

Edexcel English GCSE

Poetry: Conflict Collection

What Were They Like? - Denise Levertov

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WHAT WERE THEY LIKE?

Denise Levertov

Brief Summary

In 'What They Were Like' Levertov explores the **devastating effect of the Vietnam War** on the Vietnamese people. The poem was published in 1967 in the midst of the Vietnam War (1955-1975). It imagines the Vietnamese population as completely wiped out. In this way, Levertov **warns against the continuation of the war** by not simply describing the present devastation but projecting into the future, constructing a **'worst case scenario'** where no Vietnamese person is left alive.

Synopsis

- The poem is situated in Vietnam. The speaker posits **a series of questions about the country's lost culture**, as though from the perspective of an **anthropologist** or **journalist**.
- The second stanza moves to give the answers to the questions posed in the first. The interlocutor explains that the **"people of Vietnam"** are now dead. As such, one can only conjecture about their culture, their ways and rituals. They cannot fully be reconstructed and in fact are irretrievably lost.
- A **sense of loss** is present throughout the poem. The **natural imagery** creates a **sense of harmony** which **contrasts with the absolute devastation** caused by the war. This devastation is so total that nothing but **"silence"** remains.

Summary

Context – Set as a response to the consequences of the Vietnam War

Structure - Unusual two-stanza structure // question and response

Language – Metaphor // Loss

Key Points – In the first stanza has a speaker posing questions about the Vietnamese culture. The second stanza providing some answers to these questions but also reveals the absolute devastation effected by the Vietnam War

Context

Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

Levertov was born in England but moved to the US as a young adult. Her poetry became **increasingly political** in the 1960s as she became more involved as an activist against the Vietnam War. She never received a formal education. However, she was read nineteenth-century fiction by her mother, and she herself read poetry and wrote poetry from a young age. It has been argued that her **lack of formal education led to her work being characteristically clear and accessible**.

During the Second World War, Levertov trained as a nurse. Her first poetry collection, *The Double Image*, is subtly focused on war. Her choice to move to the US in 1948 was motivated by her marriage to the American author Mitchell Goodman, and her writing voice **became more American** as a result.



The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a long and destructive conflict between the **communist government** in the North of Vietnam and **South Vietnam and their main ally, the US**. Levertov's activism during the Vietnam War directed a lot of her poetry; amongst other poets, she **founded the group 'Writers and Artists Protest against the War in Vietnam'**, which was a New York collective responsible for organising a series of protests, exhibitions and cultural events criticising the US' military involvement in Vietnam. The War lasted from **1955 to 1975** and took more than **three million lives**.

What Were They Like?

The nature of the title (a question) sets up the unusual question-answer format employed by the poem

Repetition throughout the first stanza creates consistency

The numbered question and answer format recalls an academic research proposal (research questions are defined and then answered). This prosaic format contrasts with the delicate materials 'jade and silver' and the quiet beauty of Vietnamese culture hinted at in these questions.

Hearts turning to stone can be interpreted as their deadening after so much loss. It also reflects how the culture, once living has been petrified. It is now a lost civilisation.

The repetition of 'It is not remembered' and 'Perhaps' demonstrates how irretrievably the culture has been lost. .

Spring buds are a symbol of hope and a metaphor for new life. When the children are killed nature is also stopped in its tracks.

- 1) Did the people of Vietnam use **lanterns of stone**?
- 2) **Did they** hold ceremonies to reverence the opening of buds?
- 3) Were they inclined to **quiet laughter**?
- 4) **Did they** use **bone and ivory, jade and silver**, for ornament?
- 5) Had they an **epic poem**?
- 6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?
 - 1) **Sir**, their **light hearts turned to stone**. **It is not remembered** whether in gardens stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
 - 2) **Perhaps** they gathered once to delight in **blossom**, but after their children were killed there were no more **buds**.
 - 3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the **burned mouth**.

Lanterns made out of stone suggests an ancient civilisation - stone is a material that takes millennia to wear down. However, later in the poem we will see the culture's destruction is almost instantaneous 'there was only time to scream'

Careful, precise language. 'Quiet laughter' will later contrast with the explosiveness of war, the 'smashed mirrors' and 'charred' bones

Opulent materials

The concept of the epic poem is very Western, suggests the person posing the questions is a Western anthropologist.

The person answering seems to be in a subordinate position to the questioner (hence they address the questioner respectfully as 'Sir'). Or you could read 'Sir' as sarcastic. The person answering may find questions about 'laughter' ridiculous considering all that has happened.

