

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

Remains - *Simon Armitage*

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MOTHER ANY DISTANCE

Simon Armitage

Brief Summary

The poem is about a soldier who is haunted by his involvement in a shooting of a bank looter. It also explores the repercussions of war for individuals who come out of conflict zones and raises awareness of conditions such as **PTSD**.

Synopsis

- Soldiers sent out to handle bank looters
- Man runs away and is shot by three soldiers
- Violent death – looter suffering and dying in pain
- Body taken away but not respected
- Soldier keeps seeing his blood – haunted by guilt
- Guilt comes home with him when he is on leave
- Keeps reliving the moment
- Suffering at home – drink, drugs, can't sleep
- Can't forget the looter or his guilt

Summary

Context – written for “The Not Dead” (Channel 4) // raise awareness PTSD // 2007 // based on Guardsman Tromans – changing public opinion of war after Iraq

Structure – heavy enjambment (can't separate past/present) // shift view of responsibility // caesura (interrupt life)

Form – dramatic monologue (like therapy/stream of consciousness)

Language – colloquial language w/ violent imagery // blood as symbol guilt – blend past with present // psychological war in mind // metaphor (enemy lines)

Key idea – raise awareness for PTSD by presenting the impact on a soldier outside of war // conflict is brought home with them but internally/psychologically

Context

Simon Armitage (1963 -)

In 2019, Armitage became the new Poet Laureate, following Carol Ann Duffy in the post. He is a playwright and novelist as well as a poet, and attended the University of Manchester as well as studying in Portsmouth. His poetry is accessible as he often focuses on relatable situations and uses accessible language combined with complex structures to explore themes. He has worked in a number of occupations and his poetry often relates back to his Yorkshire heritage (Armitage was born in Huddersfield).

Written for “The Not Dead” (2007)

“The Not Dead” was a Channel 4 documentary about the impact of war on soldiers returning home. It was created in order to raise awareness about PTSD and encourage more recognition of it in society. Armitage later released a poetry collection of the same name featuring the poems from the series.

The collection was based on Guardsman Tromans who fought in Iraq in 2003 and suffered from PTSD as a result of their service. The poem and documentary coincided with changing public opinion as people were starting to oppose war. At this time the Iraq war was condemned as unnecessary, and potentially due to US oil greed. As a result of these more modern conflicts the public and military started to recognise PTSD, and Armitage's poem helped raise awareness and incite sympathy



Remains

The poem opens *In media res*, or mid action, which serves to confuse the reader as they initially don't know what's going on. This also mirrors the confusion of the soldier, as they are not emotionally prepared for what will come next. This may be Armitage making a societal comment, suggesting that soldiers are launched into situations they don't fully understand, and the military lack of compassion for the individuals they are risking in strategic military situations - hence, he was "possibly not" armed. By opening in *media res*, the poem also reflects the chaos of war and how unpredictable it is.

"tosses" connotes a lack of care or respect. Not respecting the body. Body being treated like an object. Also suggest it is an action they are used to - don't think anything of it - natural reaction. Body has no value - conflict causes the devaluation of human life - loss of sanctity. Also rhyme between "body" and "lorry", which works to add fluidity - suggesting this is routine and they are used to it. Because they have been exposed to so much death and violence they are now desensitised to it. Lost their respect for life

On another occasion, we get sent out

to tackle looters raiding a bank.

And one of them legs it up the road,

probably armed, possibly not.

Well myself and somebody else and somebody else

are all of the same mind,

so all three of us open fire.

Three of a kind all letting fly, and I swear

I see every round as it rips through his life -

I see broad daylight on the other side.

So we've hit this looter a dozen times

and he's there on the ground, **sort of inside out,**

pain itself, the image of agony.

One of my mates goes by

and **tosses his guts back into his body.**

Then he's carted off in the back of a lorry.

By mentioning that "on another occasion we get sent out", the speaker is saying this is one occasion of many, not an exceptional case but a reality the soldiers have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Soldiers are expected to deal with repeated exposure to suffering and horror without any help.

