

Paula Meehan Leaving Cert Poetry Notes

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Overview of Meehan's poetry:

- 1) A sense of place permeates her work.
- 2) Poverty, class and social justice are key themes.
- 3) She explores women's issues and their oppression in the confines of a patriarchal and religious society.
- 4) She is interested in the idea of family and community.
- 5) Her poetry is infused with element of the oral traditional, including colloquial language and peoples' voices.

‘The Exact Moment I Became a Poet’

‘The Exact Moment I Became a Poet’ is a reminiscence of Meehan’s early school days and a cutting comment from her primary school teacher, Ms. Shannon. The form is unrhymed tercets, three line stanzas, short stanzas and short lines, perhaps mirroring the beginnings of a language learner, a young person tentatively finding their voice in writing. There is also a lot of enjambment in the poem, illustrating that the poem is almost like a stream of consciousness, because it is a memory.

An insult from Ms Shannon, has stuck with Meehan and influenced her path in life. The title, so often overlooked by students, runs into the first line of the poem and pinpoints this exact moment, when Meehan’s path towards art and poetry began.

In the opening stanza the teacher is ‘half obscured by a cloud of chalk’, she is physically and metaphorically a shadowy embodiment of education to the working class girls before her. For them education seemed intangible, in many ways opaque and therefore, unattainable.

Meehan gives voices to people within her poems and in this poem it is the voice of the Ms. Shannon pontificating; ‘Attend to your books, girls, or mark my words, you’ll end up in the sewing factory’. At the time this sparked indignation for young Meehan, but with hindsight there is the realisation that there was an element of truth in her jibe ‘the teacher was right’. The poem explores ideas about class and the cyclical and oppressive nature of poverty, a common theme in Meehan’s poetry. For a lot of the girls in the class their ‘mothers worked’ in the factory as did Meehan’s aunt. As an adult looking back, Meehan is able to more fully understand how Ms. Shannon’s words ‘end up’ robbed the labour of its dignity’, or as she puts it ‘back construction’.

Yet, the poem’s key simile of the women ‘trussed like chickens on a conveyor belt’ acknowledges that, although all work has intrinsic value, not all those who worked *are valued* in society. Factory labour can rob women of their individual potential. The image is repugnant, particularly the word ‘trussed’, which means tied up, and it highlights how restricted the women really were.

The final image of importance that you must mention, is the final stanza:

Words could pluck you,
Leave you naked,
Your lovely shiny feathers all gone.

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There are two interpretations of this image; the first is that the condescending words of Ms. Shannon have harmed the girls, by exposing the weakness, the cycle of poverty, that they seem unable to escape from. Another interpretation is that the 'words' are the words of Meehan's poems. The creation of art is an act of vulnerability, exposing your inner thoughts and feelings, to an audience and as a result the very act of writing poetry leaves her vulnerable and exposed.

The overall tone is somewhat meditative; the passing years have taken the sting out of Ms. Shannon's words, and Meehan can recall and critique them in a controlled way.

Overview:

- **Themes: the cycle of poverty, education as an escape from poverty, and the act of writing as an act of vulnerability.**
- **Key images: the cloud of chalk, what Ms. Shannon says, the simile of the chickens on the conveyor belt, the plucked feathers in the final stanza.**
- **Stylistic features: enjambment, Ms Shannon's voice.**
- **Tone: meditative, and critical of society.**

'The Pattern'

'The Pattern' is another poem where Meehan looks back on moments from her childhood. This poem is specifically about Meehan's mother, and it's important to note that she had a difficult relationship with her mother.

The poem is divided up loosely below. Remember this is just as a study aid, do not mention sections in the exam.

Section 1 Stanza 1 to 3 :Remembering her fraught relationship with her mother and her early death.

Section 2: Stanza 4- 6: Memory of her mother polishing the floor with her children around her.

Section 3: Stanza 7-10. Her mother patching the red dress for her and remembering when she wore it herself when she was young, and her grandad dragging her in from the street.

Section 4 Stanza 11-12. Meehan wanting to explore the wider world.

Section 5 Stanza 13: The photo of her mother in the Phoenix Park.

