



World Words

Lament

Gillian Clarke

Teacher's Notes

The Poem

Gillian Clarke's poem, 'Lament', is an elegy, an expression of grief. It can be a sad, military tune played on a bugle. The poem uses the title as the start of a list of lamented people, events, creatures and other things hurt in the war, so after the word 'lament', every verse, and 11 lines, begin with 'for'.

The poem is about war, and in particular about wars in the Middle East. War can't be waged without grave damage to every aspect of life. All the details in the poem came from reports in the media. There were newspaper photographs of cormorants covered with oil - 'in his funeral silk'. 'The veil of iridescence on the sand' and 'the shadow on the sea' show the spreading stain of oil from bombed oil wells. The burning oil seemed to put the sun out, and poisoned the land and the sea. The 'boy fusilier who joined for the company,' and 'the farmer's sons, in it for the music', came from hearing radio interviews with their mothers. The creatures were listed by Friends of the Earth as being at risk of destruction by oil pollution, and 'the soldier in his uniform of fire' was a horrific photograph of a soldier burnt when his tank was bombed. The ashes of language are the death of truth during war.

Adapted from Sheer Poetry

<http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/gcse/gillian-clarke/notes-on-gillian-clarke-poems/lament>

Method

It is important that the students do some creative thinking before they engage with the poem, either by listening or by reading. Use the Pre-listening 1 activity first. As the text will be heard as part of a longer broadcast, prepare students for the interview part as well before they listen to it – Pre-Listening Activity 2.

When they have had the opportunity to explore the theme of the text and have contributed some of their own ideas, then they are ready to listen. There is no 'best' way to do this, but the authors would suggest the following method:

1. Students listen to the whole broadcast, checking their activity 2 charts while doing so. Ask them to recall, orally, any words or phrases from the poem after the listening has finished. Write these on the board.
2. Use the words on the board to orally reconstruct the poem, as a class activity, as far as is possible. The important thing is to recreate the structure and content, not the exact words.
3. Hand out the text and read through. Interrupt with questions if appropriate.
4. Allow the students to listen again, this time with the text in front of them.

Now the students are ready to move onto the final part of the activities. These consist of following through ideas or themes.

Pre-Listening Activity 1

Hand out the pre- activity worksheet. Do NOT hand out the text of the poem.

The object of this activity is to create an understanding of the terms of reference in the poem before it is heard for the first time. In the first part, students are asked to suggest what these animals have in common. They all live in or on or by the sea. The pictures to the left will help with identifying some of the animals mentioned. They are >

cormorant hook-beaked turtle
tern dugong wader*

*note: wader is a collective term. The bird depicted is an Oyster Catcher

In the second part, the students are asked to identify what the people mentioned might have in common. This is less obvious because the farmer's boy doesn't immediately all into the category of 'war' or 'soldier' unless he is identified as being conscripted or volunteering.

Finally, students are asked to link the two groups and find cause and effect for the lament. They might speculate that war causes damage to both animals and people and that some people are victims and some are perpetrators, while all animals are victims.

Pre-listening Activity 2

Give students the second pre-listening activity. Ask them to read through the quotations from the radio broadcast and decide who is saying what - writer or student. Then they must choose which category the quotation comes from and to write the appropriate letter in the appropriate square (see answer key below). They then listen to the broadcast to check their answers. The listening activity will have been made easier by this process of identification first.

- a. "Ahmed is just a typical name so he's a person trying to run away from Kuwait, trying to cross the border into a safer country."
- b. "This poem is the poet as observer. I was reading all the newspapers, watching television, listening to the radio, so every single image and every example ... was taken from research."
- c. "I believe she is grieving for the human race ... we will all go down at the hands of war."
- d. "My lament is, you could say, a set of verses that I am kind of singing in words that are sorrowing for the truth, for the cormorant, for the ocean itself, for the soldier, for all of those people.."

- e. "...on television, a picture of a cormorant covered in oil, so its blackness was the blackness of oil. As if it were attending its own funeral."
- f. "The way I understand it is that everything comes to an end and is more concentrated on death."
- g. "I want to know why the author focussed so much on the ocean and that animal that live in the ocean."
- h. "We are lied to. The 'ashes of language' refer to horrible phrases like 'collateral damage'."
- i. "The green turtle is lovely ...looking for a breeding ground but she lays her eggs she lays them in sea polluted by oil pouring out of a well."
- j. "I regard this lament as a cry from a member of the public from anywhere in the world, an outcry crying out against the appalling behaviour of people during any war."

	feelings	victims	images	form & language
The poet	j	a, i	b, e	d, h
The students	c, f	g		

While Listening

1. Listen to the broadcast. The students should check their chart from Pre-listening activity 2 while doing this.

2. Ask them to feed back any words or phrases they remember. It doesn't matter how disjointed they are. As a class activity try to rebuild the poem from collective memory. Some students will remember parts that others didn't. These will include the words used in the pre-listening activity. Write what they recall on the board in more or less the order in which they occur in the poem.

