

Antonia's Story

- by Owen Sheers -

Activities

A

Learners should be able to work out for themselves what has happened. Divorcing the facts from their interpretations may shed light on how little is explicitly said. It should also emerge that the second and the last two stanzas add nothing new to the facts of the case.

B

The prompts could be used to highlight how closely based on her perspective the poem is. A sense of the poem as only one version of events could be helpfully elicited here. Unheard versions such as that of the dead man or an unbiased observer might be considered at this stage in order to shed light on the strange effect of the incident on Antonia.

C

The filtering of the narrative through a 'reporter' of events is an obvious but subtle feature of the poem. The structure of the poem is entirely dependent on the idea, as is highlighted by this activity. Learners can decide for themselves whether this device makes her 'story' more or less credible, or whether the reporter is reliable, perhaps with some focus on selecting possible evidence from the text to support their views. Some useful discussion of the effects created may also be elicited by different versions in first or third person.

D

The strange contrast between the violence of the content and the tone of the poem is the focus here. Learners should be able to identify the knocking on the door as a violent act and to highlight specific words which describe it, such as 'dull' and 'thud.' Learners may also consider 'fists' to highlight the violence of the action. Antonia's reaction is more subtle and more open to interpretation. The way she seems almost soothed by the knocking could be elicited from a close study of the language and the rhythm of the stanza.

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E

A range of possible interpretations should be encouraged here. Some learners may consider the beauty of the image of the dead man as reflective of Antonia's shock and disbelief, others may be distrustful of the hypnotic quality of the language here and find her reaction disingenuous. An increased tolerance for, and perhaps enjoyment of, the ambiguity of the language and mood of poetry would be a good outcome to the study of this poem as a whole.

F

The many connotations of the apple in the image might be considered here, as well as the impact of the subtle changes between the stanzas. The substitution of an image from nature for a violent death might be addressed. The sense of a 'gift' from nature, contrasting incongruously with the sound made by the falling body, may prove a productive area for discussion. Some learners may focus on what the image might suggest about Antonia's attitude to the man and his death. The use of 'ripe' and 'ripening' is particularly odd when applied to the dead man. The rather chilling or sinister effect evoked by this image is perhaps more important to elicit than an exact 'meaning'.

The image of the 'madman's finger preaching in the wind' is also rich in possible meanings. Some ideas to explore may include the implication that the dead man was unhinged in some way, which may suggest obsessiveness considering his actions. The 'preaching in the wind' may remind learners of how Antonia seems unconcerned about his feelings. Again, an understanding that the ambiguity of the imagery is consciously created, deliberately striking and mysterious, is important here, rather than striving for a definitive interpretation.

G

There are a lot of possible observations here to encourage a really close reading of the poem. The change of 'dull thuds' to 'loud thud', the use of 'echoing' in different ways, 'the rustle of blood', 'fists on the door', the different use of 'wild' - the effect of the language, the repetition and the subtle changes could be usefully discussed. The tone of the poem is reliant on these rather hypnotic repetitions and patterns. Learners' critical vocabulary could be expanded and developed by suggesting ways to describe the tone or atmosphere of the poem.

The narrative organisation of stanzas should be noticed by learners. The use of a two line stanza in a poem of quatrains should elicit some discussion, particularly about the repeated 'surprised by the persistence of love.'

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H

Learners will need to decide for themselves whose love persists and what evidence there is for their views. There may be some support for the idea of the man as a 'madman' crazed by obsessive love for a rather cold, indifferent Antonia - 'surprise' may seem a very strange reaction to the death of a man, for example. Other interpretations may be suggested by the mysterious, detached tone of the poem or some learners may see Antonia as causing the man's death or even being comforted by it in the last two stanzas.

Further activities

I

Write the story of the poem from the dead man's perspective, perhaps in poetic form, based on the structure of the original or in a different form altogether.

Look for other poems which you have studied which would make a thoughtful comparison with 'Antonia's Story'. What would you consider to be the main theme of the poem? Which poetic techniques would you say are characteristic of the poet's style here? Other possible links between this poem and others studied may be explored.