

What Were They Like?-Denise Levertov

MATCHES:

Nothing's Changed, Limbo, Island Man-Past and Present

Limbo, Two Scavengers in a Truck, Nothing's Changed-Use of Contrast

Denise Levertov (White female poet):

1. Denise Levertov was born in England in 1926 and moved to America in 1946, where she died in 1997.
2. As a child she saw her parents help Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution.
3. She has written about controversial issues such as women's rights, racism and pacifism (Supporter of peace).
4. She was deeply angered by the injustice and violence of the twentieth century.
5. She once said that a poet write more than he or she knows which implies/suggests that the reader is free to take their own interpretation from what they read in a poem.
6. This poem was written in response to the terrible devastation caused by the Vietnam war.
7. During World War Two she was a nurse in London and witnessed London being bombed and the effect it had on its civilians.
8. While in America she taught English Literature and was active in the protest against the US involvement in Vietnam in the 1960's and 70's.
9. After World War Two, Vietnam was declared independent from the French Empire. The US feared Vietnam would become a powerful Communist country and so the US supported the anti-Communist area of Southern Vietnam and gave the South money to fight the Communists in Northern Vietnam.
10. After a US ship was attacked, America sent US troops to fight in Vietnam, which led to one of the bloodiest wars of the twentieth century.

SETTING AND CONTEXT:

1. The people of Vietnam are evoked or called upon through a series of questions.
2. The author is an American who disapproves of her country's conduct/reaction to the Vietnam War.
3. The poem is set in some future time when the people of Vietnam have disappeared from the world-the suggestion being that they were wiped out because of America.

FORM AND TECHNIQUE:

1. Free verse. The first section consists of six questions; the second section contains the answers to the six questions.
2. The questioner appears to be a sophisticated voice, perhaps a male student of history-addressed as Sir in answers 1 and 3.
3. The person responding to the questions is also unidentified-possibly a local (South East Asian) anthropologist (studies tribes/groups of people) or expert.
4. The fact that the questions have to be asked suggests that it is no longer possible to observe or ask the people of Vietnam directly hinting that they have been wiped out due to war.

5. The questions are put together at the start of the poem to build up suspense.
6. Symbolism is used to express some ideas, e.g., **light**-meaning carefree in answer one; **buds** symbolising/standing for children in answer two; **bones** meaning or symbolising jewellery and human bones in answer four.
7. Powerful metaphors include the **mirrors** in answer five, which represent the paddy field where the rice grew, which were 'smashed' by bombs in the war.
8. Delicate similes include **speech/song** and **singing/flight of moths in moonlight** in answer six.
9. **Comparisons** are used because the things being described are no longer in existence.
10. Line 2-**Lanterns of stone**-refers to their hearts.
11. Line 4-**reverence the opening of buds**-reverence means worship/celebrate. The buds refer to children.
12. Line 7-**jade**-semi-precious stone used for ornamentation.
13. Line 8-**epic**-long story like poem of a great journey.
14. Lines 10 and 16-**Sir** is used to address the questioner-it is polite, careful and impersonal language.
15. Questions 1-6 are turned into negative images in each answer.
16. Line 16-**bitter to the burned mouth**-alliteration for impact.
17. Line 18-**charred**-scorched and blackened by fire.
18. Lines 22 and 25-**reflected...mirrors**-continuation of the metaphor that the paddy fields are fragile like mirrors.
19. Line 23-**terraces**-levels of ground on hillsides used for farming.
20. Lines 20-24-**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.** This is a simple description of the lifestyle and culture of the people of Vietnam.
21. Line 25-**bombs smashed those mirrors**-the horrors of war as bombs crash on the paddy fields. The poet has called the paddy fields mirrors as fields logged with water. When still, the fields would mirror the landscape on the water they contain.
22. Line 31-**Who can say? It is silent now.**-short sentences are used at the end of the poem for impact as well as contrasting the detail sentences that went before. It is a sad desolate/lonely ending with the words **silent now**.

THEME AND INTERPRETATION:

1. Even though the people of Vietnam were not wiped out in the war, the poem suggests that a great deal of Vietnamese culture was lost because of the war.
2. The poem deals with loss. Delicate and fragile things do not survive a war; instead war consists of harsh and terrible things such as smashed **mirrors** and **burned mouths**.
3. The poem consistently contrasts these two areas of experience.