

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives
A Century Later – *Imtiaz Dharker*

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A CENTURY LATER

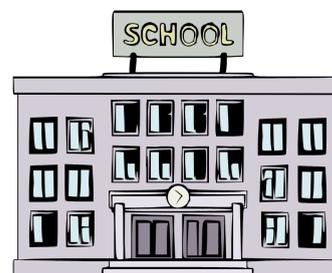
Imtiaz Dharker

Brief Summary

A Century Later describes a teenage girl travelling to school in a society where educating girls is treated as a **threat**. The poem describes a violent attack, but the girl keeps moving, refusing to be stopped. As the bullet travels, the poem **shifts** into **peaceful imagery** of orchards and fields in bloom, showing how hope and imagination survive alongside **trauma**. The speaker then highlights what the girl is fighting for: the right to be ordinary – to learn, attend school, and live freely without fear. By the end, the poem becomes **defiant** and **uplifting**, showing how one girl's resistance inspires others to stand up too.

Synopsis

- The poem describes a school environment as a place of danger, like a **battlefield**.
- A fifteen-year-old girl is presented as the target of an attack as she goes to class.
- She is shot in the head, but she continues walking as if refusing to be defeated.
- The bullet's path triggers a **shift** into peaceful images of nature and sunlight.
- The poem suggests the girl's mind reaches beyond violence into hope and possibility.
- Her survival is presented as a victory: she has earned the right to be ordinary and to keep learning.
- The girl speaks directly to the bullet, **mocking** it and saying it cannot destroy education.
- The ending widens into **collective resistance**, as more schoolgirls stand up and join her on the **"front line"**.



Context

Girl's education and real-world violence

A Century Later is closely linked to modern debates about girls' **right to education**, particularly in regions where female students face threats, restrictions, or violence for attending school. The poem alludes to the 2012 shooting of **Malala Yousafzai** by the Taliban, who opposed her public advocacy for girls' education. More broadly, the poem reflects the long history of women having to fight for rights that should be basic, including education, independence, and freedom in public spaces, echoing earlier struggles such as the **suffrage movement**. By doing so, Dharker shows how something as ordinary as going to school can still place girls in real danger.



War imagery and the legacy of conflict writing

Although the poem is set in a school, it reflects modern conflict where **civilians**, including children, are often the ones most vulnerable. The poem was published in 2014, a hundred years after the outbreak of the **First World War**. The poem's timing helps explain why Dharker uses the **semantic field** of war to describe a schoolgirl's experience. By presenting school as a "front line," the poem links past and present violence, suggesting that even a century later, conflict continues to shape ordinary lives.

Imtiaz Dharker

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Pakistan, grew up in Scotland, and lives in London. She has often described her identity as shaped by multiple **cultures** and beliefs. This background connects to her wider poetic interest in power, inequality, and the way political conflict affects everyday people. Rather than focusing on leaders or armies, Dharker frequently writes about **individual** lives caught inside larger systems, which helps explain why this poem centres on one teenage girl as a **symbol** of wider **injustice**.



The title "A Century Later"

The title makes the poem feel both historical and modern, almost inviting the reader to measure progress across time. It encourages comparisons between past conflicts and present-day violence, suggesting that war and oppression have simply taken new forms, and raising the question of how much the world has really changed.

A Century Later

The title suggests a long passage of time, implying that even "a century later" the world still repeats patterns of violence and inequality. It hints that struggles women fought for in the past – such as basic rights, freedom, and access to education – still aren't fully secured everywhere, so progress feels incomplete.

It creates a tone of disappointment and criticism, suggesting that after a hundred years society should have moved forward, yet girls are still forced to fight for basic rights like safety and education. The title implies that things which should be normal, like learning without fear, are still treated as something that must be "won."



Perspective and Tone

A Century Later is told through a **third-person speaker** who observes the girl from the outside, giving the poem a wider, almost **reporting-like perspective**. Although it focuses on one student, the **detached viewpoint** makes her feel **representative** of many girls whose lives are shaped by danger and restriction.

The opening feels tense and shocking as school is described like a battlefield, making ordinary life seem immediately unsafe. After the shooting, the **mood** becomes strangely calm and dreamlike, suggesting the mind can still escape violence. The ending widens from one girl to many, creating an uplifting sense of **shared resistance** as other schoolgirls stand up too.



A Century Later

“Bell” usually signals routine and safety, but here it becomes a warning of violence.

Dehumanising language shows how violence reduces a child to an object. Soft physical detail emphasises innocence, making the attack feel more brutal.

Alliteration and trapped phrasing create a sense of being cornered and powerless.

Violent verb suggests damage, but “pathway” also implies movement forward rather than an ending. The attack becomes psychological as well as physical, shaping memory and thought.

“Won” suggests a battle has been fought, implying ordinary life is something earned.

Listing builds a picture of normal teenage life and small freedoms.

Direct address gives her control, turning violence into something she can confront. Short sentences sound fearless and decisive, like a spoken verdict.

