

Owen Sheers

'A True Story'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

- 3** SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4** SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 6** SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 7** SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 7** SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 8** SECTION 7:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

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 was born in Fiji in 1974, but was brought up near Abergavenny where he lived and attended school before gaining a place to study at the University of Oxford. Sheers is a prolific and highly successful writer and broadcaster and is also Professor of Creativity at Swansea University.

Sheers' first collection of poetry, *The Blue Book*, was published in 2000 and included poems which explored the themes of love, childhood, family and rural life. His second poetry collection, *Skirrid Hill*, was published in 2005. Sheers is also the author of a number of prose works, including the non-fiction narrative, *The Dust Diaries* (2004), the prize-winning novels *Resistance* (2007) and *I Saw a Man* (2015), the novella *White Ravens* (2009) and the immersive theatre production *Mametz* (2014). In addition, Sheers has worked on a number of film, radio and theatre scripts and has also worked as a writer in residence for the Welsh Rugby Union.

In interviews Owen Sheers has acknowledged the influence other Welsh writers have had on his work, including R. S. Thomas, whom he credits with having 'introduced me to the beauty of economy' (1).

(1) Owen Sheers, 'How R. S. Thomas Inspired Me', The Telegraph, 2012, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/9301218/Hay-Festival-2012-Owen-Sheers-how-RS-Thomas-inspired-me.html>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'A True Story' was included in Owen Sheers' first collection of poetry, *The Blue Book*. The poem differs from a number of the other poems in the collection in that it focuses on telling a personal story and draws very little on external images. Instead, the poem offers an insight into an intimate relationship between two people. Consequently, the title has an ambiguous edge; the 'true story' could be that of the events which unfold between the two people in the poem, but could also refer to the apparent meaning of the Japanese symbol that is tattooed on the woman's back.

Form.

The poem has an even appearance on the page, comprising three balanced stanzas, each made up of five lines. 'A True Story' has a narrative tone, matching its title and subject matter, but uses direct address which creates a very personal, intimate feel within the poem.

Lines 1 - 5.

The poem opens confidently with the assertion that the subject, addressed directly, has 'the truth' tattooed on her back. This assured start is somewhat undermined by the next four lines, in which the speaker reveals that he does not actually know the meaning of the tattoo, but has been told what it means by the other person. The speaker addresses her directly, describing the tattoo's location and the way it looks like '**a spider pretending to be dead**' (line 5). The image of the spider is significant as the comparison presents the tattoo as something which has somehow ended up on the woman's shoulder and yet does not entirely belong there. Moreover, this comparison to a spider is also an early indication that the tattoo may be something unwelcome, an idea supported by the fact that the spider is pretending to be dead - perhaps representing a problem or difficulty in the relationship which lies dormant, but could flare up at any moment.

Lines 6-10.

These lines continue to develop the theme of uncertainty which was established in the previous stanza, with the speaker describing the tattoo as sometimes looking '**like a mistake**' (line 6). The fact that the tattoo is only partly hidden by the dress the woman wears suggests that it cannot be entirely concealed and, perhaps, the woman does not want to do so. The question of whether this partial concealment makes the tattoo a half-truth remains unanswered, with the question left hanging in the middle of the stanza, separating two opposing interpretations of the tattoo. In lines 6 and 7 the tattoo is described as something which, although possibly a mistake, is playful and intimate. In contrast, in lines 9 and 10 the tattoo has become '**a white lie**' (line 9), something potentially dangerous and unreliable.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 6 - 10 (continued).

This section of the poem has a more sensual feel than the earlier lines, with the tattoo partially concealed by clothing and the 'white lie' (line 9) on the subject's shoulder **'ready to whisper into your ear'** (line 10). Interestingly, the tattoo is depicted as being ready to whisper into the woman's ear, a description that has the effect of transforming the tattoo into something clandestine which cannot be relied upon. This description also aligns the tattoo and the woman as a unit, sharing a secret which the speaker is not privy to.

Lines 11-15.

There is a further change of tone in lines 11-13 as the speaker recounts an occasion where the tattoo becomes symbolic of an unresolved argument between the pair. The rhythm of the poem slows down here, with the use of commas after **'Once'** (line 11) and **'argued'** (line 11) enforcing a pause in the speaker's account of this final scene. Building further on this slower pace is an air of mystery generated by the unexplained elements of this stanza; as readers we know that the couple have argued, but we are not told why, or what the subject of the argument was. The fact that we are told few details about the argument is interesting, as we get a taste of the speaker's sense of frustration at not being able to fully understand the meaning of the tattoo. We do, however, gain an insight into the relationship between the speaker and the addressee as he accuses her of having **'played dumb all day'** (line 12), presumably in an attempt to annoy him.

