

Good day everyone

I trust that you are all healthy and working hard. We really miss you and cannot wait for you to return to school.

I want you to study the poem **Excuses, excuses** by Wilfred Owen. You have two days to study the notes and analyse the poem in the POETRY SECTION of your book. You may print the notes and question into your book and then use the slides on the analysis of the poem to make hand-written notes on the page that with the poem.

Once you have analysed the poem, you must answer the questions on the poem.

Please use the following headings and date in your book:

Reading and viewing

8 June 2020

Excuses, excuses

I'll talk to you soon. Keep safe and stay positive!

Excuses, Excuses - Gareth Owen

- 1 Late again, Blenkinsopp?
What's the excuse this time?
Not my fault, sir.
Whose fault is it then?
- 5 Grandma's, sir.
Grandma's? What did she do?
She died, sir.
Died?
She's seriously dead all right, sir.
- 10 That makes four grandmothers this term, Blenkinsopp.
And all on P.E. days.
I know. It's very upsetting, sir.
How many grandmothers have you got, Blenkinsopp?
Grandmothers, sir? None, sir.
- 15 You said you had four.
All dead, sir.
And what about yesterday, Blenkinsopp?
What about yesterday, sir?
You were absent yesterday.
- 20 That was the dentist, sir.
The dentist died?
No, sir. My teeth, sir.
You missed the maths test, Blenkinsopp!
I'd been looking forward to it, sir.
- 25 Right, line up for P.E.
Can't sir.
No such words as 'can't', Blenkinsopp.
No kit, sir.
Where is it?
- 30 Home, sir.
What's it doing at home?
Not ironed, sir.
Couldn't you iron it?
Can't sir.
- 35 Why not?
Bad hand, sir.
Who usually does it?
Grandma, sir.
Why couldn't she do it?
- 40 Dead, sir.

Excuses, excuses – Gareth Owen

SUMMARY

The poem is a humorous dialogue (two people talking) between a teacher and a student. The teacher asks the student about three things: being late, not attending class for a test and why he cannot participate in a physical education (PE / gym) class. For every question the teacher asks, the student has an untrue answer.

First the boy says his grandmother has died – but he has already used that excuse three other times in the same month. Then he says he had to go to the dentist, and he was sorry to miss the math test – which is clearly not true. Lastly, the boy says that he cannot do PE because his gym clothes have not been ironed and he has a sore hand – and it was always his dead granny's job to iron them! This is a circular argument. The clothes cannot be ironed because his grandmother is dead - if we believe that excuse. He has avoided doing the things that he dislikes at school.

The dialogue is supposed to be funny, but it does highlight that students often feel that some classes are a waste of time. It also looks at the frustration that adults and teenagers can feel with one another.

ERA

This poem was written in the late twentieth century, when poets have felt more freedom to challenge traditional ways of writing poetry, and experiment with different kinds of poetry. This technique is useful here because it mimics (copies) what the student is doing – experimenting with seeing how much he can get away with. He is challenging the school system and the teacher's authority (power), but also trying not to get into trouble.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Gareth Owen was an English poet, novelist, and actor, who lived between 1936 and 2002. This poem could easily be performed on stage because it is a dialogue. Owen is best known for his poetry and novels for children. Most of his work is humorous (funny) but it also deals with the problems children face in their daily lives.

TYPE OF POEM

This is a narrative poem as well as a dialogue. It tells the story of a teacher and student in mild conflict (argument), using only their direct speech (the words they say).

CHARACTERISTICS

Because it is a dialogue, this poem has a conversational, free-verse form. It is intended to be funny. The exchange is between an unnamed teacher and a student (surnamed Blenkinsopp). Although we are not told directly who is speaking, we can clearly identify two different characters by what they say to each other. The teacher asks the questions and uses the boy's surname. The student comes up with answers. The poem uses lots of hyperbole (exaggeration), sarcasm (saying the opposite of what you really think) and understatement (making light of something serious) to make it funny. The short sentences make the poem stop and start a lot, so there is no smooth rhythm.

CONCEPTUAL VOCABULARY

WORD	BASIC DEFINITION
absent	Absent means away. The student has not been in class.
dialogue	There are two meanings of 'dialogue'. The first meaning of dialogue is the spoken words between two speakers, taking turns when they talk to each other. This is the meaning we see in the poem. The second meaning (a dialogue) is the direct speech of two characters in a play. If this poem were performed on stage, we could say it is a dialogue
kit	Kit refers to special clothes or equipment. The teacher means the clothes that the student needs to do gym / PE at school – not his uniform.
PE	PE is the abbreviation of Physical Education – gym class or exercise class during the school day.
upsetting	When you are upset you are sad, anxious or you feel like crying. The teacher is suspicious (thinks that the student is doing something wrong) because he says he is upset that his grandmother has died. When someone close to you dies, you should be grieving or in mourning – feeling more extreme emotions than just 'upset'.

SPEAKER

The speakers in the poem are a teacher and a student. The poet communicates directly through them in the words they speak (dialogue).

VOICE

The tone of voice of the poem is in two parts: the teacher's tone of voice is frustrated, angry and aggressive. The student's tone of voice is a mixture of calm, sarcasm / mockery, and sly rudeness. We understand that he does not really care if the teacher believes his excuses.

ADDRESSEE

The teacher is addressing the student and the student is addressing the teacher. We, the reader, are like part of the audience in a theatre, observing (watching) a drama between two people.

