

Area of Study – Response Sheet

Title: Journey to the Interior

Form: Poem

Composer: Margaret Atwood

Date: 1965

Context & Values:

The poem was written during the 1960's, which was a time when many American poets were exploring mental health problems and madness using metaphors and analogies. This group of poet's called themselves a 'confessional school' and emerged as a result of the atrocities such as genocide, atom bombs and concentration camps that occurred during World War II. Others involved in the 'confessional school' were John Berryman, WD Snodgrass and Jerome Rothenberg.

She is a Canadian poet who uses her own geographical context, the Canadian landscape, to act as a metaphor for the human psyche.

Concepts or Ideas Conveyed about Journeys:

The main theme conveyed in the text is that everyone has a 'dark' side to their inner self, and going on a journey to discover that self is treacherous and time consuming.

Her opinions on this are based on the historical context as mentioned above and she feels that the human psyche is damaged as a result. She also conveys the idea that the only way to clear one's conscience is through an interrogation of one's inner mind and a full journey through one's conscience. Through these journeys she is trying to get the responder to question themselves as to 'why human's behave as they do?'

She believes that only if we journey into our darker thoughts will we find the reasons as to what moves the human psyche from just involving in 'normal' human behaviour to committing horrid deeds that seem to defy logic and reason.

Journey – Describe the nature of the journey; imaginative, physical or inner:

Whilst Margaret Atwood's poem has been suggested as an imaginative journey on account of the fact she is standing in her kitchen imagining a barren world that is 'spindly' and 'endless', most critics will argue that it is more closely related to being an inner journey.

This is because of the constant references in the first person and also the way the entire poem appears to be thoughts out loud. The poem is structured in such a way that it flows on much like a train of thought, irregular at the start but smoother once the process is running. These two main reasons are why *Journey to the Interior* is more often than not referred to as an inner journey.

Language/filmic/visual/aural features:

Discuss how the composer conveyed the inner or physical or imaginative journey. Identify the feature, exemplify and explain how it conveys or creates the journey and extrapolate by discussing its impact on the responder. Draw comparisons/contrasts between this text and other texts you are discussing in your response. Include quotes from the text.

There are many language features that help to shape Margaret Atwood's poem, *Journey to the Interior*.

The first of these is the structure of the poem. The poem is broken up into three main stanzas. The first stanza is describing the human psyche by using the extended metaphor of the Canadian landscape as a comparison to a human conscience and inner self. This allows the psyche to appear to the responder as the Canadian landscape appears to a traveller, rocky, 'spindly', 'dark' and a 'poor country' that is un-chartable and treacherous.

The second stanza describes the kitchen blending in with the inner self. This shows how the psyche can overtake a mind and demonstrates how the inner journey blends with the physical world.

The third stanza revolves around the un-chartable nature of the conscience, describing it as 'erratic' and a 'vacant wilderness.'

The combination of these three stanzas and the way in which they are divided help to convey the idea of venturing deeper into the mind, or in this case the poem, makes it more erratic and harder to escape.

Another feature that helps to convey the theme of an inner journey is the use of clichés that help to provide a degree of familiarity in an otherwise uncharted domain. The cliché 'walking in circles' allows the responder to familiarise themselves with the situation that the poet is in. By using a phrase that has common connotations it is easier for the responder to relate to what the author is feeling. It is also a common connotation for journeys that are seemingly endless or have no real purpose or value.

The most notable language feature of the poem is the extended metaphor/analogy used by Atwood to represent the human psyche. She uses the Canadian landscape as a comparison to the 'dark' regions of the mind that like its real-world counterpart is uncharted, barren and a 'vacant wilderness' that is yet to see the first signs of human contact. This shows that journeys can sometimes occur very solitary.

The tense used in the poem also adds to its intensity. The poem is written in the present tense which creates immediacy towards the situations experienced by the traveller. This allows the responder to feel as if they are a part of the journey and are also travelling on a journey through the 'dark' side of the mind.

Another language feature which is used extensively in the last stanza is the use of negative connotative words such as 'useless', 'pointless' and 'lose'. The words allow the poet to impose a feeling of hopelessness upon the reader which, as a result, makes them feel as though this 'landscape' that is being journeyed over is dark, dangerous and deep inside one's inner self.

The use of domestic items also adds another possible dimension to the idea of an inner journey. The common household items of a 'paring knife' and a 'kitchen table' help to give off the idea that she is questioning her inner self as to whether she made the right decision becoming a housewife.

All these language features help to convey the theme of an inner journey throughout the human psyche and conscience.

Describe the journey and the consequences of the journey:

There are many consequences that arise as a result of travelling on an inner journey such as the one in Margaret Atwood's poem, *Journey to the Interior*.

The journey is based upon one's own journey through the inner workings of the mind. There are two possible mental outcomes that can be reached as a result of this journey. The first possible consequence of journeying through the 'dark' side of the human psyche is the potential for waking a sleeping giant. Testing one's own barriers in the mind is a way that can turn on the darker side of human nature in oneself. This is a very dangerous consequence and is a possible connection to the phrase 'but mostly the danger.'

A more positive consequence of this journey is learning the ability to block out this more 'dark' side of human nature. If one can understand what makes humans commit horrid deeds against reason, then one may be able to block out the 'dark' thoughts that inspire bad deeds.

Linking & Synthesising: Discuss what you have discovered or learned about physical, inner or imaginative journeys from the texts. Compare and contrast the texts.

Throughout Margaret Atwood's poem, *Journey to the Interior*, it has become apparent that inner journeys can have very negative, dangerous and dark outcomes. Atwood suggests the possibility of the 'dark' side of human nature overpowering reason and compassion and igniting actions with devastating results. This is similar to the Wachowski brother's film, *The Matrix*, which also deals with exploring reason and purpose. Agent Smith, Neo's main enemy is a result of a corrupt program finding it's purpose to destroy and dominate the world.

Comparisons are also clear between *Journey to the Interior* and the cover of Victor Kelleher's novel, *The Ivory Trail*. The main idea in *The Ivory Trail* is that not all journeys have an ending. This idea is also prevalent in *Journey to the Interior*, which also throws up the idea of a never-ending quest, posing the question 'have I been walking in circles again?' This allows the responder to question themselves.

Overall, this text has used many features to help develop an understanding of journeys.