

Teacher notes 1

‘At the border, 1979’

Choman Hardi

Hardi was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1974, but her family fled to Iran while she was still a baby. Saddam Hussein needed to weaken the Kurds, who wanted more self-government, and he signed the Algiers Agreement with the Shah of Iran, agreeing to drop Iraq’s claims on territory on the northern border between Iran and Iraq if Iran stopped supporting the militant Kurds. Following this agreement, the Kurds in Iraq were forcibly relocated from their homes. All Kurdish villages along a 1,300-kilometre stretch of the border with Iran were destroyed.

Less than six years after signing the treaty, Iraq attacked Iran to invade the border lands. These border disputes once again started a war between Iran and Iraq that would last for eight years. Therefore, when she was five years old, with Saddam Hussein president of the Iraqi Republic, Hardi returned with her family to the country of her birth. At the age of 14, however, the Kurds in Iraq were attacked with chemical weapons. There were mass killings and disappearances and once again Hardi’s family was forced into exile.

Kurds have almost never had a country of their own. Kurdistan is a very mountainous area, where the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey meet. Since the Kurds are a minority people in these countries, they have not only been repressed, but have had to become refugees to survive.

Hardi settled in England when she was 20 and, although she first wrote her poems in Kurdish, she now writes in English. ‘At the border, 1979’ is one of the poems in her first collection in English, named *Life for Us*, published in 2004, which explores the terror, violence and persecution of war, alongside the pain of displacement.

Glossary

check-in point (l. 1) a place where official documents are checked

landscape (l. 13) the appearance of the land

inhale (l. 16) to breathe in

encompassed (l. 27) surrounded, enclosed

Students may be interested in reading Hardi’s diary on her website:

www.chomanhardi.com/news.html

Revisiting the border between Iran and Iraq as an adult, she writes:

In the last week we visited the Jaffati valley on the border of Iran. The mountains of this region always amaze me. How harsh! How beautiful! When you see the mountains then you realise that the Iraqi government could not have captured these mountains without the use of gas weapons. They are impossible and beautiful.

Introductory activities

Explain the background to the poem by emphasising how the Iraqi Kurds have been repeatedly displaced. Discuss with students how the adult Kurds in the poem would have felt when they were able to return to Iraq after five years' exile in Iran.

Since most of the lines are end-stopped there is a choppy, conversational feel to the poem, as though the poet is remembering the incident in a fragmented way. To raise awareness of this, before reading, give out envelopes containing copies of the poem cut into seven separate stanzas. Ask the students, in groups, to arrange them in the order in which they think the poem is written. This should promote lots of discussion, since there is not a natural progression. However, stanza three should follow stanza two ('it' refers to 'thick iron chain') and stanza five should precede stanza six (both sides of the border being compared). The opening and closing stanzas should be the easiest to detect for foundation-tier students.

Post-reading

- 1 Use these questions for whole-class discussion:
 - a How important do you think it is that we understand the background to this poem?
 - b Why is crossing over the border such an emotional experience for the adults?
 - c 'We grabbed a drink' (l. 2) — why would this be necessary?
 - d Would everything 'taste different' (l. 3) because the food would not be the same? Or is something else implied?
 - e Why is 'continued,/divided' (ll. 4, 5) an effective oxymoron?
 - f Why would the sister's balancing act across the chain be so memorable? Which line contrasts her childlike behaviour to the seriousness of the situation?
 - g How is repetition used for effect in stanzas four and six? What is the difference between the mother's description of 'home' and the child's repetition of the word 'same'?
 - h 'Dozens of families' are standing in the open air, yet somebody says 'I can inhale home' (l. 16). Why do you think the word 'inhale' is used?
 - i How many times is the word 'chain' used? Do you think the poet repeats the word on purpose? What does the word suggest?
 - j The last three words of the poem are 'all of us'. Does this mean just the Kurdish refugees; the refugees and the border guards; or the refugees, the border guards and all the people of Kurdistan?

Differentiation

2 The following is an extract from the poet's diary:

1 September 08 — London

I went with Osman Ahmad (my art teacher when I lived in Seqiz, Iranian Kurdistan) to his exhibition in the Imperial War Museum. My favourite drawing was the one casually drawn on the back of some catalogue on his way to college. It started with one line (outlining a mountainous landscape) which turned into human figures, the figures carrying the landscape along with them as they fled. The unbroken line went down the eight squares and followed the figures' journey all the way down till they became a large mass of small unrecognisable, shadowy beings.

