

## Teachers' Notes

### Counting the Nights by Chenjerai Hove

### Wintering by Paul Perry

### Divorce by Carrie Etter

#### Introduction

The essence of all rituals is repetition. We perform the same actions again and again – either because it is our work – most jobs are very repetitious, or because it is the season in which we always perform this action. Or maybe we always repeat a particular action simply to reassure ourselves. Religious rituals are always based on repetition, and repeated prayers, spoken generation after generation, acquire a significance and weight simply because they have acquired a collective, shared meaning through their repetition. Repetition echoes the patterns of eternity. It is a vital device in poetry. In poetry repetition is a transforming force. Poetry is condensed thought; or thought condensed into metaphor. All superfluity must be removed from the language so that the structure of the poem can stand clear and visible. Visible form is one of the great pleasures in reading poetry if the structure is successful. Yet some poetry thrives on redundancy and excess. Oral poetry relies on repetition to secure the understanding of the audience. Therefore the use of repetition is a highly skilled art, which must reinforce, not dilute or disperse significance and meaning.

These three poems all address the question of ritual and repetition. Chenjerai Hove writes about longing and separation. Paul Perry remembers the process of wintering in another country, preparing the orchids for their survival against the winter, making ready for the coming cold. Then the process of wintering becomes a metaphor for survival itself. Carrie Etter's brief sad squib about returning to see her ex-husband addresses the fact that the reasons why she is divorced from this man are all too clear. Love in marriage is all about repetition. But the absence of love too has its rituals.

#### Questions to Consider

##### Chenjerai Hove *Counting the Nights*

The discipline of free verse relies on repetition. Chenjerai Hove uses a register of writing that is familiar to readers of Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence. The poem is declamatory, rhetorical. The poet is addressing himself and the beloved who is longed for, yet far away. He speaks to the person he loves as if she or he were beside him.

What words are repeated? How does this work?

Birth and death are markers in the cycles of existence. How does Chenjerai Hove use the memory of birthdays and the fear of death in the poem?

The reader is placed in the position of the longed-for beloved. Consider the use of rhetorical questions in the poem.

The poet plays with the idea of nearness and distance. Look at the last verse. He imagines his beloved counting the trinkets, and the suggestion is that these are shared objects they

both know and love. Now they are both counting. The action of counting the stars unites the parted lovers. What is the emotion generated by the poet's words at the end of the poem?

Would you describe this poem as a conventional love poem? If so, why?

### **Paul Perry *Wintering***

The most familiar sources of repetition are to be found in the natural world: seasons, rains, waves, tides, floods, cycles of life and death, days – the diurnal round, the dancing planets, the returning comets. Paul Perry's poem addresses the surprising fact of wintering in the tropics – 'wintering in sunshine' – even in Florida the orchids must be prepared for the slightest shift in the season because they are fragile plants.

The arguments that the poet has with his partner over whether to marry so that he can remain in Florida form a parallel activity to preparing the orchids. What is the effect of this?

The orchids the poet/speaker prepared for winter come back to haunt him, but as a symbol that brings hope. How does this work?

This poem enacts a movement in meaning that is characteristic of poetry in English. The poet sets up a situation, an action, that is practical, concrete, almost banal. 'Nailing sheets of plastic on to a wooden/frame...' then the moment and the orchids themselves pass from their actual state into a metaphorical dimension where they come to symbolise survival, hope.

Consider this dramatic shift from the particular to the general. How does it work in this poem? Can you remember any other poems you have read that also enact this shift?

Poetry in English thrives on the description and transformation of object, concrete things. What are the strengths (or weaknesses) in this method of constructing meaning?

### **Carrie Etter *Divorce***

In the human world repetition is ubiquitous: twins, patterns of behaviour, generations, a family resemblance.

Does history ever repeat itself? If it does seem to do so is that because we look back and find patterns of repetition? The same holds true for our personal histories. Etter looks back at the marriage (remember that this may be a dramatised situation, addressing all marriages and all divorces, not one in particular) and finds patterns.

The ambiguity of the final lines suggests not only the reasons for the divorce – which can clearly be sensed by the reader – but also suggests that the old animosities are still there. How does this work?

Consider the intimacy of the situation. The divorced pair are in domestic space, their old bedroom, and she is close enough to see that the sheets are dirty. How does this effect the apparent banality of the exchange?

## **Writing Exercises**

1. What is the effect of repetition? How does it work? What effect does repetition have on the reader?
2. What difference does repetition make to the meaning of a piece of writing? What happens

when a phrase or a musical note is repeated again and again and again and again and again?

3. Write a poem about a repeated action – even a banal domestic action like washing, brushing your hair, getting ready for school, walking down a road where you have always walked, visiting a relative once a week. The action or gesture can gather significance from the very fact that it has become a ritual.

4. We all have books or poems that we love to read again and again. Describe the effect of rereading a favourite book, or seeing performances of the same play, or hearing a fairy-tale retold from generation to generation. What happens when the story you remember is no longer perceived to be the same, or has actually been rewritten, modernised?

5. Consider the significance of a prophecy – even an apparently trivial prophecy – ‘you’ll come to no good in the end’ – the essence of a prophecy is its repetition. Write about a prophecy that comes true.

6. Repetition and cruelty are often yoked. Write a story about a cruel rumour, or a piece of gossip and the effects this has on several lives – what happens when it is repeated?

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