

HARRISON

1992 On 27th May 1992, a headline in Sarajevo was attacked with mortar fire, killing many people.

Pleiades An open star cluster of the constellation Taurus, also known as Seven Sisters. In Greek mythology, they were the daughters of Atlas who became stars.

AID flour-sacks Humanitarian aid is provided to conflict sites by international organisations. There is irony here in the fact that the sack is used to create barricades that protect civilians from mortar and sniper fire.

on two shell scars, where, in 1992

Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue

and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread

lay on this pavement with the broken dead.

And at their feet in holes made by the mortar

that caused the massacre, now full of water

from the rain that's poured down half the day,

though now even the smallest clouds have cleared away,

leaving the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky

ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye,

in those two rain-full shell-holes the boy sees

fragments of the splintered Pleiades,

sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells

splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells.

The dark boy-shape leads dark girl-shape away

to share one coffee in a candlelit café

until the curfew, and he holds her hand

behind AID flour-sacks refilled with sand.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

KEY POINT

The poet is writing about a complex conflict and it is a great challenge to capture its multiple facets in poetry, but it is also a situation with great literary potential.

The poem is about the devastation and disruption caused by war and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of this. The poem highlights the difficulties faced by the citizens of Sarajevo and contrasts this with young couples whose relationships are slowly progressing in a city that seems to symbolise death. Harrison also uses references to the couples' surroundings to show that, while life will continue in harsh environments, the reality of the situation is inescapable. He also explores the roots of the conflict, by showing that ethnic divides disappear in the shadows of the night.

THEMES

► What are the main themes of the poem?

The table on page 244 shows some of the themes. Complete the table by finding examples from the text and adding your ideas, explaining how the example illustrates the theme. One quotation illustrating the theme of 'war' has been added for you as an example.