THEMES

Theme 1

Conflict and power

Conflict is a fight or struggle between two people.

The teacher officially has more power over the student because the teacher is older, and because he is an authority figure.

But the student has more real power because he stays calm while the teacher gets angry and frustrated. The student also avoids getting into trouble for being late, lying and leaving school to visit the dentist. In the conflict between the two, the student has won.

► Evidence of theme in text

Because the teacher cannot find a way to prove that the boy is lying, he looks weaker than the student. The student avoids responsibility (fault or blame) by saying things such as, 'Not my fault, sir'. The teacher finds it difficult to argue with him even though the excuses are flimsy (weak) and half-hearted.

The sarcasm the student uses ('I've been looking forward to it, sir') also undermines the teacher – he is laughing at the teacher. This gives the student a sense of power: he is challenging a person in authority. When the boy answers the teacher's question with a question ('What about yesterday, sir?') it confuses the issue. The teacher does not carry on the argument.

Also, the student always calls the teacher 'sir' even though we can see he is mocking the teacher. We usually say 'sir' as a respectful way to address an older man. However, he uses a sarcastic tone. He does not really respect the teacher.

Theme 2

Independence and conformity

If you are independent you think critically about things, and you behave according to your own rules. If you are conformist, you follow social rules about how to behave, and you do what everybody else does without questioning things.

In the poem, the teacher wants the student to conform to school rules and attend classes. The student wants his freedom. He is lazy and does not want to write tests or attend PE class. He has used his intelligence and judgement to outsmart the teacher. The student is a non-conformist. The teacher's job is to get students to conform.

► Evidence of theme in text

The teacher wants the student to follow the same rules as the other students (to conform).

The whole way through the poem the student outwits (is smarter than) the teacher. The student makes just enough effort not to get kicked out of class, but he is an independent thinker, and a non-conformist (someone who likes to do things differently).

He is not completely rude, but he does use sarcasm in his responses. He says 'sir' repeatedly, but he offers ridiculous and unbelievable excuses that tell us that he does not really care what the teacher thinks. The excuses are that his grandmother has died (again!) when a person can only die once. The next excuse is that he was looking forward to writing his math test, but he had to go to the dentist. (No one enjoys a test!) The final excuse is that his grandmother (who has supposedly just died) did not iron his gym clothes. It is clearly not true. The student refuses to conform and behave like the other students do.

DICTION / FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

SARCASM

Sarcasm is when someone says the opposite of what they really mean.

Sometimes sarcasm is meant to be funny. Other times, sarcasm is used to be hurtful or mocking (making fun of

something). When the learners in the poem says, 'I'd been looking forward to it, sir.'

The student does not mean what he says. He really means he was not looking forward to the math test.

That is why he chose to go to the dentist instead. He speaks like this so he can mock (laugh at) his teacher but not openly or directly.

UNDERSTATEMENT

This device makes a situation seem less serious or important than it really is. We usually use understatement to make jokes, or to seem as if we are more casual and cooler than we really feel. When the speaker says, 'I know. It's very upsetting, sir' this is an understatement.

The student pretends that Grandma's dying on PE days is upsetting. He is faking seriousness, when in fact he does not care at all. 'Very upsetting' tells us that he is not upset at all. Someone whose grandmother had really died, would look heartbroken and terribly upset. His grandmothers are probably alive and well. He just wants to avoid PE!

HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is when someone exaggerates or over-states a situation. This device is the opposite of understatement. The line 'She's seriously dead all right, sir' is a hyperbole. This line is hyperbole because someone can only either be dead or alive (you cannot be any more dead than just being dead!). To say someone is seriously dead is to over-state the truth of the grandma's death. Instead of believing the student, we question his statement. This hyperbole is supposed to be funny.

REPETITION:

Repetition is when the same words are used over and over, usually to emphasize something.

- a. 'sir': The student keeps saying 'sir', which is usually used to show respect. The teacher is officially more powerful, but unofficially the student is more powerful. This is because the student uses the word without its usual meaning or worth. 'Sir' loses its power because it has been over-used. We understand that he is just using it to pretend to respect the teacher, so he can avoid trouble.
- b. 'Blenkinsopp': The teacher repeatedly calls the student by his surname, to show who is more powerful. The student must call the teacher 'sir'. The name sounds a bit upper-class, rich, or silly – a stereotype (untrue judgement) of a person often mocked in comedy. The repetition of the surname is supposed to add humour to the poem.

Questions:

1. In line two the teacher asks, '*What's the excuse this time?*'
Which words tell us that Blenkinsopp often makes excuses? (1)
 2. What is unusual about the statement in line 10:
That makes four grandmothers this term, Blenkinsopp.? (1)
 3. What is P.E. (line 11)? (1)
 4. List two of the excuses Blenkinsopp uses. (2)
 5. Do you think that structuring this poem as a series of questions and answers is effective? Give a reason for your answer. (3)
 6. Use the table below to match the lines with the literary feature that you think best fits the specific line: (3)
- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 6.1 <i>That makes four grandmothers this term, Blenkinsopp. And all on P.E. days</i> | A sarcasm |
| 6.2 <i>I know, it's very upsetting, sir.</i> | B understatement |
| 6.3 <i>I'd been looking forward to it, sir.</i> | C falsehood |
7. Comment on any one part of the poem that you found funny. Explain the humour that Owen used. (2)
 8. How would you have handled the situation if you had been the teacher? (2)

[15]