

Poetry comparison essay

Profession, Poet



A poem is an expression of emotion or ideas through literary work, often with a distinctive style and rhythm. Kenneth Slessor's 'Beach Burial' and Bruce Dawe's 'Elegy for Drowned Children' both present ideas on how individuals lament for the passed, through the major theme of death. Beach Burial follows the recurring events of the battle of El Alamein in WW2, whilst The Elegy for Drowned Children questions the fate of those unfortunate souls who have drowned. Although both poems incorporate drownin, they contrast in their interpretation of death and the 'afterlife'.

This idea of death is explored through the use of setting, language techniques and symbolism. The poet's use these devices to emotionally connect with the reader, and each contribute to the specific meanings they are attempting to convey. The setting of a poem can range from physical, real-world place, to an allegorical more figurative setting. Not only does setting refer to a specific place, but also a timeframe, which can also be significantly non-sequential or non-existent. Slessor's 'Beach Burial' is based around a distinguished event and a set timeframe, being the 1942 Battle of El Alamein in World War 2.

The death and burial of the drowned soldiers, which form the main content of the poem, are likely be fictional, but still based on a historical event. Physical settings, as illustrated in 'Beach Burial', aid in creating a particular mood for the poem- loss and sorrow. The reader is likely to subconsciously link a war-ridden battlefield location with death- the main theme the poet is attempting to explore. Contrarily, Dawe's 'Elegy for Drowned children' has a more symbolic setting, encompassing, but not referring to, a range of different events.

Instead, Dawe covers the ongoing, recurring issue of the drowning of children by creating a fictional ‘kingdom’, which he implies is where children remain after passing in the water. Through this, he can explore the theme of death and the afterlife in a deeper sense. Language techniques can assist in the description of a certain setting, as well as further explore both poems’ deeper conceptual meaning. Both poems incorporate sound devices and visual devices, as well as other language techniques to improve the degree to which they communicate and appeal to the reader.

The quote ‘the voices of parents calling, calling like birds by the water’s edge’ is a simile used by Dawe to create auditory imagery, incorporating the sound of desperate cry, often made by birds who cannot find their young. Similarly, Slessor uses the simile ‘as blue as drowned men’s lips’ not only to create a visual image, but to further refer to the deeper context of the poem. The use of rhetorical questions ‘Why else would they be taken out of the sweet sun?’ in Dawe’s piece, is to force the reader to subconsciously think about the issue, which in this case is the unfairness and injustice of life.

Although Slessor doesn’t include rhetorical questions in his piece, he uses structure and sequence to reflect the emotional state of the narrator. He does this by beginning the poem with a subdued tone, using softer sounds such as ‘softly, humbly, sway, wander, and rolls’, thus lulling the reading into a false sense of calm. By understating the true theme and subject of the poem: drowning soldiers, the sound’s used in the poem become harsher and more discordant, reflecting the emotional stress caused by burying the dead.

Both poems also incorporate similar rhythmic structures, broken into five quatrain stanzas of irregular metre, with use of enjambment. Symbolism, although a technique in itself, is harnessed by both poets to imply a deeper meaning, largely revolving around death. In *Beach Burial*, Slessor implies that in death, opposing forces are brought together, ‘enlisted on the other front’. In this quote, the ‘other front’ is a symbol for heaven or the afterlife. Likewise, Dawe’s fictional character ‘the king’ is a reference to King Neptune: Roman God of the Sea.

The King takes the children down to ‘his kingdom, one by one’, which is presumed to be the afterlife for drowned children. In this poem King Neptune acts as the great and powerful grim reaper of the water. The King’s ‘sure net’ also symbolises the uncontrollable nature of the calamity, and may express Dawe’s belief of fate and destiny. Although both poets use a melancholy tone and expression to address the theme of death, they also imply that death could be interpreted as a welcoming place, or a new ‘front’-providing consolation to those who have lost loved ones.

Dawe and Slessor use setting, language techniques and symbolism in ‘*Elegy for Drowned Children*’ and ‘*Beach Burial*’ to convey meaning in their poems. As Slessor was a war correspondent during the battle of El Alamein, his piece is highly influenced by this experience. Dawe, on the other hand, has worked a variety of occupations, serving to give him extraordinary empathy with people from all backgrounds. With separate and distinct writing styles, both poets explore the theme of death and beg to provoke the possibility of spiritual continuance after death.