“Murmur” to “swarm” suggests strength multiplying, becoming unstoppable.

The school-bell is a call to battle,
every step to class, a step into the firing-line.

Here is the target, fine skin at the temple,
cheek still rounded from being fifteen.

Surrendered, surrounded, she
takes the bullet in the head

and walks on. The missile cuts
a pathway in her mind, to an orchard
in full bloom, a field humming under the sun,
its lap open and full of poppies.

This girl has won
the right to be ordinary,

wear bangles to a wedding, paint her fingernails,
go to school. Bullet, she says, you are stupid.

You have failed. You cannot kill a book
or the buzzing in it.

A murmur, a swarm. Behind her, one by one,
the schoolgirls are standing up
to take their places on the front line.

Extended metaphor makes school feel like warfare, showing education as dangerous. Repetition creates a marching rhythm, like forced movement into threat.

The line breaks freeze the moment into stages (before / impact / after), making the violence feel stark and unavoidable. Ending the first line with “she” isolates her, then the short final line shocks the reader by showing she keeps going.

Sudden shift into nature imagery creates contrast, like the mind escaping into peace. Personification makes the landscape feel alive and protective, offering comfort.

Poppies subtly link to war remembrance, blending beauty with sacrifice.

Highlights injustice: safety and education should be normal, not a prize.

The final item lands hardest, showing education is treated as the most threatened “ordinary” act.

The book becomes a symbol of knowledge and learning that survives attack- “Buzzing” suggests ideas are alive, spreading and impossible to silence.

Collective imagery shows resistance growing from one person into many.

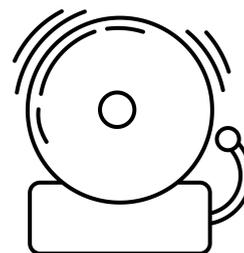
Returning to war language shows danger remains, but now it is faced together.



Structure

Free verse

- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or metre, which makes it feel immediate and realistic, as if events are unfolding rather than being carefully “shaped” afterwards.
- This suits the poem’s **urgency** because it reads like a direct account of danger and survival, especially in the blunt, uncompromising opening **“The school-bell is a call to battle”**.



Stanza shifts

- Each **stanza** marks a **clear stage** in the narrative: threat and tension, the moment of violence, the mind’s escape into nature, the girl’s ‘victory,’ and finally collective action. This structure helps the poem **widen in focus**, moving from one girl as **“the target”** to many schoolgirls joining the **“front line”** by the end.
- After the attack, the poem **shifts** into a calmer section where the mind travels elsewhere, creating a clear turning point/ **volta** in the structure. The movement from **“The missile cuts”** into **“an orchard / in full bloom”** breaks the poem away from the battlefield setting and creates a moment of mental distance from the violence.

Enjambment and pacing

- **Enjambment** controls the **pace** and makes moments feel **relentless**, pulling the reader forward through danger and movement.
- The sequence **“Surrendered, surrounded, she / takes the bullet in the head / and walks on”** is structurally powerful because the sentence is broken across lines, forcing pauses and making the survival moment land more sharply.

Ending

- The final stanza **zooms out** from the individual to the group, **shifting** the poem’s focus from one act of survival to a shared movement.
- The closing image **“Behind her, one by one, / the schoolgirls are standing up”** gives the poem a forward-driving ending, suggesting continuation and momentum rather than defeat.

Language and Imagery

Semantic field of war and battle

Dharker uses a **semantic field** of conflict to transform school into a battlefield. The **metaphor** in **“The school-bell is a call to battle”** turns an ordinary sound into a warning, and **“firing-line”** extends this idea by placing students in the position of soldiers. This **militarised vocabulary** creates immediate tension and makes the setting feel hostile rather than safe.



Innocence and vulnerability

Dharker describes the girl using delicate, vulnerable physical **imagery**, which makes the threat feel even more brutal. The **noun** “*target*” reduces her to something to be aimed at, stripping away individuality, while “*fine skin*” and “*cheek still rounded*” emphasise youth and softness. This **contrast** between childlike detail and violent context heightens shock and sympathy, making the attack feel especially unnatural.

Natural imagery and colour

After the violence, the poem moves into bright, **sensory** images of nature. “*An orchard / in full bloom*” suggests colour and life, while “*a field humming under the sun*” uses **personification** to make the landscape feel alive. The image “*full of poppies*” is also loaded with associations of **remembrance**, subtly keeping war in the background even within beauty.

Voice and rising sound

Dharker uses **direct address** to create a sudden **shift** into a more personal, confrontational voice. In “*Bullet, she says*”, the weapon is **personified** so it can be spoken to and challenged, and the blunt insult “*you are stupid*” is deliberately simple, making her voice sound clear and fearless. The short statements that follow add to this **sharp, decisive tone**.

In the final stanza, **sound imagery** widens the poem beyond one voice to many, as “*A murmur, a swarm*” suggests a build from quietness into something loud and unstoppable. The phrase “*one by one*” reinforces this sense of momentum, so the poem ends with voices gathering strength rather than being silenced.