Section 6 Stanza 14-17: Her mother knitting by the fire Meehan holding the wool being reeled back in by her mother.

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The opening of the poem reveals a tension between the Mother and daughter and this is the theme of the poem, Meehan's desire to rebel against a prescribed path carved out by her mother, the metaphorical 'Pattern' of the title. She wants to move beyond the oppressive class boundaries she feels ensnared her mother and choose a different life, a more exotic one, one that would carry her to 'Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops'.

The poem is in an elegy, in **section 1** she mourns the loss of her mother when at the early age of 'forty two she headed off for god knows where'. There's so much to unpack in this line alone. The sadness evoked by the young age of the mother when she passed, the tone of regret and loss, and of course the colloquial language we so often see in Meehan's work, lending an informality, a conversational tone, rooting the poem in the spoken word. Meehan rues the fact that she never got a chance to get to know her properly, as an adult 'without tags like mother, wife/sister, daughter'.

But she also mourns the life her mother never got to lead, oppressed as she was by class, poverty and indeed her role as a mother. In **section two** she questions whether her mother ever got a chance to know herself with the list of rhetorical questions. She wonders during her menial tasks, like shining the floor, 'Did she net a glimmer of her true self?'

There startling image, that one of the few things Meehan inherited from her mother was 'the sting of her hand across my face in one of our wars'. The word 'wars' here illustrating the truly combative and violent nature of their arguments, a generational violence that has an almost casual nature to it. This is seen later in the poem in **section 3** when the grandfather 'dragged' the mother 'in by the hair' for secretly meeting Meehan's father. 'He shoved my whole head under the kitchen tap...scrubbed every spick of lipstick and mascara off my face'. The direct speech used in the poem, a common trope of Meehan's, brings the mother's voice and her personality to life.

In the **fourth section**, the key imagery lies in the pattern Meehan is making for herself beyond the domestic scene of the mother, she was 'sizing up the world beyond our flat patch by patch'. She is breaking the pattern by creating a new one.

In the **fifth section**, the image of the photo of her mother on a bench in the Phoenix park is important because in the photo it seems 'as if she had been born to formal gardens'. This idea that the mother had so much unrealised potential haunts Meehan as well as her mother who seems 'wrapped entirely in her own shadow, the world beyond her already a dream, already lost'. The tone of sadness here evokes great sympathy in the reader.

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The final section of the poem juxtaposes perfectly the two contrasting personality of mother and daughter. Once again colour is important, her mother ‘favoured sensible shades, Moss Green, Mustard, Beige’ while Meehan ‘dreamt of a robe of colour’. The fireplace, another recurring image in Meehan’s poems becomes a place where the mother unsuccessfully tries to tame her daughter’s wild spirit. Meehan uses a playful simile to capture this battle of wills. As her mother knits and young Meehan plays with the wool, her mother drags her back down.

flew like a fish in the pools
Of pulsing light, she’d reel me firmly
Home

The final lines are the crux of the entire poem:

One of these days I must
Teach you to follow a pattern

She gives her mother the final words of the poem, but she didn’t obey them.

The tone changes throughout the poem but mostly it is a poem of regret, regret that her mother had such a hard life and that they never got to know each other properly.

Overview:

- **Themes:** mother-daughter relationships, carving out your own path in life not simply following a restrictive pattern from the past.
- **Key images:** the sting of the mother’s hand, the rhetorical questions, the grandad pulling the mother’s hair, mending the red dress, a symbol of poverty and an act of love, the exotic lands, the photo in the phoenix park, mother knitting by the fire, daughter at her feet.
- **Stylistic features:** mother’s voice.
- **Tone:** regret.

‘Hearth Lesson’

The poem ‘Hearth Lesson’, like many of Meehan’s poems is rooted in a place, in the opening stanzas we are placed in ‘Sean MacDermott Street’ and the colloquial phrases ‘money to burn, burning a hole in your pocket’ act as a catalyst to bring Meehan back to her childhood and the trauma of her parents arguing. She uses Zeus and Hera, the king and queen of the gods, as a sort of tongue in cheek metaphor for her ordinary parents.

