***What Were They Like?* By Denise Levertov**

Introductory film – images of Vietnam War

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InRDF_0lfHk>

*Teacher in My Pocket* videos Parts 1 & 2

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEHrg6bTiq4>

*helpmemrdavies* videos Parts 1 & 2

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdZWuRhAsWA>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlstZXKdGc4>

**BBC Bitesize Revision Notes**

In this unusually structured poem, Denise Levertov makes the reader think about the effect war has on the population and culture of a country, with specific reference to the Vietnam War (1955 – 75). Although she is critical about the way a nation and its culture could be disregarded, this is done very subtly through the way the poem is set out.

There are clearly two speakers in this poem (the questioner and the responder) but it is not immediately clear who they are or what attitudes they have. The questioner could be a reporter, an army officer, a tourist, an anthropologist or any number of other people. The responder's identity is also not clear; s/he might be a Vietnamese person, a junior soldier, a tour or museum guide or a student. How you ‘read’ the questioner and responder characters will affect the way in which the attitudes and themes within the poem are revealed. The first speaker, for instance, may be curious, annoyed or calm; the second may be polite, sarcastic or upset. Try reading the poem using different combinations of tone to get this effect.

Underneath all of this, however, is the poet's voice. Levertov writes her poem with a sense of sadness. Loss, regret and even anger also run subtly throughout the poem.

# THEMES

# The effects of the war in Vietnam is a key theme of the poem

A number of unifying ideas or themes run through the poem. Different readers may attach more or less significance to each of these themes, depending upon how they view the poem.

| Theme | Evidence | Analysis |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **War**: the poet explores the effects of war (specifically the Vietnam war) on a nation and its people. | 'When bombs **smashed** those mirrors/ There was time only to **scream**.' | The harsh realities of war are exposed by the image of bombs being dropped into the paddy fields and the sound of people dying. |
| **Culture**: different aspects of a culture are explored in the various questions and responses – art, literature, music, language, religion, technology. | 'It is not remembered.' | This repeated phrase in the second section of the poem emphasises that many aspects of the Vietnamese culture have been lost or forgotten. |
| **Anger**: the calm responses of the responder seem to be at odds with the rage that might naturally be felt at what has taken place. The anger is supressed. | 'Sir, laughter is **bitter** to the **burned** mouth.' | The poet's underlying anger at what has taken place is made clear by the horrifying image and the alliteration (series of words that have the same first consonant sound) of '**b**itter' and '**b**urned'. |

Question:

* What does Levertov convey about Vietnamese culture and her feelings about it?

Answer:

* The questions in the first block of the poem refer to different aspects of a culture.
* The answers reveal how war has destroyed or altered these aspects.
* The tone of the poem subtly conveys a sense of deep anger and sadness about this.

Interpreting and analysing a poem is not necessarily a matter of finding the right answer.

* Poems are complex creations and are open to many different interpretations. Your interpretation is as valid as anyone else's - *as long as you can back it up with suitable evidence from the text.*
* Remember to avoid simply identifying what techniques or approaches poets use. Aim to show an understanding of how form, language and structure create meanings and effects.
* Below are some differing interpretations of the poem. How would you interpret the poem?

Examples

* **Who could the person asking the questions be?**

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| A reporter who fires off a string of questions without waiting for answers. | The questions are numbered just as they might be in a reporter’s notebook and there are no gaps left for responses to be given. |
| The poet deliberately does not reveal who is asking the questions as she wants to suggest this could be a number of people in a variety of different contexts. | The short and abrupt nature of the questions, and the fact the questions are numbered, suggests that someone is asking for straightforward information, without emotion, but that could be for many different reasons. |

* **Interpretation of the line:** 'It is not remembered.'

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| The way this is written shows the awkwardness the responder feels in answering the questions. | Someone would usually say 'I don’t know' so it is written deliberately in this way to show how the responder feels about the situation. |
| The responder displays sadness and regret through their answers to the questions. | The fact that the word 'remembered' is directly followed by 'remember' emphasises the fact that a way of life has been lost and it is difficult to recall it. |

# Form, structure and language

# Form and structure

The poem is written in a highly individual form as two blocks of **free verse**.

The first block contains six questions and the second six responses. The poem can therefore be read in sequence or by moving from each question to each answer. Try both methods to see what effect this has on your interpretation. The poem concludes with a final twist when the person giving the responses asks a **rhetorical question** - 'Who can say?' – which the original questioner does not answer. Also of significance is the pause/gap between the two blocks, perhaps indicating the more thoughtful nature of the responder who considers answers before giving them. This contrasts with the hurried and possibly ill-considered questioning in the first block.

# Language

The vocabulary of the first block is relatively straightforward and simple. All the questions are in the past tense suggesting that the Vietnamese culture no longer exists.

