

Owen Sheers

'Antonia's Story'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright, who was born in Suva, Fiji, in 1974, and was brought up, from the age of nine, in the village of Llanddewi Rhydderch near Abergavenny. He read English at New College, Oxford and then went on to study an MA in Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, under the former poet laureate Andrew Motion.

In an interview with the *Wales Arts Review* in 2013, Sheers claimed to be ‘interested in the concept of the writer as a conduit for other voices beyond their own; in using poetry and theatre to bridge the distances that appear to be ever widening in our society’ (1).

(1) Poetry Interview: Owen Sheers’, *Wales Arts Review*, 11 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.walesartsreview.org/poetry-interview-owen-sheers/>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title '**Antonia's Story**' draws our attention to the fact that this is Antonia's recollection of events, despite the fact that an unidentified third person conveys her story. Despite the fact that Antonia does not speak directly within the poem, she is given (a perhaps questionable) priority through the inclusion of her name in the poem's title and the perspective is hers throughout. Events are mediated, however, by an unidentified speaker. The title evokes patterns of oral storytelling, which is further reinforced by the fairy-tale way that Antonia '**fell to sleep**' dreaming.

Form.

This poem is composed in free verse, while long lines make for an irregular appearance on the page. Some images and lines recur later in the poem, but these repetitions mark an irrevocable shift in experience rather than simple duplication.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Line 1.

The opening line creates a distance between the reader and Antonia through the reportage style of the phrase: **'She told me how'**. Antonia's passivity, suggested by her absent voice, is reinforced by the description of how **'she fell to sleep'**. The aggressiveness of the fists on a door and Antonia's passive resistance in falling asleep begs the question of whether she has suffered violence at the hands of the nameless man. Yet this undercurrent of violence remains ambiguous throughout the poem. The significance of auditory imagery in the poem is signalled by the word **'sound'** in the first line and as the poem progresses a number of thuds, beats, rustles, and thumps take on increasing levels of significance.

Lines 2-4.

Line 2 begins with and thus emphasises **'Dull thuds'**; the sound of fists on the door are described as if they were footsteps on the stairs, thudding up to Antonia's bedroom. The dullness of the sounds perhaps indicates that Antonia is somehow numb to such noises. The soundscape of violence transitions to one of an awareness of the body – the **'rustle of blood in her ear'** and the beat of the heart – is matched by an awareness of her bed (the pillow, the sheet). The subtext of violence is maintained. Is it the blood vessels pulsing in her ear or a rustle of shed blood? Awareness of the physical beat of a heart can suggest fear, while the word **'beat'** recalls the action of the fists on the door. A bed can be a place of rest, intimacy, love, sex, but also violence. All these possibilities are held in play, though ultimately Antonia finds some kind of rest or escape as suggested in the words: **'then sleep'**.

Lines 5-6.

These lines remind us that this is a continuation of the account Antonia had told the speaker because of the opening phrase **'Of how she'**. The introduction of a dream **'of an apple ripening, then falling a fall'** invites multiple interpretations, since dreams are widely regarded as having symbolic meaning (possibly prophetic, certainly psychological).

Apples are associated with fecundity, particularly the ripe apple falling. Eating the forbidden apple (Eve in the Garden of Eden) or a poisoned apple (in fairy stories) leads to a fall, though the apple in this poem is untasted. If the apple relates to the forbidden, perhaps Antonia's relationship with a man who is forbidden (or dangerous) is being suggested. Snow White is tempted by a ripe apple, offered by a supposedly kindly old woman; but this is an illusion for she is a witch and the apple poisonous. Is Sheers using a range of allegorical references to comment on the temptations and dangers of a volatile relationship?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-8.

By line 7 the 'thuds' have become a singular '**thud**', which is '**loud**' instead of 'dull', and repeated. The volume and repetition suggests the significance of the event while the quality of the thud '**echoing in the night**' in line 7 suggesting Antonia has heard a real sound.

The use of enjambment between lines 7 and 8 connects Antonia and the man, his 'thud' and 'the beat of her heart on the sheet'. Perhaps unbeknown to her at this point, the 'thud' is symbolic of her loss and the speaker is signalling the emotional impact that this will have on her afterwards, which we see later on in the poem.

Lines 9-10.