More able students might be interested in following the links on Hardi's website to view her teacher's art at:

www.osmankader.com/index.html

If they were asked to choose one line from 'At the border' to express the feelings in the poem, which line would it be?

Extension

Compare the poetic techniques used in 'At the border' with those used by Minhinnick in 'The yellow palm', another poem set in Iraq.

Answers to 'Find the quotation'

- 1 'The land under our feet continued,
divided by a thick iron chain.'
- 2 'my right leg is in this country
and my left leg in the other.'
- 3 'the same colour, the same texture'
- 4 'The border guards told her off.'
- 5 Lines 12, 13, 14
- 6 'Now our mothers were crying'
'A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.'
- 7 'encompassed'
- 8 'chain'

Activity 1

‘At the border, 1979’

Find the quotation

Pick out words, groups of words or whole lines to support the following statements.

- 1 Using an oxymoron emphasises the idea that, although a chain physically divides the land into countries, the landscape itself still looks exactly the same.

- 2 The two lines give a visual picture of the little girl standing astride the chain.

- 3 To the poet, when she was only five, the land didn’t look any different just because they’d reached the border.

- 4 The border guards have no empathy with the refugees, even young children, who don’t understand what is happening.

- 5 Hardi’s mother thinks Iraq is a much pleasanter place to live than Iran.

- 6 The adults feel very emotional about their return to Iraq.

- 7 The word is used to suggest that the mountains didn’t just surround them — they also grouped everybody together, whatever the name of the country.

- 8 Definitions of this word:

A restraining, confining force; that which secures; a bond; a series of things linked together, or a series of things connected and following each other in succession; a range of mountains.

Introduction

This section includes games and an exercise that can be used when all the poems within the cluster have been studied and students are preparing for the exam. They can be used with a small group or as a whole-group activity. Replaying the activities should improve student responses as they gain confidence and ideas from working together.

Poetry consequences

Poetry consequences will help students to consolidate their learning, recognising similarities and differences within the cluster.

Differentiation

Challenge confident students to go ‘full circle’ by linking the last poem with the first named poem. They could also attempt to alternate contemporary and Literary heritage poems.

Quotation quest

The quotation quest game is only one example of how quotations can be selected and recognised. Further games can easily be put together by students and, whether devised as classwork or homework, multiple copies can provide valuable revision resources.

Comparison card game

The comparison card game, often known as Pelmanism, can be adapted to suit the ability of the players. The first time played, students could be asked to compare poetic techniques only, whereas, in successive games, acquired confidence should make comparison of other aspects of the poems challenging and entertaining.

The second player decides whether the comparisons are acceptable and satisfactorily explained. When only one card remains on the table it should be turned over for both players to see. The winner of the card is the student who can first name the poet. A variation of the game would be to play in groups of three, with two sets of poem titles.

Differentiation

According to ability and/or confidence students should be allotted A, B or C:

- **A** — compare or contrast the language or structure or form of the two poems
- **B** — compare or contrast the poems by commenting on two of the following: language, structure or form
- **C** — compare or contrast all three: the language, structure and form of the two poems

