

Simon Armitage and the problematic representation of Intimacy in the post-modern world.

Simon Armitage's poetry in **The Dead Souls Collection** offers the reader a highly ironic and often problematic reading of intimacy in contemporary society. Armitage is both witty and disturbing as he exposes the difficulties human beings endure in our attempt to find anything to truly believe in today. It is significant therefore that in a poetry so concerned with intimacy or the lack of intimacy, that we see a heavy investment in the language of distance, occasional and even unwanted proximity and of course loss itself .

People are **faithless** in Armitage yet animals are **faithful**; specifically of course that most companionable of human associates, the dog! It is especially fascinating that Armitage's preoccupation with intimacy in this collection manifests itself particularly through a recurring deployment as a motif of man's supposedly 'best friend'- **the dog**. Dogs litter the poems as both victims of mankind's duplicity and abuse, highlighting the **degradation of kindness and sympathy** in today's world and the **consequences of such degradation for our humanity**. It is also possible that Armitage wishes to **ironise the cliché** that The British are a nation of dog-lovers, both in terms of the cruelty inflicted upon dogs by humans and also the possibility that dogs may be **conscious/unconscious substitutes for human relationships**.

I will begin this discussion of intimacy in Armitage with a discussion of '*White Christmas*' which carefully **dismantles the loaded symbolism** of the happy, iconic festive day, and exposes the shortcomings of such impossibly 'happy' familial situations.

The poem opens with a real 'White' Xmas, revealing that the ideal actually serves to isolate and separate individuals who expect to be together.

'..the roads are impassable/and my wife is snowbound'

Bing Crosby's ever popular song of intimacy and closeness is rather undermined here by the banal reality of road closures and personal separation. The flat irony of this utterance is continued into the deadpan and laconic description of their '*telephone*' gifts:

'Mine is a watch, the very one/I would have chosen'

The lack of proximity, this very 'white Christmas' exposes the ambiguity of gift giving. Is the narrator flattered by being verbally presented with a gift that he has dropped hints about, or is he disappointed by the lack of originality in their relationship and the distance actually exposes this fundamental tiredness in their affection for each other?

In any case the choice of present is **not a genuine choice or gift (unlike the Christian gift)** and Armitage guides the reader about the actual degree of closeness in the marriage. Thus distance and proximity are mixed up in terms of meaning and we as readers recognise the essential loneliness of so many 'intimate relationships.' Where is the risk and passion in a designated gift?

This lack of spontaneity is contrasted by the very real need of the dog. The dog is 'gnawing' and '*howling*' and demands attention. The narrator yields to this need and takes the dog along the '*clean snow*', the **pseudo/surrogate marriage partner** perhaps?

He arrives at his parents and there we see another couple **transgress** the iconic image of the happy couple. His mother is '*Marie Curie*' a cool scientific woman who prepares the festive feast as some kind of operation: his father is a buffoon or clown; the '*Fred Flintstone*' character. If the narrator regards his parents in this way then we can only surmise that he sees them as very different from each other and significantly from himself? Intimacy is once again under ironic scrutiny.

At any rate there is a tangible sense of estrangement in the family home and the vindictiveness of the 'guest from the past' (whose past one wonders and what might have happened to cause such ill feeling?) Serve to accentuate the atmosphere of tension and hostility. Again distancing the narrator and reader from the fairytale 'white Christmas' of the commercials.

The dog, the only present '**partner**' for the narrator behaves as dogs do, antisocially drinking from the toilet, yet also begging food as a possible parody or **animal version of the Christian story**. Only the child behaves in a loving way to the shunned dog, and if the dog is some sort of **intermediary**

between the son and the parents, then its cold treatment by the parents is perhaps an indication of the lack of intimacy between the generations. This suspicion is followed through by the '*base metal*' arms that will not move to greet his father, and the detached objectivity of the '*car. With my sister inside.*' When Armitage sardonically rechristens the child as an 'infant Christ' he also ignores her. **If they reject the dog as his go-between then he will reject the child as theirs?**

The poem ends on a note of isolation and lack of intimacy. He reads himself outside normal human time:

'All the clocks are stopped...'