By contrast the second section makes use of **metaphor** ('their light hearts turned to stone'), comparison ('their singing resembled/ the flight of moths in moonlight'), contrast (the bones used for making jewellery and the burned bones of the people), **alliteration** ('moths in moonlight') and other literary devices. This makes the responder appear more considered and cultured. It also allows the beauty of the country and its culture to be expressed. The answers are in a mixture of the past and present tense which highlights the sense of confusion caused by the war.

The final statement - 'It is silent now' - is firmly in the present and highlights not only the war ending but also the cultural silence which has followed as a result. It also precedes an actual silence as the poem ends and the reader is left to consider their personal reaction.

Audrey T. Rodgers criticism

In "What Were They Like?" the poem rests upon a dialogue between an innocent—the questioner—and the speaker who "knows" all:

1.    Did the people of Viet Nam  
       use lanterns of stone?  
2.    Did they hold ceremonies  
       to reverence the opening of buds?  
3.    Were they inclined to quiet laughter?  
4.    Did they use bone and ivory,  
       jade and silver, for ornament?  
5.    Did they distinguish between speaking and singing?

There were few metaphoric overtones in this first part; Levertov is dealing with the "facts" of Vietnamese life. The responses comprise the remainder of the poem. The "answers" ironically pick up the language of the questions, and the perversions of wartime are revealed in the "distortions" of a once-revered way of life. What emerges from the answers is the summation of war’s inevitable outcome expressed as metaphors: "hearts turned to stone," children killed, bones charred, bombs smashing mirrors so that "there was time only to scream,"—the destruction of the human spirit. The final stanza—the final answer—strikes a poignant note as an echo of the past haunts the present:

*There is an echo yet  
of their speech which was like a song.  
It was reported their singing resembled  
the flight of moths in moonlight.  
Who can say? It is silent now.*

One might question the format of the poem—a pseudo-journalistic and deliberately cold approach to the catastrophe of Vietnam (so effectively emphasized by the repetition of "It is not remembered"), but the device is reminiscent of the reportage of the Vietnam War in interviews on television. Equally absent from this poem is the presence of metaphor and symbol in the earlier part of the poem—something we have come to associate with Levertov’s later poetry. True, there is a value in the poem’s "understatement" and lack of intensity that is present in "Life at War," but the horror and the tragic waste of a civilization are present here. The final stanza offers an added dimension of recollected beauty in the image of the flight of moths. One is struck by the reportorial voice of the first six questions contrasted with the graphic images and the poignancy of the final lines. After her visit to Hanoi, as we shall see, there is a subtle shift in tone that reinforces this note of empathy. The silence that closes the poem is juxtaposed to the "echo," which *echoes* in our minds. This is a poem not of anger but of anguish.

"Enquiry," one of "Two Variations," presents us with another perspective—that of a Vietnamese woman who watches the atrocities of war in silence. The omniscient speaker, whom I assume to be a mother, addresses the "killers," those who carry on the "scheduled" destructive business of war and yet sleep at night. The first poem closes with the ominousness of the lidless eyes watching and the reminder that "She will outlast you." The form of the poem—the short lines, sharp images, juxtapositions of burning flesh, writhing, dying children and lidless eyes with the eating, sleeping, buying, selling killers—creates the tone of bitterness. There is no hope here, save that the woman will outlive the killers. And there is little solace from that observation. Here, Levertov allows herself the temptation to preach to the killers—a tone that flaws the first part of the poem. But in "The Seeing," the power of the suffering victims is reminder enough of the inhumanity of killing children indiscriminately. In this poem Levertov reaches the nadir of despair. The tone—not the theme—will change in later poems, but the sheer horror of *seeing* what war wreaks upon the innocent—women and children—cannot be assuaged.

The mother "sees" even with "hands over my eyes" the living and the dead; ironically, the dead are "as if alive" and the living as if dead. Death comes from the skies releasing "wet fire, the rain that gave / my eyes their vigilance." There is no overt emotionalism in the poem, but the fragmented images, the terse lines, the act of "seeing" give emotional weight to the poem. Mere survival itself seems a pyrrhic victory.

Levertov has been censured as "hysterical," over emotional, lacking control and order which she so highly prizes. There is anger but not "hysteria" in the poems in *Life at War*. Yet, the immediacy of the Vietnam War in these poems cannot be dismissed, and the sharp visual images capture the violence and the human indifference to the ravishment of the human body and soul. The images of burned human flesh, lidless eyes, babies nursing at dry breasts, and charred bones are the realities of Vietnam, and the tone fo the "Life at War" poems, while at times bitter, incredulous, poignant, or despairing, is always controlled. The order that Levertov assumes is the antithesis of the horrors she describes—in vivid image collages, in rhetorical structures (such as "What Were They Like?") in measured rhythms and repetitions. That order, for Levertov, is to be the underpinning of her poetry, to be sought and found, as she reaffirms again and again.