3. Divide the class into two. Hand out the following worksheets (appendix) with one half of the class (for example, all those sitting on your left) with worksheet A and hand out worksheet B to those remaining (e.g. on your left). Together, within group A or within group B, they must try to reconstruct as much of the poem as possible. Each group has different sets of incomplete lines. At this stage don't let the two groups communicate. After a suitable period of time (not more than 10 minutes) pair up students, one from group A and one from group B and allow the completion process to continue with the additional information. Allow up to another 10 minutes. Then play the poem again and the students can check their attempts and write in extra information that is missing.

4. Hand out the text of the poem. Allow a few minutes for the students to check what they have recalled with what is on the page.

5. Read through the poem (this can be done individually). Check understanding as appropriate, for example:

- What might cause iridescence (a rainbow effect) on the sand
- Why, according to the poem, would boys or young men join the military?
- What is 'the stink of anger'? Can feelings be described by the five senses?
- What can 'scald the ocean'? (*oil fires*)

5. Play the recording again. This time the students have the text in front of them.

After Listening

A. Oil spillage can cause the three effects mentioned.

Let students go through each of the animals in turn and state the damage caused, either specifically stated or implied.

Refer back to earlier comments

This is a line full of potential meaning, and students may well have their own interpretation. One way of looking at it would be to say that language in times of war (news reporting, propaganda, politicians speeches etc) becomes corrupted.

B. Note that the only use of verbs in the whole poem is to define nouns thus acting as an adjective. The prefix 'for' to most lines makes it clear that it is a list of that which is being lamented (though note here, in the title, *Lament* is a noun).

C. Students can work individually as homework, or in small groups in class to do this activity, which is simply a matter of following the formula displayed by the poem, *Lament*, and making a list for the animal(s) of their choice.

D In the interview, the poet claims to speak the truth while our politicians and military leaders tell lies. How true is her statement? (*Open discussion*)

Appendix

Group A

Lament

___ with her pulsing burden
in search of the breeding ground.
For her eggs laid ___.

___ in his funeral silk,
the veil of iridescence on the sand,
the shadow ___.

___ with its mortal stain.
For Ahmed at the closed border.
For the soldier ___.

___ and the armourer,
the boy fusilier who joined for the company,
the farmer's sons, ___.

___,
the dugong and the dolphin,
the whale struck dumb ___.

___, the gull and the restless wader,
the long migrations and the slow dying,
the veiled sun ___.

___ and the sun put out,
the scalded ocean and the blazing well.
For vengeance, ___

Group B

Lament

For the green turtle ____,
in search of the breeding ground.
____ laid in their nest of sickness.

For the cormorant ____,
the veil of iridescence on the sand,
____ on the sea.

For the ocean's lap ____.
For Ahmed at the closed border.
____ in his uniform of fire.

For the gunsmith ____,
the boy fusilier who joined for the company,
____, in it for the music.

For the hook-beaked turtles,
the dugong ____,
____ by the missile's thunder.

For the tern, the gull ____,
the long migrations and the slow dying,
____ and the stink of anger.

For the burnt earth ____,
the scalded ocean and the blazing well.
____, and the ashes of language

Lament

For the green turtle with her pulsing burden
in search of the breeding ground.
For her eggs laid in their nest of sickness.

For the cormorant in his funeral silk,
the veil of iridescence on the sand,
the shadow on the sea.

For the ocean's lap with its mortal stain.
For Ahmed at the closed border.
For the soldier in his uniform of fire.

For the gunsmith and the armourer,
the boy fusilier who joined for the company,
the farmer's sons, in it for the music.

For the hook-beaked turtles,
the dugong and the dolphin,
the whale struck dumb by the missile's thunder.

For the tern, the gull and the restless wader,
the long migrations and the slow dying,
the veiled sun and the stink of anger.

For the burnt earth and the sun put out,
the scalded ocean and the blazing well.
For vengeance, and the ashes of language

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BY GILLIAN CLARKE

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'Lament' is an elegy, an expression of grief. It can be a sad, military tune played on a bugle. The poem uses the title as the start of a list of lamented people, events, creatures and other things hurt in the war, so after the word 'lament', every verse, and 11 lines, begin with 'for'.

The poem is about the Gulf War, which happened in 1991 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the United States, with Britain's help, bombed Iraq. This war has never really stopped. As we begin a new school year, it still threatens the world.

War can't be waged without grave damage to every aspect of life. All the details in the poem came from reports in the media. There were newspaper photographs of cormorants covered with oil - 'in his funeral silk'. 'The veil of iridescence on the sand' and 'the shadow on the sea' show the spreading stain of oil from bombed oil wells. The burning oil seemed to put the sun out, and poisoned the land and the sea. The 'boy fusilier who joined for the company,' and 'the farmer's sons, in it for the music', came from hearing radio interviews with their mothers. The creatures were listed by Friends of the Earth as being at risk of destruction by oil pollution, and 'the soldier in his uniform of fire' was a horrific photograph of a soldier burnt when his tank was bombed. The ashes of language are the death of truth during war

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