"Burned mouth" references the impact of napalm gas.



Blunt, brutal imagery referencing the way the way war has obliterated not only the culture but people's bodies.

The use of natural imagery aids the sense of sadness and loss. The peace and harmony suggested by this imagery is juxtaposed with the brutal end the Vietnamese people (are imagined as having) met.

The sense of peace and harmony is accentuated by the alliteration 'peaceful...paddies' and assonance 'and the water buffalo'.

Moths and moonlight are delicate, and moonlight symbolises purity and innocence. Through this image Levertov expresses the fragility and delicateness of the way of life of the Vietnamese peasants.

A dream ago, **perhaps**. Ornament is for joy.

All the **bones were charred**.

6) **It is not remembered**. Remember, most were peasants; their life was in **rice** and **bamboo**.

When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies and the **water buffalo** stepped surely along terraces,

maybe fathers told their sons old tales.

When bombs smashed those mirrors there was time only to scream.

There is an echo yet of their speech which was like a song. It was reported their singing resembled the **flight of moths in moonlight**.

Who can say? It is silent now.

The sentences begin in the same way yet there is a hue contrast in tone. One sentence describes timeless peace and harmony, the other instantaneous devastation and pure fear.

This line refers to a serene past, which may still occur were it not for the conflict.

The final line refers back to the title question: "What Were They Like?" After all this conjecture, the ultimate answer is "Who can say?". The tone of the last line is flat. This flatness is created by the monosyllables. Perhaps the tone is flat because the devastation described is beyond all emotional expression.



The opening

The opening **immediately situates the poem in Vietnam**. The speaker begins the poem by **asking questions about the country's culture**. He appears to be **attempting to reconstruct it**, as though it has been lost forever. Throughout the course of the poem, we find out that this is true; the people are dead and therefore **"silent"** and many of their ways **"are not remembered"**. Painting Vietnamese culture as lost and the people as dead may seem strange to today's reader, since Vietnamese culture as well as the majority of Vietnamese people survived the war. However, we have to remember that the poem was published in 1967 and therefore written in the midst of the war (1955-1975). At that moment in time, nobody knew what the end result of the conflict would be. Levertov's poem **projects into the future** - a future where the Vietnamese people have been **wiped out**. Levertov appears to be imagining a worst case scenario. The poem can be read as a **warning against continued US military involvement in Vietnam**.

The opening is composed of a series of **numbered questions**. This numbering is **prosaic** and recalls an **academic research proposal**, in which questions are defined, numbered and answered. The prosaic format contrasts with the **quiet poetry** of the Vietnamese way of life - their (possible) use of **"bone and ivory/ Jade and silver"**, their honouring of spring and their quiet laughter. An underlying sense of **sadness and loss** is introduced during the first few lines, and this **tone** continues throughout the poem.

Form

The poem features **two different speakers**. The first speaker asks questions about the lost Vietnamese culture. The second speaker answers the questions and reflects on the impact of the war. The poem is written in **free verse** and so does not use a rhyme scheme. This adds to the poem's unique structure and form.

Structure

Dialogue / Enquiry



The poem has **two speakers**: a questioner and a responder. We might guess that the questioner is an **anthropologist or a reporter**. Likewise, we might assume the responder is a local guide (although the poem indicates that the Vietnamese population has been wiped out), or museum staff; there are many possibilities. The responder addresses the questioner as **"Sir"**, which indicates that there is a **power imbalance** between the two; the questioner is in a position of authority, which

lends weight to the thesis that the first speaker is Western/ American and the second speaker is local. Who the reader thinks the two speakers are shapes the reader's



understanding of the poem and the speakers' different tones. Are they **curious or annoyed, polite or sarcastic?**

Repetition

Repetition is used throughout the poem. In the first stanza, four of the six questions begin with **“Did they”**. In the second stanza, **“Sir”**, **“Perhaps”** **“When”** and **“It is not remembered”** are repeated. **Repetition creates a sense of consistency**, but also emphasises the poem's **simplicity**.

Language

Metaphor & comparison

Levertov is careful to employ **metaphor** in the second section. This contrasts with the simple language choices during the first stanza, potentially suggesting the second stanza's speaker and their language is more **reflective and mature**. For example, the metaphor **“their light hearts turned to stone”** reveals the severity of the conflict and the devastating impact it had on the Vietnamese people.

