Notes on poems

Out of School (pg. 118)

In this poem, the poet still manages to create a very vivid, pulsating atmosphere of school dismissal and what happens outside school, even though he is very economical with words. In fact, the verses are purposefully short leaving the reader almost breathless and thus creating the right atmosphere.

As soon as 4 o’clock strikes the school comes to life again, “Then…..came.”

Just outside the school doors, the street becomes a hub of activity, children playing, others fighting, others adjusting their clothing and so on.
This feverish atmosphere is portrayed in very short, exact lines such as, “Bully boys reeling off”, or “Murphy was stealing off”, or else function in “woolen gloves for chilblains’.

A Boy in Church (pg. 100)

This is a poem narrated in the first person in which the poet (assuming the role of a boy among the congregation) brings out very clearly the boredom experienced by a young boy during a church service. In fact the very first verse, “Gabble, gabble…brethren…gabble-gabble!” sets the tone for what follows in the rest of the poem.

Very obviously boredom leads to distraction and the boy does not even know or care what the subject (text) of the sermon is. He is far more interested in the stormy weather outside which he goes to describe in some detail. We have ample proof of this in line after line of the poem such as for example, in the lines,
“Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
The tossing trees never stay still”

His attention momentarily shifts to the hymn-book and the stained glass windows and finally back to the trees outside. In his observations he and notes and compares the solidity and safety of the pews to the swaying, shivering trees outside.
“The pews are staid, they never shiver
They never bend or sway or lurch”

Later on he even compares the swaying trees to the “ugly serious people” surrounding him noting that the virtually moving trees look like : ‘madmen praying’. This very descriptive narrative poem is full of similes which help the reader to get a much clear picture of the atmosphere both inside and outside the church and also a clear picture of the boy’s boredom.
Percival Mandeville

In this narrative poem we find a sharp contrast between P.M. the perfect boy and J. Betjeman who was anything but perfect (It is Betjeman who narrates the story). In fact apart from being a self-accused bully, at the end he (young Betjeman) also proves to be a liar and a coward. However in some ways he still emerges as a lovable rascal.

Quite obviously form the way the children speak and act, the story unfolds in the same boarding school for upper-class children. For example they call their mothers ‘mater’, the Latin word for ‘mother’. Betjeman does not really remember why Percival wants to fight him but he makes it quite clear that the perfect boy is trying to defend somebody who has been treated very badly by the poet. Being a coward deep down and remembering past experiences when he had been badly beaten. J.B. finds it very hard to settle down to a good’s night sleep the night before the fight. However he would not tell anyone how frightened he was,

“In the morning, at breakfast when the poet arrived, he had a brainwave which he thought would help to get him out of the difficult situation he had landed himself in. He would invent a letter from home saying that his mother was very ill,

“I sought out Mandeville. ‘ I say’, I said, I’m frightfully sorry I can’t fight today”

Naturally Mandeville being a perfect young gentleman does not need any further explanation and straight away puts his arm round John’s shoulder to comfort him.

The poem is narrated in Betjeman’s usual amusing, simple, straightforward way a style which makes it easy to follow.

Hide and Seek

In the poem Hide and Seek, Vernon Scannell makes excellent use of all the sense to bring out the great excitement children usually experience whenever they play this evergreen game. The fact that short sentences are used in rapid succession and that the poem seems to have been written in one short stanza also contribute to this feeling.

The persona is the one being sought, so he hides himself in the toolshed at the bottom of the garden making sure that his feet “aren’t sticking out”.

The place smells salty because of the sacks of sand and both the floor and air feel damp and cold. As the seekers draw stealthily close, the poet is almost afraid to breathe and automatically closes his eyes as if by doing so, it would be difficult for his friends to find him.

Time passes, the poet feels stiff, cold and uncomfortable so he decides to come out of his hiding place only to find that the other children have long abandoned the search and left him alone in the dark shed.

“The bushes hold their breath: the sun is gone."
Yes here you are. But where are they who sought you?

Although this poem is basically a poem about childhood recollections, a moral can still be learnt from it: namely that in life, when success seems to be within easy reach, we should not allow ourselves to feel too over-confident as we might end up losing all and feeling bitterly disappointed.

Diction (The writer’s choice of words)


In the poem, these words/verbs in the imperative form are very important because they are showing the expertise of this boy at play in this well-loved game. It is almost as if the boy is instructing the reader as to how we should play the game as well as we possibly can, in order not to be caught.

In “be careful that your feet aren’t sticking out” the young persona/the young child is giving us readers a good piece of advice – he wants to make sure that he makes the search for him a very difficult one. This shows that he wanted to be the winner at all costs. This shows that he wants to be the winner at all costs. In fact, in the next line, “Wiser not to risk another shout.” The boy is again giving advice, showing that the risk of being caught is very much possible since his friends might be close by. The adjective ‘cold’ is repeated twice in the poem, whilst we also have the word ‘damp’ to show the discomfort that the boy was feeling.

In this poem we also have words like, ‘musn’t sneeze’, ‘whispering’, ‘hushed’, ‘dumb’, ‘mutters’ and all the words show the excitement felt by the boy, when he was being sought by his friends, he tries to avoid any sort of noise, even going as far to say, ‘don’t breathe’.

There is only one stanza in this poem and there are four instances of rhyming couplets, ‘out’ and ‘shout’, ‘door’ and ‘before’, ‘land’ and again’ and ‘coat’ and ‘throat’. The fact that there is little rhyme in this poem is indicative of the excitement being felt by the boy as he lies in hiding.

The poem is very rich in figures of speech. From the very first line we find alliteration of the letter/consonant ‘c’. This alliteration almost makes the call of the boy even more audible in our minds and it also gives the poem a certain vibrant feeling from the very start.