The speaker mentions the looter he killed: "probably armed, possibly not", which suggests there's a slight chance he could have been innocent and not a threat. "Probably" comes first because this is what he wants to believe as it provides justification. There is clear anaphora of this phrase later in the poem, to show how he is focused on the possibility of the killing being unjustified, and how he feels guilty about it and regrets killing the looter.

Gruesome imagery. Also shows the transition from colloquial to emotional. Rich imagery - "pain itself, the image of agony". His colloquial language comes from trying to pretend he has not been impacted. Writing the poem is a process of going over memories and letting his actual emotions come out whilst on leave and escaped from the conflict zone.



End of story, except not really.

His **blood-shadow** stays on the street, and out on patrol

I walk right over it week after week.

Then I'm home on **leave. But I blink**

and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.

Sleep, and he's probably armed, possibly not.

Dream, and he's torn apart by a dozen rounds.

And the drink and the drugs won't flush him out –

he's here in my head when I close my eyes,

dug in behind enemy lines,

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned,
sand-smothered land

or six-feet-under in desert sand,

but near to the knuckle, here and now,

his bloody life in my bloody hands

Caesura provides a finality – should be final. Going home should be the end of his memory of the event and the extent of its impact on him. Warzone shouldn't be able to impact him once he leaves

Enjambment across stanzas - separating reality from memory. Lots of positives are used because they have a violent sound.

By using the adjective "bloody" in the line "his bloody life in my bloody hands", Armitage is making a pun as this word could be describing the violent, gruesome nature of his death or could just be used as slang / curse. The later use of the word suggests that this event has ruined his life by having cursed him, and suggest he regrets killing him.

*Death stains a person's conscience and memory just as it stains the street
He is haunted by the memory – no way to escape it*

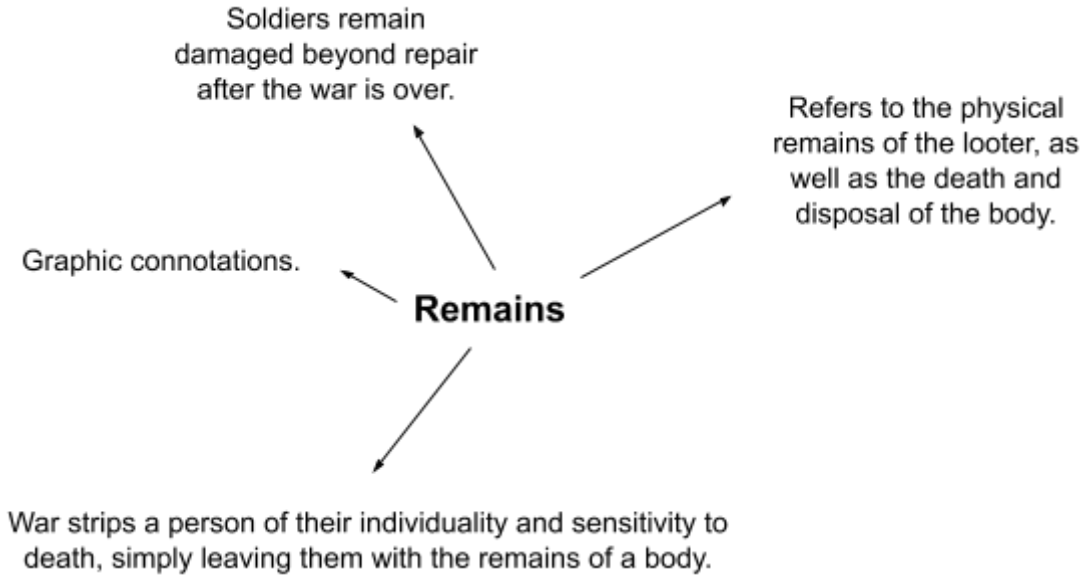
Connotations of waking up. The flashbacks are becoming impossible to distinguish between what is being awake and what is a dream / flashback. Having to blink to try and make out the difference. Merging of reality and memory – as reflected by blending and merging of lines.

