

Cinders by Roger McGough

After the pantomime, carrying you back to the car
On the coldest night of the year
My coat, black leather, cracking in the wind.

Through the darkness we are guided by a star
It is the one the Good Fairy gave you
You clutch it tightly, your magic wand.

And I clutch you tightly for fear you blow away
For fear you grow up too soon and - suddenly,
I almost slip, so take it steady down the hill.

Hunched against the wind and hobbling
I could be mistaken for your grandfather
And sensing this, I hold you tighter still.

Knowing that I will never see you dressed for the Ball
Be on hand to warn you against Prince Charmings
And the happy ever afters of pantomime.

On reaching the car I put you into the baby seat
And fumble with straps I have yet to master
Thinking, if only there were more time. More time.

You are crying now. Where is your wand?
Oh no. I can't face going back for it
Let some kid find it in tomorrow's snow.

Waiting in the wings, the witching hour.
Already the car is changing. Smells sweet
Of ripening seed. We must go. Must go.



Analysis:

The title alludes to the fairy tale 'Cinderella'. The heroine had to leave the ball at midnight as her coach would turn back into a pumpkin at that time etc. There are several references to this fairy tale throughout the poem. The father in most versions of 'Cinderella' is an absent figure who is unable to protect his daughter from cruelty and harsh treatment.

Throughout the poem, the poet addresses his daughter directly. This creates a sense of closeness between the father and his child. He also writes in the present tense, which adds to the immediacy and sense of urgency in the poem. The language in the poem is quite simple and straightforward, which is appropriate for a poem about a child.

McGough captures the scene beautifully. The description of a father carrying his young daughter back to the car are both realistic and evocative. The repeated 'ack' sounds in the third line: 'My coat, black leather, cracking in the wind', help us to imagine the sound the coat makes as it snaps in the cold wind. The fact that it is dark and there is a cold wind gives us our first indication that the poem may be somewhat bleak.

The poet goes on to say that he and his daughter are 'guided by a star' as they make their way back to the car. The star is the decoration on top of the wand that the little girl was given by the 'good fairy' in the pantomime they just attended. This is a lovely image and makes us think of other times in history and literature that people have been guided by stars: explorers heading into the great unknown, seafarers journeying home and the three Wise Men travelling to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus. In each case, there is the idea of a journey filled with hope and dreams of a bright future, just as the little girl has hopes and dreams as she heads out on her voyage through life. The father's sorrow, of course, is that he may not be there to guide her along the path and share her sorrows and joys. This is a somewhat sad interpretation of the father and daughter's rather more ordinary and down-to-earth journey back to their car! However, there is great affection in this description too. We imagine the little girl proudly clutching her wand and holding it aloft as she is carried down the hill in the arms of her loving father.

Like most fathers, the poet feels very protective of his little girl. He carries her back to the car and holds her tightly 'for fear you blow away'. The words 'for fear' are repeated in the next line, emphasising the poet's concern for his daughter. His feeling of protectiveness is not just for the girl's well-being now, but also for her future happiness. He wishes he

could protect her always, but life – he suggests – is not really about the ‘happy ever afters’ of pantomime.

McGough knows he is an older father. He admits that, as he moves ‘hunched against the wind and hobbling’, he could easily be mistaken for the girl’s grandfather. This knowledge makes him clasp his daughter to him even more closely as he reflects on her future without him.

The mood of the poem becomes even sadder as the poet and his daughter reach the car. He struggles to tie the straps of the car seat and admits that he has ‘yet to master’ them. This could be seen as a symbol of all the things he needs to learn about raising his little girl and the lack of time he has in which to do this. The poet’s plaintive wish for ‘more time’ is emphasised by the repetition of this phrase at the end of the sixth stanza. The child is crying now as she has lost her wand and this adds to the feeling of sadness.

The final stanza of the poem cleverly links the fairytale world of the pantomime and real life. The poet says that ‘the witching hour’ is ‘waiting in the wings’. ‘Waiting in the wings’ is a theatrical expression meaning that an actor is waiting for his cue to appear on stage. In the poet’s life, it is time that is ‘waiting in the wings’. Just as Cinderella’s fairytale night came to an end at midnight, so the poet fears that his joy will end too soon. Cinderella’s coach turned back into a pumpkin and he smells ‘ripening seed’. Although the poem ends on a melancholy note, the poet’s love for his daughter and his concern for her future are constant throughout this poem.

Theme:

The theme of this poem is a father’s fear that he may not be around to see his child grow up. He loves her very much and worries that he will not be able to protect her from the disappointments she may encounter in life. He is also saddened at the thought of missing out on her happiest moments.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Parents and children
- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ Relationship

Sample questions and answers.

Each question is worth 15 marks.

1. From your reading of the poem what do you learn about the relationship between the poet and his child? Base your answer on evidence from the poem.
2. Do you think the poet captures the scene well in this poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
3. Do you think this poem is sad or happy or a mixture of both? Explain your answer with reference to the poem.