He snubs his sister, **focusing his attention needlessly upon his watch** as some symbol of careless indifference to intimacy, seeking to stress his need to be **elsewhere**, when of course the literal white Xmas means he has nowhere to go but an empty house with his surrogate wife, the dog. Looking at one's watch is a commonplace preoccupation today, suggesting the need to be elsewhere, even if that elsewhere means killing the present connections or possible intimacies. 'White Christmas' is a bleak poem as it is all too acute in its ironic expose of the realities that govern our behaviours especially at such loaded times as Christmas, ostensibly a time of togetherness and intimacy of a pleasant kind.

Armitage's short poem 'Stray' utilises a vocabulary of grotesque detail with careless, seemingly indifferent cliché:

'burn marks, lesions to the skin/that sort of thing'

The throwaway 'that sort of thing' exposes a society that is redundant of compassion and whose very vocabulary fails to meet the needs of any event. In other words Armitage deploys cliché as a means to highlight how unexamined and indifferent our lives may be when they are shored up with meaningless reactions to the world. We are what we say, and our insufficiency of language renders us 'insufficient' as human beings perhaps.

Armitage uses the presumably that this cruelty extends to the human world as well?

'- go n/get out- in bare feet'

The plight of the stray animal has echoes of the Christian story and seems to suggest that post-modern society has little remaining care for others, even the most vulnerable and undemanding. The sadism highlighted through the bare details of the torture inflicted on the dog, exposes an urban landscape of deprivation and inhumanity. This Godlessness with its final parody of that old recurring cliché of 'pull yourself together' or 'get a life' is bitterly ironical and reveals the anger and horror felt by the poet towards complacent commentators on modern life. Understandably the reader who might have felt exonerated at the beginning as we don't torture animals recognises reluctantly at the end that our world's complacent philosophy of 'pull yourself together' is cruelly uninvolved. We are the bad Samaritan of the story.

In case this shift of responsibility escapes us, then we only have to look across the page to see the final stages of the poem 'Give' to notice that Armitage is once again exploring the indifference of society to those who are deemed outside the norm. These outsiders are of course those who are economically vulnerable and therefore do not 'contribute' to the material wealth of post-modern society. To be poor is to be invisible. Armitage's poetry resurrects the invisible from the shadows of our society and makes us think again about responsibility.

'It's not as if I'm holding out/ for frankincense or myrrh, just change....'

Once again we recognise the barely veiled irony of the reference to the Christian story. We are so fallen in today's greedy world that we would be suspicious of anyone who had hopes that aspired to the freely bestowed gifts of the Three Wise men? The juxtaposition of the Christian tale with the pathos of the 'change' once again forces the reader into an uneasy recognition of the indifference or complacency that is the disease of modern life. Once again we as readers seem to be the bad Samaritan?

The poem 'Before you cut loose' returns to the plight of the stray dog with explicit savagery.

'put dogs on the list of difficult things to loose'

We are plunged into a world of disposable objects, where any life seems valueless and even an irritant. The poem does not even begin at a beginning; it begins in the middle of some macho reflection or conversation underlining the complacency of the speaker perhaps of the way that we use cliché to avoid thinking about our thoughts and actions. In other words, Armiage's poetry tries to make us think by exposing the limits of our thoughts and outlook, through highlighting the limits of our language.

The anecdotal aspect of this poem:

"I heard one story f a dog that swam/to the English coast from the Isle of Man'

Reveals how important stories are in the way that we read the world and ourselves. The dog stories highlight the truly faithful nature of the animal as opposed to the faithless, godless world of man. However we must be aware that Armiage is using heavy irony to make us reconsider our behaviour and that of others and it is clear that his dog poems are a series of attacks on complacency and cruelty, both in terms of the instigators but also those who do nothing.

" A dog got rid of-that's a dog for life'

this inversion of the recurring RSPCA motif, ironically re-evaluates what makes an animal adhere to far most Christian principles than so may owners. The bleak reality of the urban landscape in Armiage shocks the reader through its powerful and immediate use of detail, so that we see how far this world has fallen. And this 'fall of mankind' is keenly examined by our ill-treatment of the vulnerable and powerless, particularly as I have said, the world of dogs and other economically vulnerable, 'invisible' members of society.