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The imagery draws on Meehan's knowledge of the Greek gods from her time studying Classical Civilisation at Trinity. And yet, there may be an earnestness in the imagery too; 'Hearth Lesson' is an exploration of family discord through the *eyes of a child*, and to a young child parents can often seem god – like, in that in a home they wield the most power and they also dictate the overriding mood and atmosphere of a home. The hearth, usually a place of warmth becomes the battle ground in the flat where 'Zeus and Hera battle it out'.

The classical allusion is replaced with the language of gambling as the parents trade insults and accusations:

'she'll see his fancyman
And raise him Cosmo Snooker Hall'

The father accuses the mother of adultery, the mother accuses the father of being absent, and gambling all their money away. In sharp contrast with the earlier grandiose imagery of Zeus and Hera, Meehan describes herself in the quirky metaphor 'I'm net, umpire and court' as she sits in the middle of this argument, not fully understanding, 'most balls/are lobbed over my head', but understanding the root cause.

Marital discord and the effects of poverty on relationships are the key themes of this lively poem. 'Even then I can tell it was money, the of it day after day, at the root of the bitter words'. The poem concludes with a vivid memory. Meehan's father 'handed up his wages' only for the mother to through 'the lot into the fire'. What follows is a beautiful image of the colour, it is important to pay attention to colour in poems, here the burning money lends colour to the dismal scene, transforming it.

The flames were blue and pink and green,
A marvellous sight, an alchemical scene.

The flames in the chimney breast are compared to 'trapped exotic birds', the simile exposing a truth seen also in *The Pattern*, that her mother in particular was trapped by her circumstances. She also has the 'last astonishing word', another element we see in the 'The Pattern', when Meehan uses her mother's voice in direct speech to have the final word.

The overwhelming tone, in the final stanzas, when the embattled parents seem to have run out steam, is of resignation. There is no escape from the poverty, whatever money there is, is not enough and never will be. They are not Hera and Zeus, the bitterness of their impoverished reality permeates the poem.

Overview:

- **Themes: the cycle of poverty and the impact it has on relationships.**
- **Key images and language: Hera and Zeus, the tennis language, the language of gambling, the money burning.**
- **Stylistic features: the classical allusions, her parents' voices.**
- **Tone: combative, moving to resignation.**

The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks

'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' creates a bitter mood with its dark subject matter. This poem in a broader sense deals with the stranglehold that the Catholic Church had on Irish society, to the detriment of women in this society. To illustrate this, Meehan uses the harrowing, true story of Anne Lovett; a 15 year old girl who concealed her pregnancy and gave birth on a cold November night in 1984 to a baby boy, beside a grotto of the Virgin Mary. Both subsequently died, and it caused outrage and shame that this could happen. Meehan tells the story from the point of view of the Virgin Mary, at times veering into blasphemous territory, with the Virgin Mary denouncing her virginity and craving 'to be incarnate, incarnate, maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed'. This sexualisation of the Virgin Mary is the very antithesis of what she represents in Catholic doctrine.

As the title suggests, the narrative of the poem traces a monologue of the Virgin Mary; she discusses the passing seasons as she observes them from her place in the grotto. The November night with 'seeds of ice' at the opening of the poem eventually leads her to recall the plight of Anne Lovett on a similar dark winter's evening 'On a night like this I remember the child/who came with fifteen summers to her name'. The opening imagery is ominous with the onomatopoeia of the 'howling' wind and the 'trees cavort in agony', 'wild things gone to earth'. All of this imagery of nature in chaos, foreshadows the awful events detailed later in the poem.

An important part of the poem is the scathing comments the Virgin Mary makes about society, particularly patriarchal society and how religion is often invoked to justify violence 'where men hunt each other and invoke 'the various names of God as blessing / on their death tactics'. She also accuses the people of the town of turning a blind eye to the realities around them. She is deeply critical of Irish societal attitudes, the repetition of 'tucked up' in the poem highlights the wilful ignorance of everyday people towards girls like Ann. Through the voice of the Virgin Mary, Meehan captures the lack of empathy and compassion that society exhibited:

And though she cried out to me in extremis
I did not move
I didn't lift a finger to help her.