The poem's ending, with the speaker lying in bed looking at the tattoo on the shoulder of his partner and realising that they must **'face the truth'** (line 14) is poignant, as it emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication between the pair. The argument which is briefly mentioned at the start of this stanza becomes crucial in an indistinct way here, prompting the speaker to focus on the tattoo. In the wake of the argument, the speaker's previous playfulness is replaced by a sense of frustration or sadness as he freely admits that the artwork is **'in a language I will never understand'** (line 15). In contrast to earlier in the poem, this final line is one of resignation, with the speaker accepting that he lacks the ability to interpret the tattoo and will have to rely solely on his partner's ambiguous statement of its meaning. This resignation can be read as a metaphor for the speaker's inability to fully understand his partner and returns to the idea that the tattoo represents a secret, problem or riddle which exists between the couple. The ending is not entirely satisfactory to the reader as we are left with a series of unanswered questions, including what the tattoo really means, why the speaker seems to dislike it and why the couple have argued. Faced with these unanswered questions we may empathise with the speaker's frustration as he accepts that the tattoo is in a language he will 'never understand' (line 15). Is it the woman herself who is the enigma?

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As mentioned above, at a glance this poem may seem very different from many of the other poems in *The Blue Book* collection. 'A True Story' focuses on something very personal and makes no reference to the environment, landscape or rural world which feature quite prominently in many of the other poems in the collection. Yet there are some shared themes which connect this poem to Sheers' other works. The concept of storytelling recurs on a number of occasions throughout *The Blue Book*, with several other poems, including 'Antonia's Story' and 'Not Yet My Mother', exploring ideas of personal identity through the recounting of an individual's story. The exploration of language as a barrier creating a divide between the couple in the poem also connects 'A True Story' to wider discussions of identity and borders which exist within the collection.

To consider the poem as merely an individual narrative would, however, be reductive. The tattoo described in 'A True Story' has a complex meaning, becoming as it does symbolic of an unwanted truth which exists between the couple in the poem. For the speaker, the tattoo appears to symbolise a different time in his partner's life and its origin may lie in a story from before their relationship began. Consequently, the description of the tattoo as a 'spider' is used to indicate something which, like the truth, is sometimes unwanted and which may also be feared. This theme is continued throughout the poem, with the speaker only fully considering the tattoo, and the truth that it represents, when he is forced to do so by his partner turning her back on him.

Moreover, the tattoo has become a barrier between the couple, both in terms of its meaning and because, symbolically and linguistically, it has come to represent something which the speaker cannot understand. In the final lines the speaker feels shut out by the tattoo as it has become an object which lies between him and his partner. The sense of hurt and frustration experienced by the poet here may well be inspired by Sheers' own fascination with languages which he does not personally speak; a nod to his childhood in Wales, a nation with its own complex linguistic history. The image almost seems to taunt the speaker, with its image appearing, slyly, half-hidden by the addressee's clothing, but visible enough to remind him that it is still there. Here, the poet seems hurt as he is able to understand the meaning of the tattoo and what it represents, without actually understanding the language in which it is written, emphasising his sense of being an outsider. As a result, the tattoo becomes a symbol of power; the woman uses the tattoo to exert an element of power in the poem, allowing it to remain partially visible when she dresses and turning it towards him following the argument. Whether the woman does these things intentionally or subconsciously is not made clear in the poem and remains another unanswered question. The poem ends with the sense that the woman, and the tattoo on her back, has a personal history which the speaker will never be able to fully understand.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the woman in this poem have no voice?

Why does the speaker seem so frustrated by the fact that he cannot understand the meaning of the tattoo?

Why does the speaker compare the tattoo to a spider?

What does the poem have to say about identity?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active June 2018)
All links are clickable

- http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen_large_feb-15.jpg
- <https://www.japanese-symbols.org/japanese-symbols-kanji/真実-Truth>

The first image is a portrait of Owen Sheers, taken around 2015.

The second image is of some of the most widely used Japanese symbols which mean 'truth'. While we do not know which, if any, of these the poem is referring to, they provide an example of the type of image being discussed in the poem.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

A profile of Owen Sheers is available on the BBC website, providing a summary of his background and key publications up to 2011:

www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/

A WJEC interview with Owen Sheers, discussing identity, where he finds his inspiration for his work and how he approaches the writing process:

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

An interview with Sheers in which he discusses the influence of other Welsh writers on his work:

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

An interesting profile piece published in *The Independent* in 2011 in which Sheers discusses the importance of truth-telling in writing and how this is what he aspires to achieve through his poetry:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/a-writer-whos-hard-to-resist-6267092.html>

All links are clickable



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August 2018

We are grateful for the financial support of the College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, CREW - Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.