There is a break in the use of quatrains here; the third verse is a couplet, a single sentence across two lines, both of which begin with '**and**'. The tone and pace changes markedly, the relentlessness of 'and' reminds us that this is an event that is past and immutable. The couplet is the last point in the poem when she is still unaware of the man's fall (and we understand his death). Repetition of the sound of fists marks is momentarily misunderstood as '**the persistence of love**', that is to say she thinks it the same fists as in line 1. Given the hints of violence in the first verse, the reader may wonder if 'love' is an apt word. Yet there is warmth and some lightness in this couplet signalled by the word '**surprise**' that suggests Antonia has some hope.

Lines 11-14.

These lines both dramatise and give us the 'facts' of 'Antonia's Story' (as related to the speaker). The image of the man '**lying on the lawn**' is seen from Antonia's perspective '**over the policeman's shoulder**'. The image of '**him**' looking '**so pale and quiet**' contrasts with his persistent fists at the door at the start of the poem. This image is uncanny or dreamlike in being simultaneously peaceful – he is '**lying asleep and covered in dew**' – and sinister as the reader immediately understands Antonia is seeing a lifeless body on the ground which has been there long enough and become cold enough to have collected the dew.

The pace of the poem is slowed here, conveying confusion and a congealed sense of time and experience through the use of questions in lines 13 and 14. The speaker focuses on Antonia's confused thoughts, and the questions running through her head. These thoughts and the adoption of her perspective as she sees '**him over the policeman's shoulder**', Antonia now becomes the active one in the relationship as she gazes down upon the man. Since this is 'Antonia's story' – and line 11 reminds us '**She told me how...**' – we might also question whether these were her thoughts or whether she concocts these later. Is there a possibility she is in some way culpable?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 15-18.

These lines suggest that Antonia only knew that he had fallen when she saw **'the broken drainpipe'**. The young man, like the dreamed of apple, has fallen, **'ripe in the night'**. His ripeness may reflect that he is in the prime of life, or 'ripe' could mean 'ready', signalling his actions were bound to lead to this. The man's attempt to climb 'the broken drainpipe' could be perceived as a romantic gesture, reinforcing the aforementioned 'persistence of love' (line 10).

The Biblical allusions suggested by the apple are reinforced by the description of the drainpipe wagging like **'a madman's finger preaching in the wind'**. The use of 'preaching' suggests the delivery of a religious message; is the fall a punishment for sin? 'Fall' recalls the fall of man from grace and the expulsion from Eden. The drainpipe itself could be seen as having a serpentine shape, which – like the snake in the garden – leads to the ultimate fall. Insinuations of violence and disorder are present in this scene. The drainpipe is like a madman's finger, while the use of **'swung wild'** recalls the idiomatic 'swing for' someone (meaning to hit them). Moreover the pipe **'still'** swings, recalling the persistence or determination of the man.

Lines 19-20.

The critical events are over, and from this point on the poem focuses on the aftermath, repeating images, sounds and actions which emphasise emptiness or grief in Antonia's life. The door is again prominent: **'each night she unlocks the door'**. In the poem, it is a threshold only Antonia crosses. The choice to leave it unlocked expresses grief or regret, and reinforces a sense of loneliness. At the start of the poem the locked door prevents the man from crossing the threshold. By the end of the poem they are separated by a greater barrier than a door.

These lines are haunting in their emotional charge and more literally in the sense of being suggestive of ghosts. The door now **'gets blown, wild in the wind'**, repeating the image of the 'broken drainpipe' that 'swung wild... / ...in the wind'. As we associate the drainpipe with the man's death, could this be a reference to how the man haunts Antonia from beyond the grave? Is she emotionally tormented by the event?

Lines 21-22.

These lines repeat the dull and rustling sounds of the first verse but now emphasise Antonia's solitariness as she alone makes the sounds. This sense of loneliness is amplified by Sheers's use of enjambment between line 21 which ends on **'bed'** and line 22. The repetition of images and phrases creates another layer of echoes, as Antonia **'climbs to bed'** and **'falls to sleep'** (where the man climbed the drainpipe and fell to his death).

Interestingly, the **'rustle of blood in her ear'** remains unchanged from the start of the poem, the sound of blood reminding us that she is alive and perhaps that she has survived the relationship.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 23-24.