The warzone is no longer real but in his head. Internal conflict due to guilt. Battle between whether the killing was justified or not. Looter is stuck in his mind – his memory continue to haunt him. In the mind – mental illness - PTSD. Soldiers are desensitised by war

*Idiom meaning "risky or verging on offensive" – likely to cause offense
The memory feels offensive – still causing him pain. Has a big impact on him. Should be in the past and forgotten but PTSD causes him to relive the past as if it is happening again – flashbacks
It should be foreign and forgotten but it is brought home and kept in the present*



The title “Remains”



Perspective

Dramatic Monologue

Armitage writes “Remains” as a **dramatic monologue** and in the **present tense**, using present participles such as **“legs it”**, **“tosses”** and **“are”**. This gives it a sense of being an account from memory in a **flashback**. It’s important to note that flashbacks are a symptom of PTSD. Perhaps the speaker could be seen as recounting his experiences in a therapy like setting. It also works to set up a one way conversation as only the speaker is talking.

The poem suggests that the speaker needs to go over the events he’s been through in his head in order to process them and lessen their impact on his life. This interpretation is strengthened by the **change in his perspective**, and perhaps suggests he is starting to accept responsibility, as well as letting go of the emotions he has been repressing



Accepting his guilt and suffering includes accepting that he is struggling instead of pretending it had no impact, and the **colloquial way** this is portrayed is also structured like a **stream of consciousness**, centred around his uncensored memories and emotions. This is in contrast to the expectation for soldiers to be strong and masculine, in order to not reveal emotions or feelings. This is a theme popular with modern literature, especially following Freud’s psychoanalysis and discovery and awareness of shellshock.



The opening

On another occasion, we get sent out
to tackle looters raiding a bank.
And one of them legs it up the road,
probably armed, **possibly not**.

The poem opens in **media res** (mid action) which serves to confuse the reader as they initially don't know what's going on. This mirrors the confusion of the soldiers who are not emotionally prepared for what will come next once leaving a war zone. This could be Armitage making a **societal comment** in suggesting that soldiers are launched into situations they don't fully



understand. It also suggests lack of compassion the military has for the individuals they are risking in strategic situations - hence, he was **“possibly not”** armed. By opening in media res, the poem also reflects the chaos of war and how unpredictable it is.

By mentioning that **“on another occasion we get sent out”** the speaker is saying that this is a typical operation in the life of a soldier, and is a reality the soldiers have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Soldiers are expected to deal with repeated exposure to suffering and horror without any help.

The opening also positions the reader as a listener, as they are being told a story and beginning a conversation. The speaker needs for someone to listen to his experiences and suffering in order to process his memories and guilt, like a confession or therapy.

The ending

but near to the knuckle, here and now,
his **bloody life in my bloody hands**

At the end of the poem, the structure of the **stanza length breaks down**: the final stanza is only two lines, whereas the rest of the stanzas in the poem are four lines. This breakdown in structure could mirror the breakdown of soldiers during war. It could also suggest that this is the stanza in which the speaker has truly broken.

The ending reveals the source of his **internal chaos** as being his **guilt**, which brings chaos and disorder to his life as it brings disorder to the structure.

By using the **adjective “bloody”** in the line **“his bloody life in my bloody hands”**, Armitage is making a **pun** as this word could be describing the violent, gruesome nature of his death. Or it could just be being used as slang / a curse. The later use of the word suggests that this event has



ruined his life by having cursed him, and suggest he regrets killing him.

The speaker feels entirely responsible for the death, suggested through the reference to **“hands”**. In literature, hands often serve as **symbols of guilt**. Shifted from sharing blame with others at the beginning of the poem to taking sole responsibility for the death of the other soldier, showing how PTSD can shift perspective, and how memory can be corrupted/changed.

The ending of the poem also has links to Macbeth and guilt, such as the quote **“all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand”**. In both texts, **blood** is used as a **symbolic motif for guilt**. It is guilt that is haunting the soldier. Armitage is thus exploring the **psychological impact** that killing has on a person. This implies that it is not natural for humans to kill others, and they can't cope with it and shouldn't have to.

