

Reading...

A Portable Paradise by Roger Robinson

Introduction

Writer, cultural activist, performer, lecturer and self-proclaimed dub poet artiste Roger Robinson was born in London in 1982 to Trinidadian parents. When Robinson was three years old the family returned to Trinidad, when his father secured a job promotion. Robinson made the journey to England once more, at age 19. Initially, he lived with his grandmother in Ilford, Essex, before moving to Brixton. It was here, during the 1990s, that Robinson began to make a name for himself on the poetry scene. At the same time Robinson delivered reading and mentoring workshops to disaffected and underachieving school pupils – the majority of whom were black boys.

Robinson is the author of a short story collection, *Adventures in 3D* (2001) as well as the poetry pamphlets *Suitcase* (2004) and *Suckle* (2009). For his first full poetry collection, *The Butterfly Hotel* (Peepal Tree Press, 2012), Robinson was shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Poetry Prize; his most recent collection, *A Portable Paradise* (Peepal Tree Press, 2019), was awarded both the TS Eliot Poetry Prize 2019 and the RSL Ondaatje Prize 2020. On the British Council Literature webpage the writer is quoted as having said of his writing: 'How good I am as a writer is of no significance to me. I want my writing to energize, provoke thoughts, discussions, smiles, and make listeners have inner monologues with themselves. That's why I write'.

Robinson currently splits his time between Trinidad and London. In the introduction to a recent interview in *The Guardian* the poet stated: 'Since I was 19 I've been living in England and thinking I'd go home, but there was a point, around six years ago, when I realised I'm here now: I'm black British.' It is from this authorial realisation that the poet's *A Portable Paradise* is perhaps best approached. In this astonishing collection Robinson (from the vantage point of insider/outsider) turns his attention to exploring the experiences of those who dared to dream of better; those who packed their hopes, dreams and idealism in a suitcase and sought out new lives on British shores; those who never stood a chance of succeeding because of pervasive social inequality, injustice and institutional racism. The collection provokes three moral questions: what is paradise, where is paradise, and how do we get there? By the collection's end it is faith – whether that be personal and spiritual faith or faith in the overwhelming goodness of people – that emerges as a vehicle through which to reach some form of transcendence.

Each poem in the collection is entirely deserving of being studied in the English classroom. However, this study guide focuses only on the first section of the collection, on a selection of those poems written to honour the lives lost tragically in Grenfell Tower in 2017.

Context for Reading

On 14th June 2017 the UK suffered one of its worst tragedies in the contemporary era when 72 people lost their lives in the fire that ripped through a block of flats in London. Grenfell Tower, a part of the Lancaster West estate, sat in the London borough of North Kensington. At around 1am a kitchen fire broke out in a fourth floor flat (potentially as a result of a faulty fridge-freezer in the home of resident Behailu Kebede). Although fire fighters responded quickly to the emergency call, the ferocity of the blaze saw the fire spread at a devastating rate. By 1:09, approximately fifteen minutes after it starting, the fire had become external to the building (burning up the cladding on the outside). Whilst many residents made their way out of the building to safety, many residents were told to remain in the building, in accordance with the 'Stay Put' safety policy that was in operation in the 23-storey block of flats. Ordinarily, this policy would have allowed fire fighters to contain and extinguish the blaze whilst keeping those remaining in the building as safe as possible. But at Grenfell Tower the fire was out of control – the 'Stay Put' policy was now endangering lives. Residents trapped inside moved to the upper floors to escape the blaze, not realising that the fire was ripping through the building in the same direction. By 03:00, with most floors of the tower block ablaze, fire fighters were forced to abandon the 'Stay Put' directive. The instruction to remaining residents to get themselves out as safely as possible came too late to save the seventy-two people who perished in the blaze.

In the aftermath questions were rightfully asked about how this atrocity could have happened in a council-owned building. Much of the ensuing discussion focused on responsibility and accountability. Investigations into the Grenfell Tower fire unearthed a litany of health and safety errors and complaints that had gone unacknowledged/ignored and that contributed directly to the loss of lives: none of the doors in the building met fire safety standards; gas pipes that had been installed in the year preceding the blaze lay exposed; the cladding around the building (made of highly flammable polyethylene polymer) was the primary cause of the fire's spread and had been used in the building's refurbishment (according to the architect who drew up the plans) for 'appearance and cost' as opposed to safety. Tenant management organisations and the Royal Borough of Chelsea and Kensington were suspected of negligence, with investigators finding reasonable grounds to suspect each organisation of having committed corporate manslaughter (under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007).

