GCSE

English Literature

'Remains' (Simon Armitage)

The poet (contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem) (AO3)

- Simon Armitage is an English poet, born in 1963.
- He became Poet Laureate in 2019 and took over the position from Carol Ann Duffy.
- Armitage wrote the poetry collection *The Not Dead* to make people aware of the moral dilemma ordinary soldiers faced as part of their day-to-day life when on duty.
- He helped to raise the public's awareness and appreciation of PTSD and the last effects of war on the servicemen and women.

Structure and form (AO2)

- The poem is a dramatic monologue from the point of view of a soldier on active duty. He is telling his experiences directly to the reader.
- The poem begins *in media res* and plunges the reader immediately into the action.
- There are 7 stanzas of 4 lines and a final stanza of 2 lines to perhaps suggest the continuous suffering of the soldier.
- The lack of rhyme and rhythm emphasise the seriousness of the situation and the soldier's suffering.
- The poem moves from a feeling of collective responsibility in the first half to the narrator's individual feeling of guilt in the second half.

The poem (content and context)

What is the poem about? (AO1)

The poem tells the story of a group of British soldiers on a routine patrol in Iraq. They spot a man who could possibly be an armed looter, and the three soldiers open fire, killing him. The man dies painfully, and his body is carelessly thrown into the back of a lorry and taken away without respect.

The poem is narrated by Guardsman Tromans, one of the soldiers involved. He is deeply affected by what happened and feels overwhelmed with guilt and regret. Even after returning home, he can't forget what he did. The memory haunts him, and he relives the moment again and again. In an attempt to cope, he returns to alcohol and drugs, but nothing helps — he remains tomented by his actions.

Deeper meaning (AO1)

The poem is about war and death, but it also deals with the repercussions and consequences of conflict and the psychological and damaging effects it can have on those involved.

The poem also describes the long-lasting effects of trauma and guilt and makes the reader understand that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is not a condition that is easily treated. The poem also exposes the reader to consider the moral ambiguity of warfare.

Context of the poem (AO3)

Simon Armitage was involved with a documentary on Channel 4 *(The Not Dead)* exploring how soldiers were affected by war, even after returning home. He wanted to increase awareness of PTSD and create sympathy and understanding for soldiers suffering from such trauma.

Armitage wrote a collection of poems (also called *The Not Dead*), one of which is 'Remains'.

The poem is based on the experiences of Guardsman Tromans, who was a soldier in Iraq in 2023 and who consequently suffered from PTSD.

Connections and contrasts (AO3)

- **'Drummer Hodge' by Thomas Hardy:** Both poems are about death and the dehumanisation of people in war and conflict.
- **'Disabled' by Wilfred Owen:** Both poems deal with death and the idea of loss and sacrifice in war. The theme of memories and flashbacks are used in both poems.
- **'Decomposition' by Zulfikar Ghose:** Both poems explore ideas about lack of identity and desensitisation.
- **'Catrin' by Gillian Clarke:** Both poems look at different types of conflict.
- **'Kamikaze' by Beatrice Garland:** Both poems focus on the themes of war, death and duty. Both poems deal with the effects of memories.
- **'War Photographer' by Carol Ann Duffy:** Both poems focus on the themes of the brutality of war, desensitisation, trauma and memories.

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'Remains' by Simon Armitage

Key quotations (AO1)

1. "we got sent out/to tackle looters raiding a bank."
2. "probably armed, possibly not."
3. "Well myself and somebody else and somebody else"
4. "I see every round as it rips through his life"
5. "and he's there on the ground, sort of inside out"
6. "and tosses his guts back into his body"
7. "End of story, except not really."
8. 'His blood-shadow stays on the street"
9. "But I blink/and he bursts again through the doors of the bank"
10. "And the drink and the drugs won't flush him out"
11. "he's here in my head when I close my eyes"
12. "his bloody life in my bloody hands."

10 key questions to ask about the poem

1. Who is the speaker in the poem, and what is their emotional state? (AO1)
2. Why does Armitage include colloquial language? (AO1)
3. Why do you think the first half of the poem uses the plural pronoun 'we' but the second half uses the singular pronoun 'I'? (AO2)
4. What does the line 'I see broad daylight on the other side' suggest? (AO1)
5. What is the effect of the line 'tosses his guts back into his body'? (AO2)
6. What is the effect of the enjambment in the poem? (AO2)
7. Why is the line 'probably armed, possibly not' repeated? Justify your answer. (AO1/AO2)
8. What is the effect of the image 'the drink and drugs won't flush him out'? (AO2)
9. What does the line 'his bloody life in my bloody hands' mean? Could there be more than one possible meaning? (AO2)
10. Does the poem present being a soldier in a positive or negative war? Give reasons for your opinion. (AO3)

Language and imagery (AO2)

- Armitage uses colloquial phrases such as 'legs it', 'Well', 'So we've hit', 'tosses his guts' to create an informal tone as if we are part of a direct conversation with the narrator. The colloquial language also reflects the tough, no-nonsense approach of army life.
- The uncertainty and ambiguity in the repeated line 'probably armed possibly not' suggests there is a chance that the man was innocent. However, by placing 'probably' first, it suggests to the reader that this is what the soldier is desperate to believe – otherwise he has killed an innocent man.
- The verb 'tosses' implies a careless, casual action which shows a total lack of respect for the victim. Armitage is suggesting how soldiers can become desensitised to death and have to distance themselves from it in order to cope. The word also suggests how the victim is dehumanized and treated as if he is worthless.
- The 'blood-stained shadow' suggests how the soldier's conscience will always be marked or 'stained' by the memory, in the same way that a stain can be difficult to remove from the ground. It is impossible to detach yourself from your shadow and in the same way, the soldier will never be able to detach himself from what he has done.
- The last line has both a literal and metaphorical meaning. Armitage writes 'his bloody life in my bloody hands' to suggest the literal blood from the victim's body. The word 'bloody' could also suggest a swear-word or curse which could reflect the soldier's suffering and regret. The line also has overtones of Lady Macbeth's actions in Shakespeare's play, where she is desperately trying to rub an imaginary spot of blood off her hands. In both cases, the blood is used as a metaphor for the guilt which cannot be removed.

Links for further research

An interview from 'The Not Dead' documentary with Guardsman Tromans

Please note – there is some bad language in this clip and some difficult ideas and themes are discussed including violence and death.

An interview with Simon Armitage