Themes

Education as power

Education is shown as more than learning: it **represents** independence and future possibility. The poem implies that this is exactly why it becomes dangerous, because knowledge can challenge control and change lives.

Innocence caught in conflict

Dharker highlights how violence invades spaces that should be safe, showing children and teenagers trapped in situations created by adults and power systems. The poem’s focus on youth makes the **injustice** feel sharper, as someone still growing up is forced into survival.

Women’s rights and freedom

A key theme is the idea that girls should not have to “earn” basic rights. The poem focuses on simple freedoms – self-expression, celebration, education – to show how unfair it is that teenage girls may be denied a normal life.



Comparisons

Name Journeys – Raman Mundair

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore how individual identity is shaped and challenged by social forces beyond the speaker's control. <i>A Century Later</i> shows a girl's struggle for education in a dangerous environment, while <i>Name Journeys</i> examines how cultural identity is negotiated after migration and how a name carries heritage across borders. Each poem uses personal narrative to discuss wider cultural tensions. In <i>A Century Later</i>, the everyday act of going to school is recast as a "call to battle" and a "firing-line", showing systemic barriers facing girls. In <i>Name Journeys</i>, the speaker's name becomes a metaphor for cultural displacement, as it is described as being reshaped through "a journey" across places and voices. Both works make readers think about belonging – <i>A Century Later</i> shows a girl claiming her right through "the right to be ordinary", and <i>Name Journeys</i> shows a speaker learning to balance heritage and integration through the way their name holds identity across time and place.
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>A Century Later</i> is rooted in physical danger and violence, emphasising life-and-death stakes in education and conflict, while <i>Name Journeys</i> focuses on cultural and linguistic experience, describing inner feelings about identity and migration. Dharker's poem uses war imagery such as "target" and "missile" to show threat and survival, whereas Mundair adopts cultural and mythological references (e.g., comparing herself to figures like Rama and Sita) to explore inner identity journeys rather than literal physical danger. <i>A Century Later</i> ends with a sense of collective momentum as other girls join the front line, shown in "one by one", a forward-moving image of resistance; <i>Name Journeys</i> often returns inward to the speaker's personal struggle with belonging and sound of her name, so closure is more introspective than action-focused.

Thirteen - Caleb Femi

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore how young lives are shaped by oppressive forces beyond the speaker's control. In <i>A Century Later</i>, a girl walks into danger just by going to school; in <i>Thirteen</i>, a young Black boy's life is disrupted by suspicion and power structures that see him as a threat.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each poem uses imagery of threat and fear to show vulnerability. <i>A Century Later</i> uses battlefield language like “call to battle” and “firing-line”, while <i>Thirteen</i> presents danger through the boy being treated as suspicious and criminalised, showing how fear can be enforced through authority. • Both give voice to young people confronting systems of power – one in relation to conflict and education, the other in relation to policing and prejudice – showing how authorities affect ordinary lives.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Century Later</i> frames danger as external violence that directly attacks the body, shown through “takes the bullet in the head”, while <i>Thirteen</i> focuses on social prejudice and perception that shapes a young boy’s sense of self and powerlessness, even without physical harm. • Dharker’s poem emphasises resilience and collective uprising at the end as girls stand up together; in <i>Thirteen</i>, the ending is more sombre and reflective, focusing on bleak realisations about racialised experience and fear rather than immediate collective empowerment. • The portrayal of setting differs: <i>A Century Later</i> uses war-like language to create an environment of danger, while <i>Thirteen</i> uses everyday urban life and interactions with police to show how threat is embedded in routine systems rather than explicit battlefield imagery.

Homing – Liz Berry

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems deal with voices being suppressed or challenged by social pressures. In <i>Homing</i>, an accent is hidden through “hours of elocution”, while in <i>A Century Later</i>, a young girl’s right to learn is challenged by violent systems, shown through the idea of the “firing-line”. • Each poem explores the idea of reclaiming something vital – <i>Homing</i> through recovering dialect and identity, shown in “years of lost words”, and <i>A Century Later</i> through claiming the “right to be ordinary”. • Both use direct, confrontational language to show resistance: <i>Homing</i> ends with dialect being released “fluttering for home”, while <i>A Century Later</i> has the girl directly address the bullet and reject its power through “You have failed” and “You cannot kill a book”.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Homing</i> focuses on cultural and linguistic heritage as a personal identity issue within a domestic, memory-driven context, whereas <i>A Century Later</i> frames identity in terms of physical survival and public struggle against oppression.• Berry's poem roots hope in embracing what was suppressed and passing it on, while Dharker's poem shows hope in surviving external violence and inspiring others, so the source of empowerment differs.• The tone of <i>Homing</i> moves from nostalgia and longing to pride; <i>A Century Later</i> moves from danger to collective defiance, ending with shared resistance as girls rise "one by one", making its arc more about public courage than private reclamation.
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