

By the end of studying What Were They Like I need to know;

Summary: This poem asks general questions about the culture and people of Viet Nam. The second stanza answers them with subtle anger of either the poet or someone personally affected by the war.

Ideas: The poem suggests that the questions of people outside of the war show a lack of true understanding about the impact of the Viet Nam war on the civilians and its culture. It is a protest poem and shows the poet's anger and disagreement with the war happening, criticising the destructiveness of war.

Reading:

<p>Vocabulary</p>	<p>Vietnam - The country. Located on East Coast of Thailand. Lanterns - a cover on a candle or light Ceremonies - a gathering to acknowledge an important event Reverence - treat with respect Inclined - leaning towards something terraces - flat areas on a slope for growing things</p> <p>Bone - animal bone for ornaments Ivory - Tusks of elephants carved into ornaments Jade - a green stone used for ornaments Epic poem - a long, lengthy poem Distinguish - tell the difference between</p> <p>illuminated - lit up charred - burnt peasants - a poor farmer/labourer paddies - fields where rice is grown</p>
<p>Context (To inform interpretation)</p>	<p>The poet - Denise Levertov wrote the poem in 1971. She was a British born American poet. Her mother was Welsh and her Father was a Russian Jew who converted to Christianity. She served as civilian nurse in London during WW2 and married her American husband in 1947. Whilst living in America, she opposed the American involvement in the Viet Nam war and was an activist against it. Her style of poetry tends to be direct rather than metaphorical.</p> <p>The Vietnam War - Happened between 1954 and 1975. It began as a civil war between the North and the South. The South received support from America in the conflict due to their capitalist views, whereas the North was communist and supported by China (another communist state). Communism was hated by the Americans and they wished to stop it, so were happy in helping the South Vietnamese people. Millions died as a result of the conflict. The war utilised half a million American soldiers. There was a lot of brutality in how the war was fought, with little regard towards the impact on the Vietnamese civilians. The conflict also saw the use of a lot of napalm bombs to attack many miles of jungle. The napalm contains a mix of gelling agent and a fuel like gasoline which sticks to the skin and burns on explosion. Many hundreds of civilian people were caught up in these bombings.</p> <p>A number of American civilians were angry about the way in which the Americans were involved, and the level of brutality being used, so began large protests against the war continuing. Levertov actively engaged in the protests herself and was imprisoned at one point for doing so. The Americans finally removed troops in 1975 and the North won.</p>
<p>Themes</p>	<p>Culture - The destruction of the Vietnamese culture in the name of war. Also, the lack of cultural awareness that some Americans had of countries and people outside of their own nation. The agricultural system, jewellery and history of the country is also destroyed as a result of this conflict, and therefore emphasises the lack of respect for culture that war, and in turn those in command, have.</p> <p>War - The impact of war on civilians rather than on soldiers. In this poem we are shown the brutality of war.</p> <p>Anger - The anger of the disagreement with war and what is happening.</p>
<p>Deeper understanding</p>	<p>Language: There is no empathy or compassion shown throughout the questions; they are simple and cold, almost naïve. Similarly, there is no identity given to the responder, but what is shown is that they have empathy and understanding of what the Vietnamese people have gone through. The tone is bitter and demonstrates an anger and frustration with the interviewer for having such a lack of understanding. The replies take time to detail the impact of the conflict on the people and show a mock respect through the use of the term 'sir'. The voice of the second stanza is clearly more experienced demonstrated through the use of heightened figurative language (metaphors, imagery and similes) to provide a clearer image on what the reality is. Levertov also suggests that some of the questions asked are inappropriate as it is irrelevant compared to what the people had gone through. There is a very strong use of contrast within the answers to show the anger of the responder.</p> <p>Structure: Written in free verse with no rhyme scheme or regular rhythm. There are two stanzas: stanza one asks the questions, stanza 2 provides the answers. So this gives two voices in the poem. We don't know who the persona of the first stanza is, but we can assume that it would be someone like a journalist or</p>

future historian who has very little knowledge of the people of Vietnam. The speed at which the questions are asked appear to show a lack of respect for the suffering that the Vietnamese have gone through.

The twisting of reality- It is heavily implied that the speaker of poem 1 is an American who is ignorant to what happened in Vietnam. The first clue to this is the first persona's pronunciation of Vietnam as '**Viet Nam**'- the separation of Vietnam into two reflects the American pronunciation of the country, whilst also reflecting the ignorance of the persona. This ignorance is also continued throughout the poem- as the persona asks superficial questions about what life was like in Vietnam- the ornaments they used, songs, their language- but doesn't reference the war itself. This idea is further reinforced through the continual hypothetical discourse markers: '**perhaps, it is not known**'- symbolising how, with the destruction of the Vietnamese came the destruction of culture- as if all records and documentation of them had been wiped out. This would make sense if the persona is American- their history would not have explored the destruction of an entire civilisation at their hands but would have hidden in- the same way British history has hidden the atrocities committed in the Boer War or during the expansion of the British Empire. There's a message here about censorship and the twisting of reality- by those with power (or wealth) against those who lack it.