The Grenfell Tower tragedy also raised much larger questions about race, ethnicity and social class. In the first instance, Grenfell Tower was a council housing complex (inhabited by many people with low incomes) that sat in the heart of one of London's most affluent neighbourhoods (and home of Britain's super-rich), Kensington. In the second instance, the majority of those who died in Grenfell Tower that night were people of colour. Those seeking answers understandably questioned whether this entirely avoidable loss of life would have occurred in a tower block in which white people predominated.

Notes on the Poems

The first section of poetry in *A Portable Paradise* is dedicated to honouring the victims of Grenfell. There is a total of eleven accessible (but challenging) poems that link thematically to this subject. Below are analytical notes to facilitate the study of six of these poems, with some ideas for extension tasks.

1. 'The Missing'

- In the poem's dedication the writer makes it clear that these words are his **memorial** for those who **lost their lives** in the devastating disaster at **Grenfell Tower**.
- If we take this poem as the **first in a sequence**, we might consider this a strange starting point. Whilst later poems in the sequence will reimagine the start of the fire, or the moments and hours during which the tower was ablaze, or the hours and days in which those people who remained unaccounted for were sought out in the tower's burnt-out shell, in this first poem the poet **imagines the moment at which the souls** of those who died in the fire **leave their earthly bodies** and **ascend heavenwards**.
- This 6-stanza poem is a **haunting exploration of loss**.
- Although Robinson does not refer to victims by name, he skilfully **provides snapshots** of how the victims were in life, offers descriptions that capture their originality and diversity, their humanity. This allows us to **appreciate the scale** of what has been lost.
- As readers we intrude on the **private grief** endured during a very **public tragedy**.
- We feel deeply the **visceral pain** of the woman in stanza one, left behind and grieving, who asks her God: 'What about me Lord, why not me?'; we watch the desperation of a man try to grab hold of the floating soul of his dead wife.
- By focusing throughout on the **lightness** of the bodies as they float, Robinson effectively draws attention to the **weight** of the emotional burden on those who remain in 'the city of the stayed'.
- Towards the poem's end the dead are described as 'superheroes' whose souls (cruelly snatched by the tragedy) ascend heavenwards to a 'city of the missing'.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Simile
- Repetition
- Metaphor
- Word Choice
- Alliteration
- Complex Listing
- Contrast
- Nouns and pronouns
- Narrative persona

2. 'Haibun for the Lookers'

- Poem two in the sequence transports us to the **epicentre** of the tragedy.
- In the first instance, the subjects of this poem are the onlookers who have **amassed** at the foot of the tower, including those who have managed to flee from their homes in the tower to safety on the ground.
- In stanzas 1-5, the poem's speaker imagines the thoughts, fears and emotions coursing through the minds of these helpless people, watching the tower metamorphose into a 'charred black tomb'.
- Robinson's use of **figurative** and **descriptive** language has effectively conveyed the **danger** and **intensity** of the heat: 'fire-ash' floats across the scene, parts of the building 'fall like giant sparks from a welder's torch', 'rippling orange-yellow and punch-red acrylic flames' lick the building. To the onlookers the scene looks so extraordinary, so unreal, so thoroughly **incomprehensible**, that it seems as though someone has painted it.
- As the poem continues we note that the attention to the heat of the blaze is intentional, for it is only in the dramatic **final stanza** that we realise that there is another looker in this poem, someone who has been observing the amassed crowds on the ground from the position of still being trapped inside this deathly tower.
- In a heart-stopping **conclusion** to the poem, the speaker throws her infant out of the window (with no other alternative) and prays that God will protect them.
- The **poetic form** of this piece is hugely significant and enhances meaning.
- The title indicates that this poem is a **haibun**.
- A haibun is a poetic form that originated in Japan. It combines two different types of poetry: **prose poems** and **haikus** (3-line poems containing 17 syllables that are divided up into 5, 7, 5).
- Writers of haibun set out to describe a **slice of life** or an **unfolding scene** in an imagistic way. In haibun, this description usually takes the form of **prose poetry**. If we think about 'Haibun for the Lookers' this is exactly what we find: a sensory description of a burning building, and the unfolding devastation.
- The second poetic form that we are looking for in haibun (the **haiku**) comes at the end of the poem: this 17-syllable conclusion should deepen the meaning or significance of the scene unfolding. Again, thinking about 'Haibun for the Lookers' the final section describes a parent's worst nightmares realised: what would they do to preserve the life of their child? The parent's decision – to throw their child from a window of the burning tower block – is gut-wrenching.
- We understand that the alternative – leaving the child to burn in the blaze – is unthinkable for the speaker. It is the most horrific of catch-22 scenarios.
- The haiku certainly deepens the significance of this poem.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Compound adjectives
- Poetic form
- Structure
- Word choice
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Personification

