Your Dad Did What?

Sophie Hannah

Apple Inc.

1st Edition
Poem - Your Dad Did What?

Where they have been, if they have been away,
or what they've done at home, if they have not -
you make them write about the holiday.
One writes My Dad did. What? Your Dad did what?

That's not a sentence. Never mind the bell.
We stay behind until the work is done.
You count their words (you who can count and spell);
all the assignments are complete bar one

and though this boy seems bright, that one is his.
He says he's finished, doesn't want to add
anything, hands it in just as it is.
No change. My Dad did. What? What did his Dad?

You find the 'E' you gave him as you sort
through reams of what this girl did, what that lad did,
and read the line again, just one 'e' short:
This holiday was horrible. My Dad did.

Sophie Hannah

Want to know more?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vz3ohvcEmL4 - video reading of “Your Dad Did What?”
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**

- The poem is written from the point of view of a primary school teacher as she asks the class to write about their holidays. The narrator, however, speaks in the **second person** - “**you** make them write about the holiday.” This means that we have to decide who is speaking:
  - ‘You’ sounds fairly hostile towards the teacher (e.g. “**you** who can count and spell”).
  - Is it the teacher speaking to herself at the time (the poem is, for instance, in the present tense)? If so, could the word ‘**you**’ symbolise her lack of passion for her job - she doesn’t feel like she’s fully involved enough to use ‘I’?
  - Or, is it the teacher, having realised her mistake, now feeling guilty and judging her behaviour harshly as she looks back on the events?
- She doesn’t know the class/boy well, which is symbolised by the constant personal pronouns such as “he”, “she”, “they”, “one”, “this boy seems bright.” She doesn’t seem particularly nurturing, and is impatient when speaking to the boy. This is emphasised by her short sentences and repetition of questions (e.g. “What? Your Dad did what?”)
- She realises in the final stanza that the boy has been trying to find a way to tell her that his Dad died without using the actual words (grieving). Only from awarding him a grade E does she realise that the letter e is missing from “did.” From this we learn about their relationship-why can’t he tell her?
- Our feelings change when we read the poem a second time-we see how cruel and thoughtless she is from the boy’s perspective and the difficult situation he is in.
Why do you think the teacher missed the significance of the boy’s work? Is there any evidence to show the teacher made a mistake?

What is the difference and the significance of the two Es?

Why do we only find the “e” in the final word? What is the effect of the poem holding back this information?
Do you think that Sophie Hannah wants us to sympathise with the teacher or not?

Why do you think Sophie Hannah wrote this poem? Is it just a story, or is there a wider message about power, conflict and misunderstanding here?

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**

- The rhyme scheme is ABAB- a simple structured rhyme scheme. This fixed structure could symbolise:
  - The teacher’s strictness.
  - Her desire to be in control of the situation.
  - Her belief that the task set is simple (just like the rhyme is simple).
- There is one use of half-rhyme (“done” / “one”). This could symbolise that:
  - The teacher makes the rules but they can’t always be followed.
  - The boy is the ‘odd one out’ - he is the ‘bar one’ whose work is incomplete and doesn’t fit (just like the rhyme ‘one’ doesn’t fit with ‘done’).
- **Enjambement** is used throughout the poem (e.g. “He says he’s finished, doesn’t want to add / anything” to perhaps mirror the confusion of the teacher and the unfinished story of the boy
- Repetition: “My Dad did.”
- Hannah uses short sentences to show:
  - The barking orders of the teacher e.g. “That is not a sentence. Never mind the bell.”
  - The child’s immature writing e.g. “This holiday was horrible. My Dad did.” These sentences also give us a sense of finality - death is the end.
- The poem uses complex sentences when teacher is thinking- this reflects the supposed superior intelligence and sophistication of the voice. It contrasts with both the barking tone she uses to him and with his voice, suggesting she doesn’t know him well and isn’t attempting to bond with him.
How does the use of short sentences and questions convey the teacher’s feelings towards the situation?

The grammar of the first sentence is not standard or formal. What do you think the poet wants it to sound like and why?

Consider the length of line in the poem and how they change. Why do you think Hannah writes in this way?
What is the effect of enjambment in the poem?

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**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?