The innocence of the Vietnamese- The poem is a damning critique of the American involvement in the Vietnam War; therefore, the poet deliberately highlights the innocence of the Vietnamese throughout, she does this through juxtaposing presumed life before the Vietnam War with factual statements of their fates. For instance, the metaphorical imagery of '**their light hearts turn[ing] to stone**' reflects how the joy and happiness was eradicated from their lives by tragedy- the image of their '**hearts**' becoming '**stone**' suggesting either that they were killed, or that they suffered so much tragedy that their hearts became like stone: hard and cold. The adjective '**light**' has connotations of their life being carefree and innocent prior to the war. Their innocence is also reinforced when the second persona asserts '**their life was rice and bamboo**'- painting an idyllic view of their life as simple, if '**rice**' and '**bamboo**' then they would have been contented with the life they had, again intimating that the Americans are the aggressors. Rice demonstrates how it was their food sources- they cared about being able to eat- whilst bamboo would have been used for both construction and hunting. This is important here, the only 'weapon' that appears afforded to the Vietnamese is '**bamboo**', which juxtaposes with the '**bombs**' and napalm- signifying the considerable difference in power and weaponry. The Americans also come under criticism for what they destroy: '**when bombs smashed those mirrors**'- the plosive verb reflects the utter destruction of the '**mirrors**', which the second persona previously mentions are the paddies, the source of food. The operations of the Americans are under question here- they destroyed the food supplies in hopes of starving the Viet Cong, however by doing so they also starved the '**peasants**'.

Quotes and references

'**Sir, their light hearts turned to stone**' - Metaphor to show the despair and heartache of the people.

'**It is not remembered whether in gardens**

Stone lanterns illumed pleasant ways' - The irrelevance of the question about gardens is shown here, reproaching the interviewer for their lack of knowledge.

'**Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom**

But after their children were killed

There were no more buds' - The persona highlights the fact that the blossom pales into insignificance when the death of Vietnamese children is taken into account. There is also an inference here to the way in which they had died. One may assume that the horror of their deaths could erase any delight in blossom again. The use of 'buds' also highlights the innocence of the children.

'**Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth**' - Direct reference to the use of napalm by the Americans. The tone here suggests true anger at the somewhat 'stupid' question posed. It also provides a very direct image of the horrific effect of the bombs; as readers we cannot help but imagine how we would feel. This is emphasised through the use of the plosive 'b' sound.

'**All the bones are charred**' - the responder reminds us that the bones of interest to the civilians would be those of their loved ones, not of ornament, and that through the war many died through the burning of bombs and explosives. Again we see the link to the past in comparison to the present.

'**Remember most were peasants**' - their societal level is stated here and reminds us that they had absolutely no power over the 'super powers' fighting on/over their land and killing their people.

'**when peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies**' - emphasises the peaceful nature of the civilians and that their peace has now been destroyed. It also emphasises that the conflict has destroyed the grounds that the people use for working and earning/feeding themselves from.

Links across the text:

Compare with Exposure, The Man he Killed, Destruction of Sennacherib - all consider the impact of war people directly involved.

War Photographer- both poems explore the idea of how reality can be distorted or twisted. It is twisted by those in power in more developed and affluent society.

Belfast Confetti- Both poems explore the impact of conflict on place and people as a result of overly aggressive actions of those in authority, both of which as a result of some form of guerrilla warfare. However, whereas in 'Belfast Confetti' the impact on place is temporary in 'What They Were Like?' it is permanent.

	<p>'maybe fathers told their sons old tales' - highlighting the times of the past and how the knowledge of an 'epic poem' is irrelevant to them in present times, as families have been destroyed through the conflict, therefore even an 'old tale' isn't being heard.</p> <p>'When bombs smashed those mirrors, there was only time to scream' - a metaphor for the water in the paddy fields, showing the lasting impact of the war on the local people.</p> <p>'their singing resembled the flight of moths in the moonlight' - the fragility of the Vietnamese people is highlighted here in the comparison to the moths. It shows them to be gentle and delicate.</p> <p>'It is silent now' - the persona tells us we will never hear from the voices again. This provides a haunting image to the reader and leaves us with a very solemn ending to the poem as we are again reminded of the horrific impact of the war.</p>
Terminology	<p>Metaphor - the use of metaphors to develop the contrast between the 'then' and the 'now'.</p> <p>Free Verse - the structure of the poem has no rhyme scheme or meter.</p> <p>Rhetorical question - Used on the last line of the poem. Suggesting that the responder is more thoughtful than the interviewer as it breaks the line, giving a chance for thought to happen.</p> <p>Alliteration - softens how we see the people in Vietnam as they are 'moths in moonlight'.</p>