Imagery

There are two very different types of imagery used in the poem. The first kind of imagery is **natural imagery**. Natural imagery is used to describe Vietnam before the war. The second speaker tells us that in pre-war Vietnam life was rural and peaceful, featuring **“paddies”** reflecting **“peaceful clouds”**, **“bamboo”**, **“rice”** and **“water buffalo”**. The first speaker also **conjectures** that the Vietnamese used precious materials such as **“bone and ivory/ Jade and ivory”** for ornament. The first speaker hints at an ancient civilisation with fine craftsmen while the second speaker paints a picture of a simpler way of life. The first speaker's picture of pre-war Vietnam is **mysterious** - perhaps informed by **Oriental ideas of the ‘East’** - while the second speaker's picture of pre-war Vietnam is more **mundane**. However, both pictures are **lyrical** and **idyllic** and evoke a sense of **timeless peace and tranquility**.

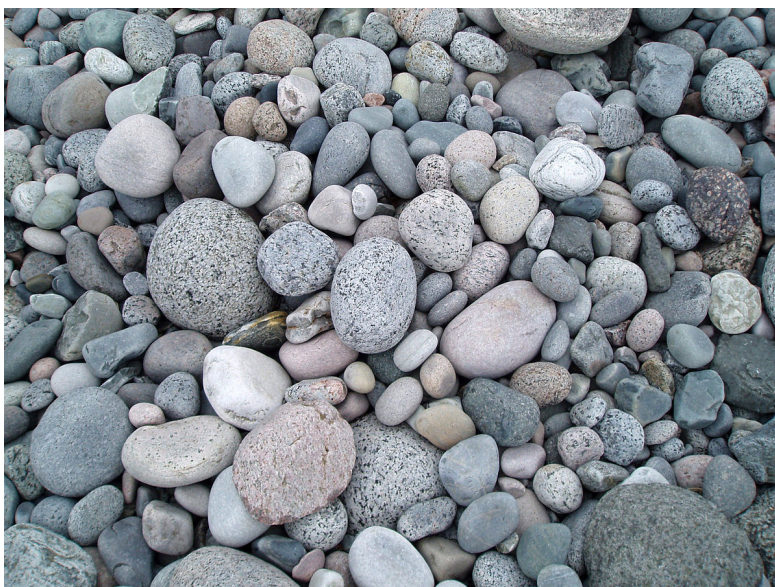
This peace is **“shattered”** by the war, and as such, the imagery used to depict a wartorn Vietnam is very different: it is **graphic and violent**. Examples of this imagery include **“bones were charred”**, **“burned mouth”** and **“smashed... mirrors”**, all of which reveal the **intensity** of war. In particular, the images of charred bones and burnt skin are particularly **disturbing** and are likely to have a **visceral impact** on the reader. They remind the reader that war doesn't only obliterate buildings; it also **obliterates bodies** in ways that are almost **unthinkably horrific**. The unnaturalness of war is not only **conveyed** by these disturbing images; it is also conveyed by the image of **withered nature**: **“after their children were killed/ there were no more buds”**. The **rebirth of nature in spring** is thought of as **inevitable**. The fact that in the second speaker's account nature fails to renew itself shows **just how unnatural war is**.



Tone

The poem contains both **delicate and beautiful images** and **shocking** images. However, it doesn't just shock; it also conveys a sense of **sadness and heaviness**. The poem is almost **elegiac**, mourning the beauty of pre-war Vietnam - a beauty that has been replaced by horror. The poem seems filled with **ghosts or ghostly phenomena**: “**echo[es]**” “**moths**” “**moonlight**” “**lanterns**” as well as conjecture “**Who can say**”, reflecting the way the absence of the Vietnamese people and their lost culture **haunts** the second speaker.

Stone imagery



Leverlov includes the noun ‘stone’ three times in ‘What Were They Like’? Imagery of stones underlines the **heaviness of the subject matter** and the severity of the Vietnam War. In the **oxymoronic** image “lanterns of stone” (lanterns are normally light whereas stone is dense and heavy), Leverlov is trying to combine two incompatible items, perhaps suggesting that the war still feels alien and unbelievable and cannot be comprehended or **assimilated** psychologically.

Rhythm

Sudden changes in rhythm reflect the abrupt change that Vietnam has undergone as a result of war. Generally the images of pre-war rural Vietnam are longer and use **enjambment**, for example:

When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.