MOTIF | A recurring theme in a text.

Structure

Shifting blame

At the start of the poem, the speaker begins trying to excuse what he did and share the blame with others; making it clear it wasn't only him and wasn't his decision. This is reflected in the phrases:

“myself and somebody else and somebody else”, “all three of us” and “three of a kind”.

These repeated references to there being other people present for the decision **alleviate his responsibility**, and the **speaker works to syntactically and structurally dominate the stanza with other people to minimise his own role**.

- This may be interpreted as the speaker trying to **ignore his guilt**, relating to the expectation for soldiers to not show emotion but instead remain brave. This aloof appearance is also shown through **colloquial language**, as he is trying to remain casual and not reveal how much impact it has had.

SYNTACTICALLY | Relating to the arrangement of words within a sentence within a text.

On the other hand, this feeling shifts to him feeling entirely responsible towards the end of the poem. He not only accepts his role and responsibility for the actions but blames himself entirely. This emphasises the guilt he feels and demonstrates how PTSD can warp how a person views past events, even to the extent where they can change memories.

Enjambment

ENJAMBMENT | Sentence which runs over multiple lines.

Armitage's use of **enjambment** such as in **“and I swear // I see every round as it rips through his life”** causes tension and builds up to **violent imagery**. It also suggests that the speaker is unable to separate out events, just as the sentences flow on his memories cause the past to flow



into the present. He continues to be haunted by what he did and this moment will continue to hold influence over the rest of life, unable to be isolated nor forgotten.

It's also notable that the **enjambment occurs at key moments** and specifically break up the sentences about death and suffering. This suggests that the pain he witnessed breaks him just as it breaks the structure.

Caesura

Caesura, such as in the line *“Then I’m home on leave. But I blink”*, provides finality. Going home should be the end of his memory of the event and the extent of its impact on him, because the war zone shouldn’t be able to impact him once he leaves. However the **conjunctive “but”** at the start of the second sentence shows how war continues to impact him even when he should be able to escape it.



Leave should be a time of relaxation and recovery, with an opportunity for peace and rest, *“But I blink”* creates doubt that this will be true because the actual response is separated through enjambment. The **caesura** interrupts the sentence, just as his memories of conflict interrupt his everyday. This forces the reader to pause and think and consider conflict and think about it through the speaker’s perspective.

CAESURA | A pause between words, for example across lines, with the use of a comma or full stop.

Language

Contrast between colloquial language and gruesome/violent imagery

The **colloquial language** such as *“so”, “I swear”, “legs it”* and *“mates”* which is used when referring to the dead bodies suggest that the soldiers have become deadened and desensitised to the harsh realities of war. This allows them to talk about death and suffering in **colloquial** terms.

Thematic references to the impact of war on a soldier

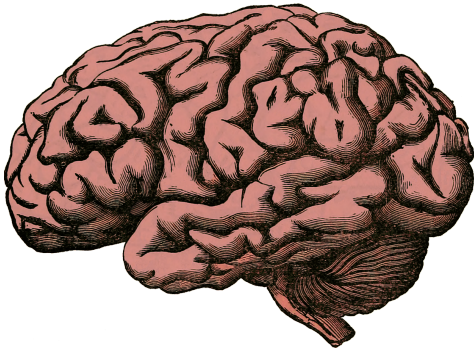
Tools of War

Soldiers are used as tools of war, which leads to war causing a soldier to lose their individuality and humanity. For example, the phrases *“three of a kind”* and *“are all of the same mind”* show that war has made all the soldiers trained to think the same way, suggesting they must suspect everyone of being an enemy and fire. War breeds a certain kind of person and changes them all into more



aggressive and distrusting people who just have to follow orders [**"we get sent out"**] without question.

Soldiers are also not supposed to question the morality of killing, and to shoot without thinking as they are programmed to think in a certain way. It is only afterwards that he starts to consider the implications of what he did, and his thoughts are altered by the PTSD he has suffered as a consequence of the conflict he fought in.