We also have alliteration in the second line, ‘sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside’ with the letter/consonant ‘s’ and the effect that this creates is very much like the sound of the sea upon the shore, bringing about the olfactory image of the sea to mind. The soothing sound effect created by the alliteration of the letter ‘s’ ‘brings to mind a feeling of calmness and serenity; a feeling that is extended in the following line when the persona says, ‘they’ll never find you in this salty dark’ meaning that he is calm because he knows that he is safe.

The alliteration of the letter/consonants in ‘sound so’ almost enables us readers to hear the low voices and the increasing silence as the tension mounts.
The alliteration of the consonant ‘d’ in ‘don’t breathe’ and ‘don’t move’ brings out the sense of urgency and heightened excitement felt/experienced by the boy. We also have alliteration in ‘dark damp’, ‘smell of sand’ and in both these instances it is the alliteration of the letter ‘s’ which makes us almost feel the coarseness of the sand in the young child’s throat. The poem is also rich in personification where inanimate objects are being human qualities. For example: ‘cold bites’ this figure of speech makes us realize just how cold and uncomfortable this boy was feeling as he lay on the cold floor.

The personification ‘darkening garden watches’ shows that the only thing greeting our winner in a dark garden, whilst in the next line, ‘the bushes hold their breath’ this personification not only reminds us of the effort done by the boy in order to avoid those who sought him, but also portrays the silence that surrounds the boy once he emerged from his hiding place. The very last in the poem sums up the disappoint felt by the persons, as soon as he realizes that all his friends had abandoned the search long before. Indeed the feeling is one of bitter disappointment and although this is basically a poem about childhood recollections, a moral can still be learnt from it, namely that in life, when success seems to be within easy reach, we should not allow ourselves to feel over-confident as we might end up be losing everything and feeling completely empty, and disillusioned losers.

**False Security**

Diction is the writer’s or poet’s choice of words. The title “False Security” denotes a feeling which is supposed to be safe, thus the word ‘security’ which in itself means protection from harm. The word ‘false’ shows something that is untrue, fake. So we already know from the title that we are going to be told a story about a security that was not secure at all, but indeed it was false.

In the first 2 lines of the poem, the persona remembers the sound made by the door when he left his house to go to a party. The words ‘little hostess’ show us that he is going to a girl’s party. The phrase ‘sailed out’ gives us the idea that this young boy is like a ship leaving the safe harbour and going out into the dangerous night. We have an auditory image when we hear the ‘shuffling’, ‘shouting’, ‘whistling’ of the boys playing outside.

**2nd Stanza**
The first line of 2nd stanza, “And black…”
The colour black ties up with the word ‘dread’ in the first stanza. The trees looked black because the ponds outside were reflecting the sun’s colour; they were also ready to freeze, meaning that the temperature had dropped (it was getting colder). The next line, ‘And all was still…” The word ‘ominous’ suggests that something dangerous is going to happen. The ‘closing bell’ of the park indicates that the park is also going to be deserted. The lights, sounds and colours are described. The idea of the lights bursting into mauve is again a visual image showing colour ‘As I climbed…..’ The words ‘great’, ‘big’ show the richness of
the house and also its large size. The words ‘children’s party’ and ‘dear little hostess’ are rather warm, when they are compared to the darkness and cold of the outside.

The ghost is mentioned when the boy walks past a house which is supposed to be haunted. The boy rushes from the darkness into the safety offered by the lamp-post’s light, until he reaches ‘the ironwork gateway of number seven/secure at last on the lamplit fringe of heaven.’

These last two lines are very ironical as we shall find out towards the end of the poem, that the place will become anything but a heaven in the end.

3rd Stanza “Oh who can say…”

These three lines show us the security that the boy is feeling because he’s dressed in what he thinks are the best shoes (sandals) and ‘stuff from Heal’s’ - the stuff refers to the material that his clothes were made from. The next 3 lines continued to build up the excitement that the boy feels when he sees the richness of the food laid out before him. He is excited at the sight of the’ cakes and ices and jelly and blackcurrant wine’ and he describes the happiness he felt whilst watching the magic show. He was very proud of the fact he was the last one to leave the party, however at the very end he hears the birthday girl’s mother say something- words which were going to haunt him for the rest of his life. “I wonder where Julia found that strange rather common little boy.”

Timothy Winters

Timothy Winters by Charles Causley, is a poem that highlights the suffering of a very poor boy called Timothy Winters. (Notice how significant and how clever is the poet’s choice of name for this unfortunate boy). The narrator starts off by giving us a physical description of TW. In the third stanza, we get to know that he does badly at school, and that he receives no help from the Welfare State.

The fourth stanza gives us a closer look at the situation he was in – he has bloody feet which leads us to believe that he has no shoes. We are also told that he lives in a house which is situated on Suez Street – the alliteration of the letter ‘s’ makes the phrase ‘Suez Street’ sound like ‘sewer street’ – and living in such a place obviously bears the place of the street being very unhygienic, smelly and unpleasant.

We are told that TW’s father is a drunkard, an irresponsible parent who goes on drinking beer, when his son is starving. T’s mother is no better because she has abandoned him, and went off to seek to her pleasures, rather than staying by T’s side and giving him the love that he so desperately needs.

Grandma is just as bad, because all she seems to be doing is making herself drunk with gin, so we can say that both generations have abandoned their little boy, while Timothy is drugged with an aspirin and goes to sleep.

The welfare worker is aware of T’s poor living conditions, but the law prevents him from taking T out of his present misery and thus, there is nothing that seems to be able to help Timothy.
The Headmaster prays for children who are less fortunate and T is the one who says the loudest ‘Amen!’

The fact that the final stanza is prayer-like shows that Godly intervention is the only thing that can help save him, because he has been very badly down by all human beings.