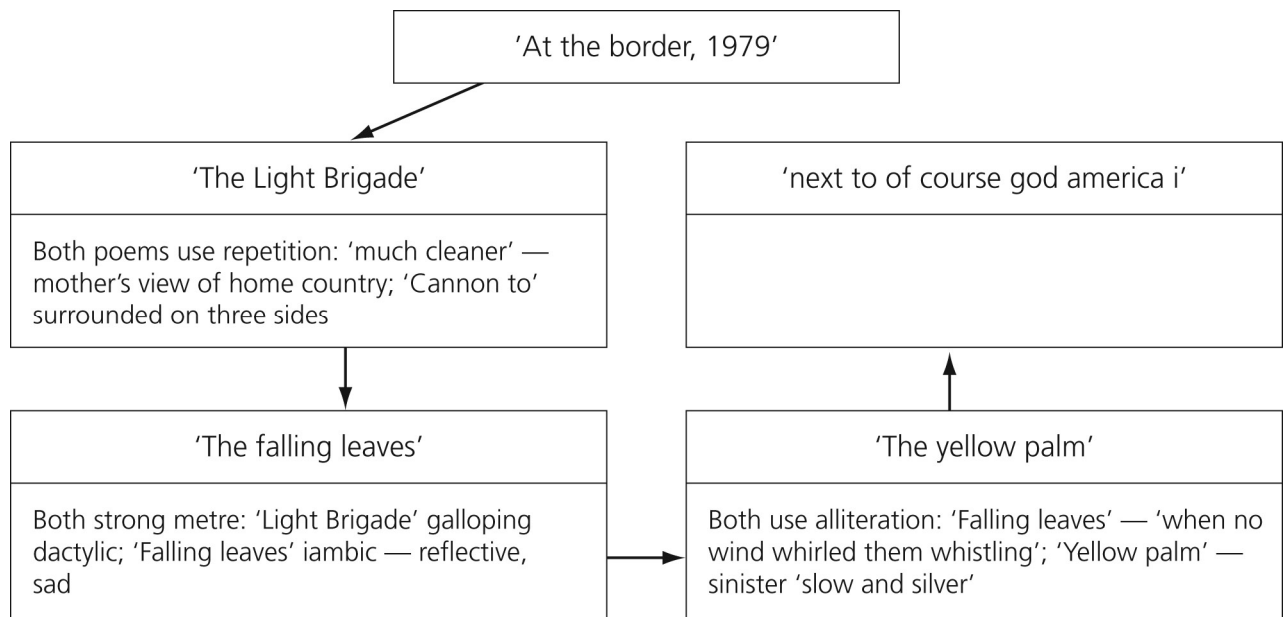
Poetry game 1

‘Conflict’ poetry consequences

Instructions

- 1 Decide on any poem to start off and write the title in the top box.
- 2 Choose any other poem from the ‘Conflict’ cluster that you can compare, using one of the techniques from the list. Write the title in the second box, explain the link underneath and cross off the technique you have used for your comparison.
- 3 Continue until all the boxes are complete and nine different poems have been named and compared. All the techniques in the list should be used.

Below is an example of the way the first three poems could be compared. There are numerous combinations for this game.