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**Imagery - Key Points**

- There is very little imagery in this poem. **Why?**
- Imagery is often used as a way of gaining understanding (through thinking about what things are *like* and making connections between different things), but the teacher does not want to do this. She is *not* trying to understand the boy, but is impatient and is only interested in getting the boy to complete the task as she wants him to do it.
- The teacher is confused, and is not trying to understand, so is not making comparisons or exploring what’s happening.
- The poem talks about everyday life, and, in particular, children, who are often represented in simple terms. This may be another reason why Hannah has not used imagery.
Why do you think Sophie Hannah has chosen not to include similes, metaphors or personification in this poem? What might it tell us about the character of the teacher?

Language

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

Key Points - Language

• The language used in the poem creates a sense of frustration and disbelief on the part of the teacher:
  • Short sentences / repeated questions.
• The language used to describe the activities of the narrator suggests her strictness and lack of sensitivity towards the children:
  - “Never mind the bell” - she refuses to let the boy go outside.
  - “You count their words” - again this demonstrates a methodical personality as she wants to see exactly what each student has done.
in terms of length but is less interested in the content or the ideas they have expressed.

- She marks ‘reams’ of work. The phrase ‘reams of paper’ is generally associated with a boring, time-consuming task, suggesting that she does not enjoy reading the children’s writing and is uninterested in their lives.

- Her practice of grading primary school students (“you find the “E” you gave him”) is unusual, and giving out such low grades to young children suggests she is a stickler for good grammar but does little to encourage them to communicate with her or build relationships.

- The word “assignment” again sounds odd when applied to primary school students. It is very formal and does not sound creative, especially given that Hannah mentions “you make them write,” which reinforces our notion that the teacher is strict and dictatorial.

- Therefore, although the poem is told from the teacher’s perspective, the language used actually encourages us to sympathise with the boy. At one point it seems almost directly hostile towards the teacher:

  -“(you who can count and spell)” - this phrase could imply that the educated teacher is judging the young boy unfairly. Is this the teacher judging herself with the benefit of hindsight?

- Hannah uses **alliteration** - this “holiday was horrible.”

- She also uses **alliteration** to repeat the **plosive sounds** in “Dad did” - these harsh ‘D’ sounds could heighten:

  - Our sense of the teacher’s harsh personality.
  - The finality of the death of the father.
Do any of the words suggest any of these emotions? Confusion, frustration, disbelief?

How does Hannah use language to give the reader the impression that the narrator is a strict and not particularly enthusiastic teacher?

What is the effect of alliteration and plosive words in the poem?
Effect on the reader

What do you think the overall message of the poem is? What point do you think Hannah might be trying to make about conflict?

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

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What is your own personal response to the poem? Did you like it? Why or why not?

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Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents her ideas about the conflict between two people in ‘Your Dad Did What?’

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
There are various options in terms of comparison here - which one you go for will depend largely on what the questions asks you about.

Options include:

- **Cousin Kate** - both monologues about conflict between individuals, neither narrator is made particularly sympathetic by the poet. You could focus here on how each poem deals with a particular conflict, and how each poet uses language to give the reader the impression the narrator is offering a one-sided view.

- **Catrin** - both in some sense about parent-child relationships. Whilst Catrin shows the depth of the bond between mother and daughter, Your Dad Did What? shows the destruction of the bond between father and son, and highlights the inability of others to understand the grief that this can cause.

- **Hitcher** - a more extreme example of an unlikeable narrator recounting an incident of conflict in his past. You could contrast the seeming guilt of the teacher over her mistake with the driver in “Hitcher’s” complete lack of remorse for the murder he has committed.

- **August 6, 1945** - although these are about very different subject matters there is actually quite a lot you could compare here. Both poems, for example, deal in some sense with an incident in which an adult harms a child (the teacher harms the boy emotionally through her failure to understand him, the pilot kills the girl through his action in dropping the bomb). You could write about:
  - remorse and guilt in each poem.
  - the way the poems deal with their central characters e.g. the effect of the use of “you” in Hannah’s poem and “he” in Fell’s and the use of language in both poems to show the flaws of each character (e.g. the pilot’s inappropriate comparison between the mushroom cloud and ‘apricot ice’ demonstrates his insensitivity; the teacher’s references to ‘make them write’ and her repeated questioning of ‘what?’ demonstrate her insensitivity to her class and failure to understand her pupils).
the use of tenses to show confusion (present tense in “Your Dad Did What,” future tenses in “August 6, 1945”).

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Sample Exam Question - Part B

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

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of Your Dad Did What? and Cousin Kate present incidents of conflict between two individuals.
3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of Your Dad Did What? 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.