The Virgin Mary examines her position as a deified figure in such a heartless society, 'They fit me to a myth of a man crucified' and 'They call me mother of all this grief', and she appears to reject it. The Virgin Mary of Meehan's poem is not the one we see represented in the Catholic Church, the tone is unfeeling and detached, she lacks the maternal empathy to help a child in need. The simile 'their prayers/ fly up like sparks from a bonfire / that blaze a moment, then wink out' illustrates the futile nature of prayer and faith. She has sexual desires and appears to be a pagan, praying in the final stanza to the Sun. 'O sun...molten mother of us all/hear me and have pity.'

The final line resounds with self – centredness, and the mood we are left with is one of utter desolation.

Overview:

- **Themes: patriarchy, our shared responsibility for the damage religion does to society.**
- **Key images and language: the passing seasons, the November night and nature in chaos, the unfeeling Virgin Mary, Mary's sexual desires, the oblivious town and the desperate image of Ann asking for help and being abandoned.**
- **Stylistic features: the unconventional voice of the Virgin Mary.**
- **Tone: bitter, callous, judgemental.**

'Prayer for the Children of Longing'

The desolation seen at the end of 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' is also seen in 'Prayer for the Children of Longing'. This poem is another elegy, commemorating the young people of Dublin's inner city who died as the result of drug addiction during the heroin epidemic of the 1980's. Meehan was commissioned to write it and read it at the lighting of the Christmas tree on Buckingham Street. The poem has the language and chant-like rhythm of a prayer, as indicated by the title but the deity she appeals to throughout is the Christmas tree:

Great tree....grant us the clarity of ice

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She asks the tree for ‘comfort’, ‘silence’, and ‘quiet’. She longs for this silence to ‘catch the breath of the children of longing’, she wants to somehow save them, those children already lost to addiction. This description of addiction as ‘a longing’ is particularly poignant, the reader questions, what longing did the drugs alleviate for these young people, and how did society let them down by not providing for them as we should have? This is perfectly depicted by the image; ‘The streets that couldn’t shelter them’... ‘the streets that promised them everything that delivered nothing’. The personification of the streets here as a menacing influence is particularly effective.

The short, sharp images depicting the savage nature of addiction is chilling in the poem, ‘the scream, the siren’. The onomatopoeia here adds to that chilling tone which is evoked throughout with the refrain, ‘Here at the heart of the winter’.

Meehan does something beautiful in this poem which is to venerate those most often demonised in our society, addicts who have succumbed to their addiction. She uses anaphora of ‘Let their names...let their names...let their names’ contributes to the sense that these young people should not be forgotten, we owe them that at least.

Overview:

- **Themes: addiction, reframing how we see addiction.**
- **Key images and language:, the personification of the streets, the great tree, the heart of the city, the heart of the winter. The respectful silence and quiet.**
- **Stylistic features: the onomatopoeia, the repetition, the anaphora**
- **Tone: reverent, regretful, sad.**

‘My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis’

This poem about Meehan’s family, this time though it is about her father, and it is a much more forgiving portrait than the one depicted in ‘Hearth Lesson’. There is an intimacy in this poem from the outset because of the images from the comfortable family home, ‘my brother’s room...full of ties and sweaters and secrets.’ She listens to her father as he goes about his early morning, domestic routine, ‘I heard him rake the ash from the grate’. When she sees him in the garden the colloquial language Meehan so often uses, interrupts her observations, ‘What’s he at?’

As alluded to in the title, the theme of the poem is how our perceptions of people are in flux. She admits she is anchored to an image of her father from the past, ‘He was older

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than I had reckoned' until confronted with the physical realities of her aging parent in the sibilant image, 'for the first time I saw the stoop of his shoulder, saw that his leg was stiff'. Then later in the poem he is once again transformed by his actions, the early morning ritual of feeding the birds imbues with him with a renewed youth and vigour, deserving of adulation:

He was suddenly radiant
A perfect vision of St. Francis ,
Made whole, made young again,
In a Finglas garden.

We've seen this type of juxtaposition before; in 'Hearth Lesson', when Zeus and Hera are in Sean McDermott Street trading insults, and here St. Francis is in Finglas garden, feeding the birds. This sense of place pervading her poems, roots Meehan in an Irish context, Meehan's finds her universality in the ordinary and the everyday people and places.