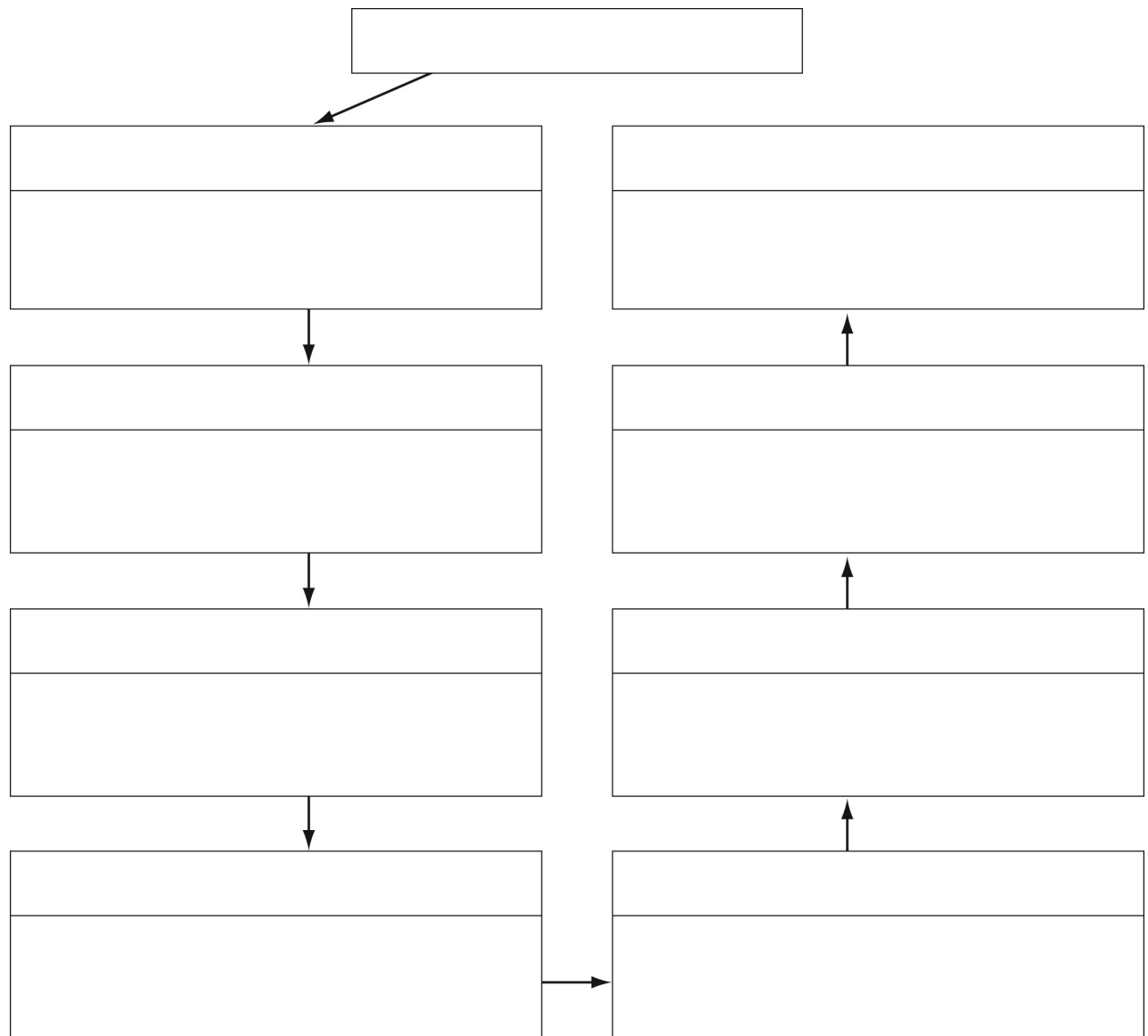
Techniques

repetition
alliteration
metaphor
simile
enjambement
rhyme
metre
regular form

‘Conflict’ poetry consequences play sheet

Techniques

- repetition
- alliteration
- metaphor
- simile
- enjambement
- rhyme
- metre
- regular form



Exam practice 1

Assessment descriptors in practice

Students benefit greatly if they understand what their examiners are looking for when marking their responses. The Assessment Objectives can seem too general and therefore the mark scheme descriptors are being used here. Although they are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, they should help students recognise how to ensure that they demonstrate their potential in the poetry section of the exam. Each descriptor is dealt with at grade C and grade A levels using poems from both clusters.

Descriptor 1 grade C

‘Candidates demonstrate: a considered/qualified response to text’

When the poet sees ‘the brown leaves dropping from their tree’ she sadly thinks about all the soldiers falling to the ground because they have been killed in the First World War. They are wearing khaki uniforms just as the autumn leaves are turning brown.

‘Don’t talk to me of love. I’ve had an earful’ the poem begins. It sounds as though the speaker never wants to get involved with another woman. But by the end of the poem he’s already starting on another relationship.

These are ‘considered’ (thoughtful) responses and ‘qualified’ (supported by quotation).

Descriptor 1 grade A

‘Candidates demonstrate: insightful exploratory response to texts’

‘The brown leaves dropping from their tree’ are a sudden reminder to the poet of the huge loss of young life in the First World War. Written during the conflict, the poet throws up the contrast between nature’s way of renewing life and the unnatural, futile deaths of young soldiers who can never be replaced.

‘Don’t talk to me of love. I’ve had an earful’ the poem begins. The sulky tone and colloquial expression suggest he has been involved in too many relationships where the word ‘love’ proved insincere and a temporary convenience. He really needs the word again, however, in order to seduce his new girlfriend and at the end of the poem humorously substitutes ‘Paris’, a romantic city in which he has little interest.

These responses have ‘insight’, which means they can sense how the poet or persona feels. They ‘explore’ the way the poem is written to gain this personal perception.

Descriptor 2 grade C

‘Candidate demonstrates: details linked to interpretation’

In ‘Poppies’ the mother went into the son’s bedroom and ‘released a song bird from its cage’. I think this means she felt that she knew she had to let her grown-up son be independent. He is going away to war and she has to be ‘brave’ and let him go out into the world, even though war is dangerous.

In ‘Sister Maude’ the dead man is described as ‘the comeliest corpse in all the world’, which makes the dead body still sound good-looking. The grieving woman still loves him and his body would have been put on display for everybody to see, which seems to be a strange Victorian custom.

These responses explain what a quotation means to the student by providing details in the student’s own words.

