

Area of Study – Response Sheet

Title: Leaving New York
Form: Song
Composer: R.E.M.
Date: Written – 2001, Released - 2004

Context & Values:

To fully understand what *Leaving New York* is trying to say, the context must first be understood. It was first penned shortly after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centres in downtown Manhattan and it is genuinely agreed that the song is based on those events. The release was held back because R.E.M. felt that it was not time and was put off until the release of their next album, *Around the Sun*, in 2004. It was also written just after there had been a big media release stating that George Bush had information surrounding terrorist plans but had not acted. This coupled with a history between R.E.M. and George Bush Snr has many critics suggesting that *Leaving New York* is also a political comment. In 1988, on Election Day, R.E.M. released the protest song *Green*, ironically on the day George Bush Snr was voted in to office.

Concepts or Ideas Conveyed about Journeys:

The main theme evident in the song is that of journeys, or life, not working out exactly as planned and that even the most rowdy, excited and thrilling journey can be torn in two by external factors, in this case terrorism, and can turn a 'brilliant night' into dead 'quiet.'

The other theme evident in *Leaving New York* is that no matter what terrible events occur in our lives we must move on and leave it behind us, regardless of how painful it is. However we must still never let that memory fade or be forgotten entirely.

The political theme evident is a statement in the chorus, 'You might have laughed if I told you.' This line reflects on George Bush's reaction to intelligence that America was under an imminent threat from terrorism.

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

There are two themes concerning the nature of the journey conveyed in the song. The first is that of a physical journey of a person leaving New York following the attack and is merely concerned with people fleeing the city.

The more subtle theme is that of an inner journey which suggests that *Leaving New York* is referring to putting the past behind us and moving on. It also has links to the loss of loved ones in the attack, and the leaving is referring to leaving them in your memory but having to let go to their physical beings. Both these two types of journeys help to convey the themes evident in *Leaving New York*.

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 features which help to convey the idea of both physical and inner journeys.

The first such feature is the use of tense in the very first line of the song. The phrase 'It's quiet now' gives the song an aftermath feel to it straight away. By using 'now' it shows that the quiet is occurring now but it hasn't always been like that. Hence, the song is set up as a comment on the journey undertaken by New York itself right from the beginning.

Another feature that helps to convey the theme of both a physical and inner journey is the structure of the song. Each verse is broken up into many shorter parts. The first verse, for instance, is broken up into four stanzas which each represent different stages of the overall journey. For example, in the first verse, the first stanza represents the aftermath; the second stanza the city before the attacks, the third stanza is back to the aftermath but is imagining nothing had happened and the fourth stanza which reflects on just how horrific the situation is.

Another language feature used is the use of hidden meanings, in this case expressing the opinion that the tragedy was preventable. The first line of the chorus 'You might have laughed if I told you' is possibly a connection to George Bush's denial that America was in danger despite intelligence to the contrary. This is backed up by the last line of the chorus, 'I might have been turned around.' which is hinting that if Bush had listened to his advisers; the composer may have a different political opinion of Bush than what he does now.

Another line with hidden meanings is 'It's easier to leave than to be left behind; leaving was never my proud.' The composer is stating that even though it may be hard to clean up the mess left by terrorism, it is still easier to be leaving at the end of the day, hence, being alive, than being 'left behind' as one of the unfortunate souls that did not make it. It also gives the impression that the composer was not 'proud' to be leaving so many fellow citizens behind.

A feature that can be linked to both physical and inner journeys is the use of metaphors. The phrase 'light fading out' can be synonymous with the loss of a loved one or the flame of human spirit being extinguished and this reading lends itself to an inner journey. However, the 'light fading out' could also refer to the flames and fires of the towers burning. In this case the 'light fading' is the composer watching the last ashes of the buildings burn and being unable to watch and hence leaving New York on a physical journey.

Often in a panic the human memory cannot keep running smoothly, and this is evident in the simile, 'memory fuses and shatters like glass.' This is a point in the song when the composer is recalling his own 9/11 experience and the simile shows us how in a panic we can pool our memory together but also 'shatter' and lose our focus and cool.

The final feature that expresses the political side of the song is the use of repetition. The words 'I Told You' are repeated to reinforce the fact Bush allegedly had evidence that an attack such as what happened was going to happen.

All these features help to convey the themes of physical and inner journeys as well as express a political opinion.

Describe the journey and the consequences of the journey:

The consequences of this journey are more related to that of an inner journey.

One such consequence that can occur as a result of this journey is that of remorse and guilt. As stated in the song 'leaving was never my proud' and this conveys the idea that the composer was torn as to whether to stay or leave but chose to leave, a decision that he is not proud of.

Another possible consequence of this journey, despite several warnings against it, is the possibility that the memory will fade and we will 'forget the past.' Just like the Jews at the end of World War II, the composer of *Leaving New York* is vowing, although slightly more subtly, to never let the world forget or the memory fade.

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

Through the text, *Leaving New York*, it has been discovered that journeys can be exciting, fun and thrilling but can still be interrupted by external factors and brought to a stand-still.

The theme of remorse or guilt at leaving New York is similar to the slight remorse expressed in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*. In Frost's poem, the composer expresses regret about choices made a long time ago in his past. *Leaving New York*, on the other hand, while it does convey the idea of regret at certain choices, reflects on those choices much sooner afterwards.

There are also similarities between *Leaving New York* and *The Ivory Trail*. In *The Ivory Trail*, the idea that journeys can be exciting and thrilling is also an idea prevalent in *Leaving New York*. However unlike *Leaving New York*, *The Ivory Trail* also conveys the idea that journeys can be continuous. This is almost opposite to the idea conveyed in *Leaving New York*, which is that journeys can be brought to an abrupt end by external factors beyond control.

This text has used many features to develop an understanding of journeys.