Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Conflict

Belfast Confetti - *Ciaran Carson*

BELFAST CONFETTI
Ciaran Carson

Brief Summary

Belfast Confetti centres around a fictionalised bombing which has occured during the period of conflict and violence in Northern Ireland, the Troubles. The speaker expresses to his reader the fear and psychological confusion felt both in the moment and during the aftermath of the bombing, perhaps to teach readers about the consequence of conflict on both individuals and society in general.

Synopsis

- The poem opens in media res, with the introduction of a "riot squad" into a situation revolving around a bomb which exploded in a busy area.
- The speaker starts trying to gather his thoughts from this violence incident but can't seem to coherently figure out his feelings.
- The speaker expresses confusion as to why he can't seem to leave the conflict and starts questioning himself.

Context

Ciaran Carson (1948 -)
Carson is an established poet, born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He also went to university there, at Queen's University Belfast. He's authored a number of collections and has also received the T.S Eliot Prize [2013] and the Forward Poetry Prize [2008]. His work tends to be very political and he often writes about the Troubles and violence in his home country. He's also a musician who plays the flute.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland
Carson lived through the Troubles which started in the late 1960s and ended in 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Carson, even in 1969, narrowly missed death when he was shot at in a taxi.

Whilst there are a whole host of political and social issues which caused the Troubles, one of the main issues was the divide between the Irish Republicans/Nationalists, who were mainly Catholic, and the Unionists/Loyalists, who were Protestant. Republicans believe Northern Ireland should not be part of the UK and want it reunited with Southern Ireland and turned back into an independent nation, whereas Unionists want Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK.

These conflicting beliefs resulted in a lot of violence. It is estimated three to four thousand people died over a thirty year period of conflict. The violence came in the form of bomb attacks, and street disturbances, and resulted in security checkpoints and a constant military presence, especially in Belfast. British soldiers were deployed to Northern Ireland and eventually became involved in the fighting.

The title "Belfast Confetti"

Plosives in "Be" and "Co" reflect the anger that the speaker may feel towards the existence of the Troubles and the conflict.

Euphemism used to refer to the homemade bombs used by the IRA because of the nuts and bolts they used for shrapnel

Belfast Confetti

The imagery and meaning of confetti contrasts sharply with the conflict discussed in the poem.

Belfast Confetti

The poem opens on an active adverb, which suggests it is opening in the middle of the action.

The war has destroyed, 'broken' and ruined everything.

The reference to punctuation shows how conflict can destroy or alter language, which can be considered a fundamental core of human lives.

Labyrinth makes the city sound sinister, mirroring the fear felt by people disrupted by the conflict of the bomb and the Troubles in general.

Implies that the war has created a lot of confusion for those involved, including the speaker, including psychological impacts.

This means a group attack.

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 - **Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street** -

Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. **Dead** end again.

A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie- talkies. **What is**

My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A **fusillade** of **question-marks**.

Reflective of the noise made by the bomb. Also imply the anger and frustration felt by those affected by the conflict.

The asyndetic (without the usual conjunctions such as 'and') listing here increases the pace of the poem and implies a sense of panic and urgency.

Could mirror the sound of the gunfire occuring in the conflict.

These are names of streets in Belfast, and these are all streets named after generals / battles / places from the Crimean War, which could suggest that this riot is similar to a battle in a bigger war. Symbolic of conflict.

Could perhaps be considered a play on words - literal meaning of a dead end they can't continue down the street, or referencing the thousands killed in the conflict of the Troubles. Ambiguous.

Continues the extended metaphor of punctuation.

Perspective

The poem is written from a **first person narrative** which makes it feel intimate. This helps to convey the psychological effects **the speaker** is feeling after the conflict and violence he has witnessed. It is quite an **internal narrative**, not directed at anyone, although Carson does use extensive **rhetorical questions**.

Opening

> **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.

The poem opens in **media res** [in the middle of the action], suggested by the **adverb** "*Suddenly*" which replicates the chaos experienced by those disrupted by the bombing, and by extension, the conflict of the Troubles. The phrase *"raining exclamation marks"* is **reflective of the noise made by the bomb**, and also works to imply the anger and frustration felt by those affected by the conflict.

Structure

<u>Stanza arrangement</u>
In the first stanza Carson uses the **past tense** to show the reader what the speaker remembers from the violence he witnesses. The second stanza is written in the **present tense** to reground the speaker in the current moment and **express how he is finding it hard to adjust to life**. Apparently, if you orientate the poem sideways, it is supposed to be shaped like an explosion.

<u>Punctuation</u>
The punctuation and language used in the poem is rather untraditional and the grammar is often incorrect which may reflect how violent conflict can affect communication.

The intense focus on punctuation may reflect how communication between the two groups of people involved in a war is blocked and prevented due to the nature of the conflict. The continual **references to punctuation** can be considered a **semantic field**, such as *"asterix", "hyphenated", "colon"* and the phrase *"Every move is punctuated.*"

By referencing *"A fusillade of question-marks"* as the final sentiment the speaker may be suggesting how war has led those involved to question everything around them. The random

punctuation and crazed structure also works to **reflect the chaos** caused by the bomb that the poem is centred upon.

Lack of meter and rhythm
The poem is **void of any kind of clear meter or rhythm**, and this may be to **mirror the confusion and disorientation** felt by people who were involved in the bombing incident described in the poem. This works to present more of a reality than perhaps if it had a clear format and meter to it.

Asyndetic Listing
Carson uses the device of **listing** (without using the conjunctive "and") frequently throughout the poem in order to **increase the pace** of the poem, this reflects the **sense of urgency and panic** the speaker is experiencing. The lists include: *"Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys."* and *"Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street -".*

➔ The line listing of generals, battles and places reference the Crimean War - *"Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street"* - and may be suggesting that the riot is **similar to a battle in a bigger war**, as well as also generally being symbolic of conflict. Through **referencing a historic war**, Carson could be showing his frustration that individuals haven't learnt from the damaging effects of war which looking back through history teaches us.

Language

Dual meanings
Lines such as *"side streets blocked with stops and colons"* both refer to how the speaker can't escape the bombing and its aftermath in that specific moment, but also by extension how the Northern Irish community can't escape the violence and conflict being committed in general. The concepts of *"stops and colons"* are quite **passive**, which could suggest that because no one is actively doing anything useful or effective to stop the violence it is not coming to an end.

The line *"I know this labyrinth so well"* is also rather **paradoxical**, because labyrinths are meant to be extremely hard, even impossible, places to explore, yet the speaker knows them so

well. This **paradoxical expression** also juxtaposes with the fact that, whilst he may know how to leave the area, the speaker is unable to do so.

<u>Educational</u>
Through his poem, Carson educates readers about what it is like to experience a bombing or any type of mass, concentrated violence. This theme of **didactic** teaching and messages is arguably supported by the range of historic and academic references, such as to the **Crimean War** and punctuation.

> **DIDACTIC** | With an intention to teach.

The punctuation referenced - *exclamation marks / asterisk / stops / colons / hyphenated / punctuated / question-marks* - may be representative of Carson suggesting that language and poetry can be used to educate other groups of society, to ensure similar conflicts do not occur again.