

What were they like essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 'What Were They Like' and 'Nothing's Changed', both Levertov and Afrika illustrate a sense of meaning about 'Viet Nam' and 'District Six' by using linguistic and structural techniques. Levertov explores the loss of the Vietnamese cultures while Afrika represents the racial divide that continues to exist even post-Apartheid. Firstly, both writers use strong language choices to demonstrate their anger towards the loss of culture and racial divide that is apparent in both areas. In 'Nothing's Changed' the poet uses words such as 'hot, white [anger]' to illustrate how frustrated he is.

The anger and rage that has developed inside the protagonist has affected him both physically and emotionally. Indeed, he wants to break the barrier between the two races as he yearns for 'a stone, a bomb, to shiver down the glass'. Similarly, in 'What Were They Like', Levertov also expresses her resentment but in a more subtle way. She uses phrases such as 'their light hearts turned to stone'. This suggests that the Vietnamese people, who were light-hearted and simple people, have become inflicted with pain and distress.

The contrast of 'light' against 'stone' which is heavy effectively shows this. The poets also use references to words that accommodate the semantic field of nature to indicate the sharp contrast between the cultures. In 'What Were They Like', the Vietnamese are referred to as people who 'had their life'.. in 'rice and bamboo' and used 'bone and ivory'. This implies that the Vietnamese people were peaceful people who were concerned with Mother Earth only. Levertov then contrasts this by saying that their 'buds', children, have had their laughter stripped of their 'burnt mouths'.

The poet uses this to convey to the reader that such earth-loving people who ' [delighted] in blossom' and worked in ' paddies' have become ' silent now'. In ' Nothing's Changed, however, the reference to nature is used to make the ' white's only inn stand out'. For instance, Afrika says that the inn ' squats in the grass and weeds'. The inn itself is built upon the very foundations of District Six. The poet is suggesting that the inn is artificial and ' flares like a flag'. Furthermore, the inn is surrounded by ' incipient Port Jackson trees'.

Incipient' suggests that the trees themselves are new. Moreover, ' Port Jackson' trees are not indigenous to District Six and have been imported from elsewhere. In addition, the poets use structure to represent meaning within the poem. In ' Nothing's Changed', anger is expressed by the protagonist as a result of the minimal change that has occurred in the lives of black people. Afrika presents this anger by the repetitive use of the word ' and' at the beginning of lines 11-16. This is used to show the intense build up of the protagonist's anger.

Likewise, the lengths of the lines also gradually get larger to show the anger accumulating inside the speaker's ' bones'. On the other hand, Levertov uses structure to indicate the uncertainty of existence of Vietnamese culture.

Levertov does this by using question marks at the end of the lines in stanza 1. Questions are usually asked to gain understanding about something, however, no one can answer these questions. This is shown by the use of ambiguous phrases such as ' Perhaps', ' It is not remembered' and more.

Lastly, both poets show how cultures have been lost and the racial divide that still exists by their choice of title. In ' Nothing's Changed', a cyclical

structure is created as the ending of the poem repeats the title itself. This reflects upon the poet's message as it shows that segregation still exists within District Six and the blacks still know where they 'belong'. In 'What Were They Like', the title poses a question to the reader and it suggests that this will be answered throughout the poem.

However, it isn't because Levertov ends the poem with the question 'Who can say? This final question reinforces how the culture has been destroyed by the American-Vietnamese war because even at the end of the poem; there is still ambiguity to whether the Vietnamese 'terraces' and 'paddies' existed or not. In conclusion, both poets express meaning to the reader by a mix of both structural and linguistic devices. One shows the segregation and racial divide between black and whites and how this has affected the development of culture within 'District Six'. On the other hand, Levertov demonstrates how culture has been lost by the destruction of 'Viet Nam'.