Writing

Imagine that you work for a broadsheet newspaper. You have been given 800 words to report the details of the incident and convey the horror of the tragedy.

3. Fourteen to One

- In 'Fourteen to One' we hear another voice of one who was **trapped** within the burning building.
- At **seven lines long** this poem is (somewhat surprisingly) not the shortest poem in the entire collection, but it is the most concise that we find within the section of poetry focused on Grenfell Tower.
- The speaker in this poem appears to be a **survivor** of the fire.
- In two arresting sentences we are given a **vignette**, a brief description of how it was the speaker managed to **escape** the fire.
- The poem is a **survival** story. The speaker (there is an **ambiguity** as to whether the speaker is male or female) describes in a rather **matter-of-fact tone** (as though recounting their experience as part of a testimony or interview) how they tied together a rope made of bedsheets – fourteen sheets in all – with a final sheet reserved for tethering their child to their body to descend from the building.
- In seven short lines the poet conveys the **stoicism** of the speaker, and the determination that protects them against the **abject horror** with which they are faced.
- Yet, the **brevity** of the poem means that we are given very little supporting detail whilst the **detached tone** almost denies the **significant emotional toll** of this event on the speaker.
- This leaves the reader with fundamental – and utterly heart-stopping – questions at the poem's end: was the fifteenth sheet used? Was the child saved?

Note: Poems 2 and 3 in this section of *A Portable Paradise* work well as companion pieces as they foreground interesting speaking voices who are concerned primarily with preserving the life of their child.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Ambiguity
- Narrative voice
- Contrast
- Alliteration

Writing

Including the title, 'Fourteen To One' contains 35 words. Given the power and emotive impact of this poem, it is astonishing that only two sentences are used to deliver the story.

Can you tell a powerful story in 35 words? You might look at current news websites for examples of a powerful story that you can use. Focus only on **facts** and **key details**. Keep **emotive vocabulary** to a **minimum**. You can divide your 25 words up into as many or as little sentences as you want to.

4. 'The Portrait Museum'