In the final stanza, the urban, or should I say suburban, landscape collides with the natural world as birds come flocking to be fed by her father. St. Francis is the patron saint of animals, and her father takes on this spiritual persona in this ordinary act of benevolence. The remarkable vividness of the image of the sun cresting 'O'Reilly's chimney' at the moment her father 'threw up his hands' is an image of benediction and love. There is a sense of ambiguity, how much do we really know about the people in our lives even those closest to us. This small act of kindness by Meehan's father bathes him in new light for her, this theme of renewal permeates the poem.

Overview:

- **Themes: renewal, aging, our perspectives on people.**
- **Key images and language: the comparison with St. Francis, the birds, the sun cresting the chimney.**
- **Stylistic features: the colloquial language**
- **Tone: intimate, sense of awe at the small act of kindness.**

'Buying Winkles'

'Buying Winkles' is a lyric poem, a tale of a late night childhood adventure through the streets of Dublin. It has allusions to the quest motif of Classical literature, and the tone is more light and playful than some of her poems on the course.

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Meehan is sent to buy winkles, a type of shellfish, by her mother, and although warned in the opening lines ‘Hurry up now and don’t be talking to strange men on the way’, the streets hold little menace in the eyes of the girl and the overall atmosphere is one of warmth, and the vibrancy of life that existed in the tenements. The poem acts in opposition to stereotypes held about the tenements and their occupants, and they are remembered with tenderness by the poet. She shows us the lives of the men and women of her childhood, her mother and the other women are tending children, staying at home or working, while the men are out socialising and drinking.

Meehan enjoys the freedom of the expedition and her simple, straightforward language reflects the voice of the child ‘even in the rain I was happy’. There are lovely images familiar to all childhoods dotted throughout the poem; her ‘dash from the ghosts on the stair’ or the invisibility of a child as she would ‘weave a glad path through men heading out for the night’. She envies the adults their grown up lives when she catches a glance through the door of the pub, ‘I envied each soul in the hot interior’.

The poem is filled with contrasting light and darkness; the blown out bulb on the stair, the moon, the light from the pub, the simile of the winkles themselves like ‘blue little night skies’, the final image of the torches. Sibilance is another important technique employed by Meehan, we often tend to think of sibilance as creating a menacing tone, but here the s’s lend a lovely softness throughout the poem, creating this cosy feeling as we are immersed in the scene.

The winkles represent something exotic in the impoverished landscape of the tenements and Meehan is only too happy to seek them out.

The closing simile of the poem again touches on the child’s naivety, her ‘prize’ filling her with pride; she has accomplished her mission.

I’d bear the newspaper twists
Bulging fat with winkles
proudly home, like torches.

Overview:

- **Themes: childhood adventure, the vibrancy of tenement life, gendered roles of her childhood.**
- **Key imagery and language: the winkles, light and darkness,**
- **Stylistic features: colloquial language, voice of her mother and the winkle seller. Assonance and alliteration lend a musicality.**
- **Tone: excitement, at the end pride, proud of her area and of her accomplishment.**

‘Cora Auntie’

This poem is yet another elegy, divided in three sections. It is a beautiful tribute to the indomitable nature of her aunt, her mother’s sister. The poem’s appeal also lies in the universality of its subject matter, someone going through illness, particularly cancer is something a lot of readers can relate to. The idiosyncrasies of Cora’s personality are evident from the outset:

Staring Death down
with a bottle of morphine in one hand,
a bottle of Jameson in the other

The harsh alliterative ‘d’ sound mirroring the fact that Cora is made of hard stuff.

This opening section of the poem deals with the aunt’s attitude towards her terminal cancer and in doing so it focuses very much on the personification of Death. Meehan describes her aunt’s relationship to death as a sort of reluctant courtship, ‘laughing’, ‘teasing’ and ‘grinning’ at him. Sadly she eventually succumbs to his advances:

It was time to go and leave her
In the arms of Death who desired her so

But her irascible spirit is what shines through, the imagery both irreverent and edifying at the same time.

