

Nature as a possible
catalyst for human
connection in
"mametz wood" and
"father"



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Throughout the collection *Skirrid Hill* (2005) by Owen Sheers, nature is presented as a significant factor to both the development of personal and cultural identity and to human relationships. In “Mametz Wood” and “Father”, the speaker’s attachment to the earth is apparent. However, moving beyond description of the natural world alone, Sheers calls attention to the way in which nature has played a part in these speakers’ lives by exploring the impact of nature on human beings at large.

In “Mametz Wood”, nature is presented as a powerful force, although affected by humans and their creation, both are inextricably linked. Through describing the unearthed fragments of the soldiers as: “A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,” and the “broken bird’s egg of a skull,” Sheers contrasts the birth of new life and the fragility of the human body with the impact of their violent history. The harsh, plosive monosyllabic sounds bite like bullets, evoking a strong visual image within the reader’s mind of the battle that took place. The alliteration of the ‘ch’ sound could also allude to the farmer’s plough, digging up the remains of the “wasted youth [...] as they tended the land back into itself.” This cyclical notion highlights the futility of war, perhaps alluding to the speaker’s criticism of the military, and although the soldiers may be dead, the land will always remember them. The use of the verb “tended” here suggests that the farmers are caring for the land, juxtaposing the treatment of the army towards nature, as though they are seeking to comfort and rehabilitate it. This notion is carried forward to the fourth stanza, where “the earth stands sentinel, / reaching back into itself for a reminder of what happened”.

Through personifying the earth, Sheers implies that nature will guard these

fallen soldiers and their memories. Whilst the second line draws strong links with the first stanza, again a reference to the cyclical theme throughout, the speaker creates a sense of reflection and retrospect: the earth is keeping the soldiers connected to the present by reliving their past, unearthing it so they are not forgotten. Although each tercet in "Mametz Wood" is formed from a single sentence, they are unified by the message they convey, and by the fact that nature will protect what is repressed, returning it to the surface.

Throughout "Father", the speaker draws strong links between the hill that both father and son are climbing and their personal relationship, highlighting the impact nature can have on a human connection. It is significant that Sheers chooses the Skirrid: "It was then that we climbed the Skirrid again", as it acts as an extended metaphor for the physical and emotional distance that has grown between the two, and this yearly shared tradition is a way to overcome this challenge. By describing physical features of the hill, with "that soft cleft of earth / split they say by a father's grief / at the loss of his son to man" Sheers alludes to the myth surrounding Skirrid Hill, that it was formed at the moment of crucifixion by God's grief. In this instance, however, it could also reference a father's sadness at losing his son to adulthood, the inevitability of his son no longer being a boy. The earth's connection to the pair is drawn again halfway through the poem, when the speaker describes his father, with his "bent head the colour of rocks, / your breath reaching me, short and sharp and solitary". Through linking his aging father to the ancient rocks, the speaker strikes a balance between the first half of the poem where the reader is exposed to the father's sadness at losing his son, and now the second half where the son is pained by his father

growing older. The semantic field of aging is further explored through the description of his breath; the sibilance imitates the father's breathing; although it is rhythmic, it is labored. Sheers uses nature to connect father and son on this journey of developing their relationship, through the turmoils of regular life.

Sheers uses structure in both "Mametz Wood" and "Father" to reflect the changing focuses of the poems. In "Mametz Wood", the regular three-line stanzas broken by longer lines suggest the unevenness of the earth, of nature's course impacted by human invention. The first stanza is a single sentence, followed by a pair of stanzas joined by one sentence. This structure is followed throughout the poem, ending ultimately with a tercet formed from a single sentence. The cyclical nature of the poem reflects how the earth and humans will continue to encroach on one another. Through the description of the "notes they had sung / have only now with this unearthing, / slipped from their absent tongues", the speaker is able to form a resolution, the assonance in the final phrase symbolizing the soldiers' unity. The verb "slipped" connotes an easy image, as though the earth has allowed them to easily communicate with the living. In "Father", however, the structure is strikingly different, not employing the use of tercets which are atypical of Sheers' style. The use of enjambed lines and no clear stanza structure could represent the speaker's stream of consciousness, as he attempts to elongate the time he has left with his father. The irregular line lengths create an image on the page of multiple hills, as though the earth physically represents the hardships and ease of the journey both father and son face together.

With these selections, Sheers uses nature as a powerful tool to both metaphorically and literally link humans, as is evident through both poems. Whilst humans and the earth have a significant effect on one another, humans use nature as an organic way to connect with others.