Descriptor 2 grade A

‘Candidates demonstrate: close analysis of detail to support interpretation’

In ‘Poppies’ the mother went into the son’s bedroom and ‘released a song bird from its cage’. The metaphor could suggest the mother’s emotional response to having to allow her grown-up son his freedom, but could also relate to the sense of release felt by the mother when her child has ‘flown the nest’. Does ‘After you’d gone’ refer to the day the ‘gelled’ boy left for school or the day her ‘young man’ left home to be posted abroad? The song bird could suggest an outpouring of ‘intoxicated’ joy from a young man who was leaving to see the world, or be a poignant reminder of the imminent danger of war for a son who has always been protected in a safe home environment. Just as the mother’s words are ‘turned into felt’ past memories seem to ‘slowly melt’ together.

In ‘Sister Maude’ the dead man is described as ‘the comeliest corpse in all the world’. This seems a strange way of describing the dead body of somebody you love, since the old-fashioned word ‘comely’ doesn’t just mean attractive, but suggests he was pleasing to look at. Even though the Victorians laid out the dead for public viewing, you wouldn’t expect the woman who loved him to think he looked ‘pleasing’. Perhaps, she loved the young man for his physical appearance and was proud that he had chosen her, instead of her jealous sister, Maude.

Both these responses take the language of the poet and suggest what it might mean, considering alternative meanings. ‘Interpretation’ means a personal explanation of meaning, therefore you have the freedom to give your own supported opinions.

Descriptor 3 grade C

‘Candidates demonstrate: appreciation/consideration of writers’ uses of language and/or structure and/or form and effects on readers’

The cruise missile in ‘The yellow palm’ is obviously on its way to destroy the people and buildings in Baghdad and it must be a terrifying thing to see. It is described as ‘a slow and silver caravan’ and the words ‘slow and silver’ are repeated on the next line. The repeated ‘s’ sound makes it sound sly and scary, but the beggar child just looks up and smiles as though there is nothing to worry about.

The farmer says his wife is ‘shy as a leveret, swift as he’. He seems to understand a lot about nature so even compares his new wife to a baby animal. She is as shy as a wild animal, but also runs away as quickly as a hare would, because she’s frightened of him.

Both these responses consider the poet’s language, quote it and explain the effect of the chosen words on the reader.

Descriptor 3 grade A

‘Candidates demonstrate: evaluation of writers’ uses of language and/or structure and/or form and effects on readers’

The cruise missile in ‘The yellow palm’ is described metaphorically as ‘a slow and silver caravan’. The next line repeats the ‘slow and silver’ to emphasise the sinister purpose of the guided missile: not the usual procession of beasts across the desert, but a weapon of destruction, heading across the sky and targeted to destroy certain areas of the city. Collateral damage would usually kill innocent people, yet a beggar child ‘blesses it with a smile’. The alliterative ‘s’, used again, but now describing the child’s naivety, enforces the poet’s opinion that the attacks on the people of this beautiful city are cruel and insensitive.

The farmer describes his reclusive young wife as ‘shy as a leveret, swift as he’ at the start of the fourth stanza. He continues to use similes comparing the terrified girl to other aspects of nature: ‘a young larch tree’, ‘the first wild violets’. He seems to have a definite sensitivity to youth and wildness in nature, yet cannot understand why his wife, a human being, who he admits was ‘too young maybe’, should run away from him. The reader understands the irony of the situation. He should not treat a woman like an animal and needs to talk ‘to her wild self’. It is the ability to talk that separates humans from animals; he can’t ‘choose a maid’ as he’d choose a cow at the local market.

Both these responses ‘evaluate’ the poet’s use of language, which means they judge why it works well and what they think it tells the reader. Note how evaluation of one phrase or line often links to others in the poem, demonstrating full appreciation of how the language is interconnected.

Descriptor 4 grade C

‘Candidates demonstrate: thoughtful consideration of ideas/themes’

‘Honour the charge they made/Honour the Light Brigade,’ Tennyson says at the end of the poem. He wants the British public to know how brave the soldiers were who went into battle because they were told to do so. They knew they would probably be killed but knew they had to obey orders. Tennyson calls them ‘Noble six hundred’ because they were prepared to die for their country.

Duffy writes ‘Time slows, for here/we are millionaires, back handing the night’. She is saying that when you are with the person you love, every minute is longer. She says that each hour is precious so lovers must be millionaires. ‘Back handing the night’ carries on the idea that if you are enjoying being together in the daytime you don’t want the night to come and would give the night a backhander.

Each of these responses explains the poet’s theme by using quotation to back up the candidate’s understanding of what the poet is trying to say.