Sample Answer to Question 1:

From my reading of this poem, I think the poet has a **very** close relationship with his child. He addresses his daughter directly in the poem, using the word "You" repeatedly. This creates a sense of intimacy and makes us feel as if we are listening in to a private conversation. McGough clearly feels very affectionate towards his daughter and makes several references to hugging her tightly to him. He is concerned about his daughter's happiness and expresses dismay when he realises why she is crying: "Where is your wand?" Although he cannot face going back to get it, he is obviously so in tune with his child that he knows why she is upset. The lost wand is the sort of detail that a parent might well overlook at the end of a busy night out, but Roger McGough does not.

Your opening sentence should directly address the question.

Developing the answer means going into more detail about the point you made in the first sentence. In this case, explaining that McGough is affectionate, concerned about his daughter's happiness and in tune with her feelings proves that he has a close relationship with his child. In each case, examples are given to support the point being made.

Though the relationship is a good one, the poet is sad about certain aspects of it. He is older than most fathers of little girls:

"I could be mistaken for your grandfather", and he is worried

that he won't see his daughter grow up. He would like to be

there to see her "dressed for the Ball", but he knows he won't. His sadness is apparent as he reflects on the fact that he will not live long enough to tell his daughter about the realities of life and warn her "against Prince Charmings". His wish that there could be "more time" is a poignant one.

Like many fathers, the poet feels very protective of his little girl. He carries her back to the car, and holds her tightly "for fear you blow away". The words "for fear" are repeated

Link sentences make your answer flow well. This shows the examiner that you have planned your work.

in the next line, emphasising the poet's concern for his daughter. His feeling of protectiveness is not just for the girl's well-being now, but also for her future happiness. He wishes he could protect her always, but life, he suggests, is not really about the "happy ever afters of pantomime". This is certainly true in his case as he won't be around when his daughter reaches womanhood.

From my reading of this poem, it is clear to me that the poet is a loving and concerned father who has not only taken the trouble to bring his little girl to the pantomime, but has also immortalised the experience and expressed his love for his child in the form of a poem.

If you have time, a brief conclusion which sums up the main points of your answer can be helpful. It is not essential, however, and you can write a perfectly good answer without one. Different students write at different speeds.

Sample Answer to Question 2:

I think the poet captures the scene very well in this poem. The physical descriptions of a father carrying his young daughter back to the car on a cold winter's night are both realistic and evocative. The repeated 'ack' sounds in the third line: "My coat, black leather, cracking in the wind" mimic the sound I imagine the coat to make as it snaps in the cold wind. He says that he and his daughter are "guided by a star" and goes on to say it is the wand the little girl was given by the good fairy. This simply but effectively conjures up an image of the child proudly clutching the wand and holding it aloft as she is carried down the hill.

This is a question on style, so concentrate on the language of the poem. Don't just point out a feature of style: say what it does. In this case, link it back to the question by saying that it 'conjures up an image'...

The poet unflinchingly faces up to the fact that he is an older father, and ruefully describes himself as "Hunched against the wind and hobbling" as he picks his way carefully down the hill. This alliterative line and the one which follows it in which he admits that he "could be mistaken for your grandfather" draw us into the poet's moving but self-deprecating description of the scene. He tells us that he "fumbles with the straps" of the baby seat. This little detail adds to the poignancy and gives us the impression that there is much about practically parenting the little girl that causes him difficulties. It is easy to picture a frustrated McGough struggling with the nylon straps in the dark as the child cries for the lost wand.

Use poetic terminology throughout your answer.

Again, say what this image does. It makes it 'easy to picture' the father. This refers to the question.

I was struck by the way in which the poet blends the world of the pantomime and the real world to create a scene which is both charming and sweetly sad. The little girl is probably lost in the story of the pantomime she has just seen, and McGough's reflection that he will never see his daughter "dressed for the Ball", nor will he be "on hand to warn you against Prince Charmings" effectively captures the sad reality of the scene. Here he is, with his small daughter in his arms, clutching her tightly, and yet fully aware that he cannot hold her forever. The simple but descriptive language and the poet's bitter-sweet thoughts really bring the scene to life for me.

In each paragraph, reflect the wording of the question by mentioning the way in which the scene is created.

Sample Answer to Question 3:

I think that this poem is both happy and sad. It opens on a positive note and presents us with the heart-warming image of the poet carrying his beloved daughter back to the car after a night out together at the pantomime. Roger

Words like 'positive' and 'heart-warming' reinforce the idea that this is a happy image.

McGough is a caring father who holds his little girl as tightly as she holds her magic wand. She is precious to him and he clutches her to him 'for fear you blow away'. This concern for his child is touching but even in this early part of the poem there is a note of sadness in the poet's fear that his daughter will 'grow up too soon'.

The sadness in the poem centres on the poet's realisation that - as he is an older father - he will not always be there for his little girl, and he will not be around to see her 'dressed for the Ball.' This story will not end in 'happy ever afters'.

The poem becomes even sadder as the poet and his daughter reach the car. He struggles to tie the straps of the car seat and admits that he has 'yet to master' them. This could be a symbol for all the things he needs to learn about raising his little girl and the lack of time he has in which to do this. The poet's plaintive wish for 'More time' is emphasised by the repetition of this phrase at the end of the sixth stanza. The child is crying now as she has lost her wand and this adds to the feeling of sadness.

Although the poem ends on a melancholy note, with the poet keenly aware that his time with his daughter is limited, his love for her and his concern for her future is a constant throughout the poem. For this reason, I find the poem to be a blend of happiness and sadness.