Scourge of Croydon tram drivers and High Street dossers
on her motorised invalid scooter.

The second section is a flashback to Cora’s youth and her mother and sister’s sewing sequins to her dress for her twenty-first birthday, Meehan uses the vibrant similes to capture the red of the scene, a colour of youth and coming of age:

Sequins red as the lips of maids
...as blood on the bedsheet.

Meehan does something unusual in this poem that we don’t see elsewhere that is worth mentioning. She writes about the fact she is writing the poem, in the poem;

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This red pen on this white paper

I've snatched from the flux
To write this poem.

We are made aware of the suddenness of her artistic inspiration as she writes.

Like many of Meehan's poems this has a feminist edge and we see this in the naming of the matriarchal line, her grandmother, her mother and her aunts and her realisation of their vibrancy only reaching her in adulthood. She uses a metaphor to compare them to stars:

The light of those stars

Only reaching me now.

The final section explores the theme of emigration from the point of view of those left behind. We see the poet has grieved her Aunt twice because she left for England shortly after her twenty-first birthday. The sequins left scattered around the house act like a trail for her, a way to recall her aunt's presence:

All that year I hunted sequins in the house

The final image of 'an emigrant soul' is poignant and loving, we empathise with Meehan's loss. A loss keenly relevant to a country with so wide a diaspora.

Overview:

- **Themes: love, emigration, a community of women.**
- **Key images and language: personification of death, sequins, the aunt on her motorised scooter.**
- **Stylistic features: alliteration, colour red.**
- **Tone: humour, admiration, love, grief.**

'Death of a Field'

'Death of a field' is yet another poem with a social commentary and it is about the loss of green spaces for the development of '44 houses'. The poem is filled with bitterness, Meehan describes how we lose so much more than just a field, we lose the nature that fills the field and the future of that nature. We lose our connection to the land:

The field itself is lost the morning it becomes the site

Repetition is an important technique in the poem the words, ‘memory’ and ‘lost’ are repeated throughout, as the poet tries to capture what she knows will be destroyed:

And the memory of the field disappears with its flora

The use of anaphora is another key technique that is important to mention in the exam. In the eighth stanza she lists all the flora and fauna that will be destroyed when the houses are built and the chemical cleaning products that will replace them: ‘The end of dandelion and the start of Flash’ this creates a particularly oppressive atmosphere in this part of the poem.

Before the inevitability of the construction Meehan goes once more at night ‘barefoot’ to ‘know the field through the soles of my feet’. She craves connection with what will soon be lost: ‘That I might possess it or it possess me’. The poem is a stark warning to humanity about the natural world and our relationship to it.

Overview:

- **Themes: ecological destruction for human benefit. Loss of connection to the land.**
- **Key images and language: the flora and fauna the familiar brand names, memory and loss**
- **Stylistic features: anaphora, contrast nature and chemicals, repetition**
- **Tone: despair, bitterness, grief.**

‘Them Ducks Died for Ireland’

The sonnet ‘Them Ducks Died for Ireland’ is a meditation on those whom history has forgotten. The irreverent epigraph serves as a reminder that many were sacrificed during the 1916 Easter rising.

The poem opens with an image of startling beauty ‘Time slides slowly down the sash window puddling in light on oaken boards’, the soft sibilance adding to the atmospheric nature of the image of the condensation on the windowpane. The metaphor of St. Stephen’s Green as ‘a great lung, exhaling’, and the enjambement throughout, lends to the slow meditative atmosphere as Meehan is reminded of the ‘smoke and fire’ during the Rising.

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She explores how the passing of time means we can now remember those overlooked during the conflict

When we've licked the wounds of history, wounds of war,
We'll salute the stretcher bearer, the nurse in white
The ones who pick up the pieces, who endure'

Her final image is that the 'breathmark on the windowpane' is perhaps as fragile as our statues 'commemorating heroes in bronze and stone'.

Overview:

- **Themes: commemoration, war, passing time and changing perspectives**
- **Key images and language: the green, the nurse, the windowpane, the statues in bronze and stone.**
- **Stylistic features: compound/portmanteau words – bloodprice, moonset. Enjambment. Sonnet.**
- **Tone: meditative, contemplative.**