

Individual poem – 1915, roger mcdonald

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1915 is a poem written in free form structure which details the conditions, emotions and deaths of Australian soldiers fighting in the trenches, presumably at Gallipoli in World War 1. As opposed to writing in a structure that rhymes, which traditionally provides a joyful flow to a humorous or exciting situation, McDonald has chosen to present this text in the less constrained free form format. This allows him to express the emotion and hardship within the scene he is describing. Using this structure McDonald is able to easily communicate the bleak and somewhat depressive themes of the poem. The key themes McDonald focuses on are death, longing for family back home, the apprehension of being on death's door and the overall misery that life in the trenches brought to all who served in them.

Death is an obvious theme in 1915 as the entire scene is set for an all-out charge 'over the top' to attack the enemy. McDonald illustrates a graphic moment where soldiers are cut down by machine gun fire,

“ Hard like ice it cracks their shins -

They feel a drill and mallet climb their bones,

Then cold, then warmth as blood spills from pockets, chests and mouths”.

McDonald also uses the machine gun fire as a “ metal voice” saying to the soldiers as it cuts them down,

“ Boys relax, as one by one they totter to their knees”.

These quotations come from the final stanza of the poem and provide a very visual illustration of death in the reader's mind.

Longing for family back home is another theme explored by McDonald, and is a very common aspect of every soldier's life in any war.

“ Others touch their lips on splintered wood to reach for home”

Touching their lips on splintered wood may refer to imagining kissing a loved one that the soldier's missing, or it could mean that for many of the men it will be the last time they remember their families before they die. McDonald has another reference to home in the third stanza saying,

“ As up the scramble, pockets fat with Champion Flake in battered tins,
and letters wadded thick from mum (who says ‘ always keep some warm clothes on....’)”.

Letters from home were the only connection and form of communication any soldier had to back home. These letters would have been one of the most important things to a soldier, as the endless longing to be with one's family again begins to take a sad, depressive turn, as life in the trenches can bring on severe and in some cases suicidal depression.

The third theme McDonald explores in 1915 is the apprehension of being on death's door. Being in the trenches, waiting for the whistle which orders you ' over the top' is an unimaginable feeling to almost anyone. The sheer terror the soldiers must have been feeling is astonishing. McDonald refers to these feelings in the first stanza,

“ The crack of knuckles dropped to sooth the heaving in their legs,

while some, ashamed, split bile between their teeth and hum to drown out their stomachs”.

These descriptive passages set the scene for a brutal battle, and serve as a great insight into the apprehension felt by the Australian Diggers awaiting that deadly whistle blow, to send them to their dooms.

The themes explored in 1915 connect with other poems we have studied. Australian Identity and illustrating the question ‘ what is it to be Australian?’ are also highlighted in Dawe’s Search and Destroy, Exiles and Life-Cycle. 1915 also reminds me of Dawe’s Katrina, the way Free Form is used to paint a verbal picture of loved ones facing death. As well as Katrina, 1915 also made me think of Dawe’s, On the Death of Ronald Ryan how the poet is able to illustrate to the reader what a person may be feeling as they are about to be killed.