and ramshackle quality of the structures in the picture may help to shed light on how the poet sees a different side of Mumbai people from the image students may themselves have of such shanty towns.

B

The image should elicit discussion of the differences between Western perceptions of the city, compared with the poet's appreciation of the resourcefulness and resilience of the citizens.

Students' first reading of the poem may shed light on the poet's own, perhaps surprisingly appreciative view of the city. Some tentative selections of references to support these ideas may be offered by students here.

C

The structuring of the first stanza leads the reader to the startling use of 'miraculous' as the last word. There should be some productive discussion about ways in which the city and its inhabitants could be considered 'miraculous'. The religious connotations of the word may prove a good talking point.

The verbs highlight the precarious quality of the buildings. Students should also note the personification of 'thrust' and 'clutch' and some discussion of the effects created may include the idea of the city as a living entity or of the desperation or tenacity implied by these strong verbs.

The enjambement used here may be better noticed by reading the stanza aloud. The disjointed sounds of the lines perhaps recreate the jagged, crooked skyline phonologically. Students may also notice the internal rhyme patterns of 'Beams'/'seams'/'leans' and the plosive alliteration of 'Beams/balance..'. Discussion should focus on effects created rather than simple identification of devices.

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D

The change of mood started by the use of 'miraculous' is continued. The human angle is introduced for the first time in the poem and the mood of wonder at the resourcefulness of the city's people is highlighted.

E

Students should be encouraged to probe the imagery for themselves because Dharker rarely uses images which have a direct or single meaning. The image of the eggs may, for some students, encompass ideas of the fragility of human existence in the city. The contrast between the crooked, man-made structures in the first stanza and the 'fragile curves of white' might suggest nature's perfection and clarity. Other ideas resonant in the imagery here may include religious connotations in the use of the colour white, the 'gathering of the light' and the 'walls of faith'. These ideas are also linked with the use of 'miraculous' in the first stanza. Students may perhaps hear echoes of creation myths here in the 'slanted universe' and the 'dark edge' and in the image of an egg as the source of life itself. To develop a willingness to interpret and probe images and ideas here is the main aim of the task rather than pinning down the equivalent meanings of the image.

F

Students may be able to discuss the way the 'living space' is described as a physical place in the first stanza but becomes a more ambiguous, possibly more universal idea or belief by the end.

In the first stanza, mostly short statements are used, while the whole of the next two stanzas form one sentence, creating a much more fluid rhythm which changes the tone and tempo of the poem.

The 'living space' is both a place to live and a place which is alive and both meanings could be addressed. The structure of the poem could be highlighted by the way in which in the first stanza, the description is focused on the physical, whereas the ending is more abstract and metaphorical.