- The **setting** of this poem is the **day after the fire**; the poem's **subject** is the search to locate people still unaccounted for in the hours immediately following the blaze.
- The poet homes in on the **litany of photos** posted on the streets surrounding the tower by those who desperately needed answers as to the whereabouts of their loved ones.
- By focusing on the day after the tragedy – the **first day of mourning** the dead – the poet explores **grief** and **how it manifests**.
- The **title** is an important place to begin analysing this poem as it tells us everything we need to know about both the subject of the poem and the thematic concerns that underpin it. We can see this by breaking the title into its two component words.
- Firstly, a **portrait** is a **likeness** (or artistic representation) of a person. In portraiture the artist seeks to capture something **essential** about the sitter (ie. Their personality, a mood) for posterity. Portraits tend to **depict people at their best**. Traditionally, **important** or **affluent** people would commission portraits because owning a painting of themselves was a sign of their **high status** in life.
- A **museum** is a place in which important **artefacts** of **historical** or **cultural importance** are **collected**, **preserved** and **curated** (ie. Organised in a way that tells a particular story). The photos of the missing are **arranged** in the streets as portraits would be in a museum gallery.
- The photos chosen or selected by family members to be 'stuck on tree trunks, walls and fence boards' project those missing in a **humane** light: as **family** members, as friends.
- This poem is written in **unrhymed couplets** (paired lines that do not rhyme).
- To look at the lines as they appear on the page we might initially see **formal neatness**. However, a closer examination of the punctuation used by the poet reveals two **different types** of **couplet** working throughout the poem.
- Firstly, in stanzas 1-5, we find examples of **open couplets**. This is where sentences remain **incomplete** from one stanza to the next.
- The first sentence in the poem spills over three stanzas. In this sentence we move quickly through the faces and posters as though we are **walking past the posters**. It also works to **convey the number** of missing people. Stanzas 4 and 5 are also open couplets.
- We might argue that open couplets are used at the beginning of the poem when family members are looking for answers ie. **Still seeking closure**.
- **Closed couplets** are used in stanzas 7-8. With every day that passes, the **hope** of those searching **diminishes** until there is no hope left of finding their loved ones alive. They are presumed dead and therefore some form of **resolution** or **closure** has been found.
- At the poem's conclusion, the images begin to **detach** and **blow away** on the breeze, just as the **hope** of those who have pinned the images **evaporates**, and the crowds of mourners disperse (eventually) from the scene.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Couplets
- Personification
- Listing
- Parenthesis
- Narrative persona
- Alliteration
- Metaphor
- Extended metaphor

5. 'Blame'

- In a **logical progression** from 'The Portrait Museum', 'Blame' sees Robinson explore the very human desire/need to **apportion blame** in the **aftermath** of a **tragedy**. This focus is signposted clearly by the poem's title.
- In the poem's first sentence (which takes the form of a **complex list**) four parties deserving of blame are held up for scrutiny: the council who owned the property; the contractors who worked on the building; the Health and Safety department who claimed the building passed safety regulations; and the Prime Minister who visited Grenfell Tower in the aftermath of the blaze and showed a fundamental lack of compassion and respect for those who lost their lives in the fire.
- Sentences two and three of this 4-sentence poem continue to examine the concept of blame, but whilst the first sentence explicitly considered who was responsible for the extent of the tragedy, sentences three and four look at the ways in which those same parties are responsible for **continued injustices** enacted on the survivors of the tragedy.
- In one entirely **predictable, yet** entirely **shocking** final line, the poet asserts: 'Nobody took the blame'.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Listing
- Repetition/Anaphora
- Word choice
- Simile
- Short sentences

Talking and Listening

In this poem the writer makes a political point. He argues that those parties who unquestionably had a role to play in the tragedy failed to shoulder any responsibility and in so doing failed to show remorse. We might see their actions as being undignified and showing little respect for the dead.

Undertake **research** on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, focusing your research on what was learned by investigators about how the fire started and why it spread so quickly. During your research **keep neat** and **careful notes**. Remember to make a list of the articles that you read (this is called a **Bibliography** of sources). Following your research, take part in an 8-minute **group discussion** about who was to blame for the scale of the tragedy.

6. 'The Father'

- A really interesting feature of *A Portable Paradise* is the **variety of poetic forms** used by Robinson to tell the stories that he wants to tell.
- In 'The Father' we find a **prose poem**. Prose poems are a difficult form to analyse because they can look deceptively like a **paragraph** from a short story or an article. However, there are **poetic devices** to be found in these prose-like sections that turn the prose into poetry.
- This poem is an **observation** on the **impact of grief**.
- The speaker describes watching an interview with the daughter of a man who lost his life in the Grenfell Tower fire.
- The speaker observes how the child (who is only twelve years old) undergoes a **metamorphosis** during the course of the interview. Her **stoicism** is clear to the observer, as is her **maturity** when faced with daunting questions.
- Throughout the interview the child speaks with almost an **adult voice** and the **wisdom** of her father.
- A shift in time occurs mid-way through the poem as the poet uses a **flashforward** technique to illustrate the enforced/premature transformation of the child into an adult.

Poetic techniques to look out for

- Repetition
- Half-rhyme
- Metaphor
- Narrative persona/speaking voice
- Commands
- Shifts in tense
- Tone