Memory / Psychological Impact

The poem explores the idea that memory is not reliable and can be **corrupted by trauma**; this is observed from the speaker's shift over the course of the narrative from deflecting blame to feeling entirely to blame. It also investigates how PTSD can isolate you and make you feel entirely alone, and how it will change how you view events due to the intensified guilt from going over and over and event in your head.

Memory allows conflict to **invade the domestic sphere**.

The **caesura** in **"Then I'm home on leave. But I blink"** provides a finality to the phrase. This suggests that going home should be the end of his memory of the war and the extent of its impact on him. However, the **conjunction "but"** shows that the war continues to impact him despite him physically escaping it.

Guilt

The speaker starts by denying his involvement and guilt, but ends up accepting it once he stops hiding how he really feels from the reader. This relates to the strong expectation for soldiers to be strong and not display emotions and put up a brave facade.

The speaker mentions the looter he killed: **"probably armed, possibly not"**, which suggests there's a slight chance he could have been innocent and not a threat. **"Probably"** comes first because this is what he wants to believe as it provides justification.

There is clear **anaphora** of this phrase later in the poem, to show how he is focused on the possibility of the killing being unjustified, and how he feels guilty about it and regrets killing the looter. This **cyclical structure** shows how he is stuck in his mind and is forced to keep coming back to this question. The crux of his suffering is guilt.

ANAPHORA | A word which refers to a previously used word.



Comparisons

Remains	Poppies
The psychological consequences of conflict are due to guilt, highlighted by the blood motif.	The psychological consequences of conflict are due to guilt and loss, highlighted by the form of the poem as an elegy which starts with remembrance.
Memory extends the impact of conflict: an exploration of the impact of PTSD – enjambment can't separate past from present and the caesura shows how PTSD is interrupting his normal life.	Memory extends the impact of conflict: conflict overshadows every aspect of life and her memory of her son, which blends domestic and military.
Both poems show how the effects of war are damaging and painful.	

Remains & Charge of the Light Brigade

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets present the expectation that soldiers will not question orders, and will serve the military with blind obedience, in the sense that they won't question orders or the morality of actions. Soldiers are shown to be desensitised to war and treated like tools rather than individuals with real thoughts and feelings. Both poems demonstrate the reality of war vs. the presented propaganda perspective of the glory of war. In reality, war will have severe psychological impact, but in propaganda soldiers are shown to be brave heroes who are saving their countries.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remains presents the impact of war on the individual whilst COTLB glorifies the collective impact of soldiers on a nation; collectively they bring glory, but at the expense of the individual They also explore the impact of memory on soldiers, but suggest different impacts in each poem. In Remains, memory is damaging, and causes conflict to be taken home and have long lasting impact. On the other hand, in the poem COTLB, memory is presented as a motivator as soldiers hope to be remembered and glorified as they make history.

Remains & Bayonet Charge

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems present a psychological impact. In BC the speaker starts questioning his role in war, such as in "the finger pointing that second", to realise futility and lack of honour. The theme of psychological impact is also investigated in Remains however the writer's focus is on PTSD Both poets also present the soldiers as scared; in Remains, the speaker is scared of the past and keeps remembering it. Whereas in BC the soldier is scared of the future and how he could get killed They also both criticise war and killing, in BC the leaders of war are criticised because they don't protect soldiers, but there is a more internal
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	criticism in Remains as he criticises his own actions and feels ashamed and guilty.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Remains, the speaker tends to focus on the short term, suggested by the opening of the poem in media res, whereas in Bayonet Charge, it's suggested the speaker tends to focus on the long term, through the use of the structural flashback device. • On the other hand, in BC the acute impact as he is scared within the battle is presented because everything is happening the instant of the poem. In Remains, however, everything is happening afterwards, so the war is over but it still impacts him. This is further shown through the use of caesura as it shows its still bringing chaos, and enjambment blurs lines between past and present, showing the effect of war permeates all aspects of time.