The recurring dream – a variation on the earlier dream – makes her very sleep **'dark'**. One expects to sleep in the dark, but **'dark sleep'** suggests a lack of rest, of troubled dreams.

Whether it is the implied violence of the relationship or regret or even guilt at the man's untimely death is open to speculation.

Lines 25-26.

There is a slight uplift of the tone in these final two lines. Antonia is still very much alive and perhaps capable of loving again, as **'the beat of her heart on the sheet'** reprises an image from earlier in the poem. The final line is richly ambiguous. The **'persistence of love'** echoes line 10, but this time it is Antonia's love not the man's. This is the first time her feelings have been mentioned directly. Is her surprise based on her ability to go on loving a man who was violent towards her? Or the depth and length of her mourning? Or both? Is this a tale of a survivor of an abusive relationship (in which case the persistence of love is troubling) or the story of a woman whose relationship ended with an untimely death for which she feels some responsibility? Given the sombre tone of the poem from the outset, violence seems to have formed at least some part of the relationship between Antonia and the man. Antonia's story relates the complex and paradoxical feelings of a woman who feels both abused and bereft.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The complex and paradoxical feelings of a woman who seems to have been in a violent relationship are conveyed with understatement and a refusal to provide resolution. Violence is implicit in the language and imagery – particularly the dull thumps of fists. Yet the poem voices Antonia’s belief in ‘the persistence of love’, and acknowledges her grief. The poem is troubling because it does not reveal the wider facts that might allow judgement of both the man and Antonia; this air of uncertainty, of an unspoken story, contributes to the sombre feeling of the poem. There are a series of mixed emotions that are suggested throughout the poem, including relief, regret, loss, love, guilt and even shock.

The poem is structured around the fall of the man, the events leading up to this and the aftermath or grief caused by his death. The poem coheres through the use of repeated auditory imagery, repeated phrases or words which take on different tones and meaning according to their position in the poem. Like much of Sheers’s poetry, this poem is interspersed with natural imagery, but here also the external and bodily sounds are important.

Eight lines of the poem begin with the word ‘and’, creating the impression of something that is ongoing, continuous or even everlasting, as well as possibly inevitable. Could this be suggestive of the ongoing cycles of violence within their relationship? Or, the ‘persistence of love’ that is spoken of by the poem’s narrator? Or even, the ongoing emotional pain that is now experienced by Antonia **‘each night’**?

Sleep is a prevalent motif in the poem, and it is used both literally and figuratively. It assists with the dreamy, hypnotic mood of the poem – particularly when we hear Antonia’s version of how she saw the man ‘lying on the lawn’. The prominence of sleep throughout the poem seems to support the idea that ‘Antonia’s Story’ expresses a degree of guilt. Shakespeare used sleep as a motif in Macbeth to highlight Macbeth’s guilt throughout the play: “Macbeth does murder sleep” (Act 2, Scene 2, Line 36). Antonia’s possible culpability in the man’s fall could therefore lead to a guilt that is manifested in her restless ‘dark sleep’.

FIVE QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How is violence suggested by the poem? Is the evidence of violence conclusive?

What's the significance of the apple in the poem? Does it change or hold multiple meanings simultaneously?

How might the structure be important to the meaning of the poem?

How effective is the use of recurring phrases or images in the poem? How do the meanings of each recurring phrase or word change in the course of the poem? Does one meaning supersede or merely supplement or qualify the other?

Is Antonia a reliable source within the poem?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

A recent picture of Owen Sheers, taken from his website:

http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen_large_feb-15.jpg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Owen Sheers's website:

<http://www.owensheers.co.uk/>

Owen's Sheers's profile on the BBC website:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/>

British Council Literature: Owen Sheers <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers>

Owen Sheers as a Poet in Residence at the Poetry Archive, where he talks about poetry and answers questions from members of the public:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet-in-residence/23185>

Owen Sheers talks about the influence of his Welsh heritage on his writing, from the landscape to the lives of the small town boys he grew up with:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview>

Wales Arts Review's interviews and articles on Owen Sheers:

<http://www.walesartsreview.org/?s=owen+sheers>

WJEC's exclusive interview with poet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zKIDtOo>

Twitter link:

<https://twitter.com/owensheers>

All links are clickable



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