This enjambment creates a sense of **undisturbed peace**. In contrast, the second speakers' comments on the present moment are **short and blunt** and the lines are **end stopped**:

A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.

All the bones were charred.

This bluntness communicates the **ugliness** of what has happened and **through rhythm mirrors** the sudden disruption and chaos (as well as outright devastation) that the war has wreaked on Vietnam.

Comparisons

'Exposure'

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore the horrors of the war in gruesome and emotive language. Compare “bones were charred” and “burned mouth[s]” in ‘What Were They Like?’ to “twitching agonies of men”, “We cringe in holes” and “Shrivelling [...] hands” in ‘Exposure’. Both poems juxtapose beautiful images of nature with images of the horrors of war. ‘Exposure’ notes the “blossoms trickling” and the blackbirds while ‘What Were They Like?’ also talks of possible ceremonies to honour the blossom and “peaceful clouds” reflected in paddy fields. The natural imagery heightens the awfulness of war by contrast. Both poems explore how war kills the spirits and deadens the hearts of those who survive. In ‘Exposure’, the burying party is so numbed by death and misery that “their eyes are ice” as they look on their dead comrades, while the “light hearts” of any (temporary) Vietnamese survivors “turned to stone”.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘What Were They Like?’ has two perspectives: the (presumably Western) anthropologist or journalist and the person who answers his questions, who seems to be a guide. ‘Exposure’ has one collective perspective, and the pronoun “we” is used throughout. The two speakers in ‘What Were They Like?’ are both distanced from the suffering experienced by the Vietnamese. The guide does not seem to have been present in Vietnam during the war, as he is not familiar with the culture “Who can say?” “It is not known” and the first speaker is even more removed. In contrast, the collective speaker in ‘Exposure’ is intimately familiar with the “agonies” of war - the reader discovers throughout the course of the poem that they have actually died as a result of the conflict. ‘What Were They Like?’ is set in the past while ‘Exposure’ is set in the midst of conflict or its immediate aftermath. It is entirely not clear whether the conflict is ongoing or has recently finished,



	<p>however, but for the collective speaker it no longer matters; they are already dead therefore bullets are no longer deadly (“less deadly”).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘What Were They Like?’ uses free verse, whereas Owen’s poem uses a more traditional ABBAC rhyme scheme, although most of those rhymes are only half rhymes.
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The Destruction of Sennacherib

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems explore the impact of war in particular contexts. ‘What Were They Like’ explores the devastation wreaked by the Vietnam War while ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ is based on the Biblical account of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC. • ‘What Were They Like?’ is removed from the scene of the conflict - neither of the two speakers were present in Vietnam during the war. Likewise, ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ feels very unreal. The scene almost feels like painted scenery from a stage set “blue wave rolls” “gleaming in purple and gold” or like a medieval play for children “lances” “trumpets” “banners” “tents”. In this way, both poems contrast with some of the other poems in the anthology (for example ‘Exposure’) where war is a lot closer at hand, e.g. experienced by the speaker in the present.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Byron uses an ABAB rhyme scheme and each line has 11 or 12 syllables. The rhymes are full and almost singsong. In contrast, Levertov uses free verse; her poem has neither regular meter nor any rhyme at all. • Byron uses sophisticated language devices throughout his poem, including extensive similes and metaphors, whereas the first stanza of ‘What Were They Like?’ is very simple. • ‘What Were They Like?’ paints a dreamy picture of pre-war Vietnam - it’s a sleepy country full of paddy fields and clouds. Although this imagery is dreamy, it is natural and realistic. In contrast, the imagery in Byron’s poem is more artificial - almost storybook imagery. We can easily imagine the scene as a painted set “blue wave rolls” “gleaming in purple and gold”. • Levertov’s poem depicts the horrors of war and its devastating effect on a country (in her poem, no trace remains of the Vietnamese culture; it is a lost civilisation). We know from background information that Levertov might have written the poem to draw attention to the horrors of the Vietnam War and diminish support for US military presence in Vietnam. In contrast, the speaker recalling ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ is not unambiguously against war. While there are some disturbing images, such as the “foam” from the mouth of the gasping, dying horse, the poem does not really depict the psychological or physical devastation of



war. There are no “**charred bones**” like in Levertov’s poem; there is only the **delicate “dew”** (sweat) on the rider’s brow. Furthermore, the poem ends with a couplet that suggests the **moral of the poem** is not that war is bad, but that God favours the Jews over Gentiles.

