Belfast Confetti

Ciaran Carson

Apple Inc.

1st Edition
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Ciara Carson, poet, novelist and musician, was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1948. Carson's very name may embody a cross-cultural project (Ciara is Catholic, Carson is Protestant; an ancestor enthusiastically converted), but when he was growing up there was no such mixing. The family lived in a space about a mile square marked by graffiti. He resides in Belfast.

"I write in English, but the ghost of Irish hovers behind it; and English itself is full of ghostly presences," he suggests two influences on his poetry: his bilingual upbringing, and an unusual alertness to language. He shows language being used to enforce, to spy, and - broken into its almost meaningless constituent parts - to commit physical violence, when the bomb in 'Belfast Confetti' is loaded with not only ironmongery but "a fount of broken type." Violence, or its effects, often makes an appearance in Carson's poetry, whether this is found in historical warfare or the more recent conflicts of Northern Ireland. Indeed, Carson's use of the street names of Belfast that
allude to these battles - "Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street" - underlines the violence of the Troubles.

"I see those poems as being very much just as if I were an eye on the scene. As if I were alert to the sounds of the time and what was going on at the exact time”

Wider context

“The Troubles”

Carson was a young man in Belfast when the Troubles began in 1969. ‘The Troubles’ refers to almost 30 years of violence between the nationalists (mainly Roman Catholic) who wanted independence from the UK and the unionists (mainly Protestants) who believed in strengthening the political ties between Northern Ireland and Britain. Armed paramilitary groups, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), made Belfast a terrifying place to live between 1969 and 1997 and much of the violence took place around the Protestant Shankill Road and Catholic Falls Road areas. The British government claimed that its forces were in Northern Ireland to keep law and order, but Irish republicans objected strongly to the presence of the British soldiers.

Want to know more?

http://www.helpmewithenglish.co.uk/page_2111267.html
Poem

Belfast Confetti

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion
Itself - an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire ...
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering,
All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and colons.

I know this labyrinth so well - Balaklava, Raglan, Inkerman,
Odessa Street -
Why can’t I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street.
Dead end again.
S.M.I.L.E. Analysis

Remember, to analyse a poem we need to look at:

- Structure
- Meaning
- Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)
- Language
- Effect on the reader
Meaning

“Meaning” is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and why you think the poet has written it.

Meaning-key points

- 'Where am I coming from? Where am I going', taken from the end of the poem, best sums up the main point of the poem.
- The tone of the poem is tense and insecure.
- The first stanza sets the scene, whereas the second stanza interrogates the scene and the speaker's attempt to understand it.
- He uses punctuation as a means to convey the feelings of violence this scene creates.
- Carson's use of the street names of Belfast that allude to these battles - 'Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street' - this underlines the violence of the Troubles.

Exploration - Meaning

What do you understand by the title of this poem? Is the title ironic? How?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
What does the speaker suggest about himself in this poem?

How is the craft of writing a poem mirrored in the events of the story of the poem?

Structure

Structure refers to the way a poem is set out and organised. Here, you write about things like rhyme scheme, length, repetition and the flow of ideas throughout the poem.

Key points - Structure
• Enjambment and caesura (look -thoughts are breaking up-stuttering (effect of the bomb and psychological damage.

“And/
the explosion/
itsel”

• Carson uses lists when describing the riot squad-dehumanises them suggesting barrier between face to face conflict.
• No rhyme scheme-why?
• Every 2 lines are indented and only contain 1-5 words - we could interpret this as him being trapped within the structure of the poem itself, just as he is trapped within the streets of Belfast.
• The poem ends with “a fusillade of question marks” -what does this say about how the poet feels?
• The shape of the poem resembles a series of guns being fired.

Track carefully the end of the lines... What do you notice?
How about the use of punctuation?

Ciaran Carson makes deliberate use of form to achieve an erratic and fragmented feel within this poem. Why?
Consider the length of line in the poem and how they change. Why do you think Carson writes in this way?

What is the effect of enjambment in the poem?
Imagery

This is where you look at techniques such as similes, metaphors and personification. What pictures has the poet tried to create in your head?

**Imagery - Key Points**

- Carson uses an extended metaphor throughout. He compares Belfast to a sentence broken and blocked up with punctuation marks. Punctuation marks are used to represent:
  - Weapons and debris e.g. “raining exclamation marks,” “this hyphenated line, a burst / of rapid fire”
  - Barricades and stops e.g. “blocked with stops and colons”
- We see this most clearly when the speaker tells us ‘That every move is punctuated”
- This suggests that the city is fragmented and confusing. Like a sentence with too many ‘stops’ ‘exclamation marks’ and ‘question marks’ movement is difficult.
- “A fount of broken type” suggests an explosion of broken words- implies the chaos of the bomb blast. (terrorists used typeface in their bombs)
How does Carson build up sense of panic and claustrophobia?

Why do you think he uses so much punctuation in the poem itself? Why does he make such extensive references to punctuation and language?

What is the significance of the title as a metaphor?
Language

This is where you comment on the language the poet uses. What choices has he/she made, and why?

Key Points - Language

• A “fusillade of questions” suggests that the questions are all firing at once.
• Carson switches from the past to the present tense - what could this represent?
• Street names refer to Crimean War-perhaps a reminder?
• “Stuttering” reflects the sound of gunfire and the speaker’s fear!
• “...stops and colons” why colon?
What is the significance of the fact that the streets of Belfast are named after battles from the Crimean War (e.g. Balaclava, Odessa, Raglan)?

Why do you think Carson describes in detail the weapons that were used by the police (e.g. “Makrolon face-shields”)?

Effect on the reader
Have you noticed any similarities / differences with other poems in the Clashes and Collisions collection? Which poem(s) might this best ‘fit’ with?

What is your own personal response to the poem? Did you like it? Why or why not?
Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents his ideas about the causes of violence in “Belfast Confetti.”

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.

Comparison
### Sample Exam Question - Part B

*Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii*

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of *Belfast Confetti* and *Parade’s End* present incidents of conflict in twentieth-century Britain.

3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of *Belfast Confetti* and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions
collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)

Use examples from the language of both poems to support your answer.

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.