**POEM – SIMON ARMITAGE – NOTES**

SUBJECT MATTER /THEME

* It reads like a list of the man's qualities, of the things he did in his life, both good and bad.
* The poet never comes to a conclusion about whether the man is good or bad, saying only 'they' summed up 'sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that.'
* The theme of ‘Poem’ is that we’d rather not judge people or look at the ugliness in their character.
* Written in the third person, summing up a man's life from the outside.
* The poem seems to weigh up a man’s life. He’s never named, and left anonymous. If feels a bit like a final judgement or obituary because it uses the past tense and seems to cover all the main events of the man's life. Normally an obituary would only cover the good bits, but this poem includes bad parts too. The narrator seems to be omniscient - able to see into good behaviour, as well as the bad behaviour that would normally be private and hidden.

PURPOSE - EVERYMAN?

Interpreting the poem is extremely difficult because 1. the poet thinks the man is bad and 2. the narrator takes a very blank, neutral voice and so do the 'they' who are quoted in the final judgement 'when they rated him'.

The final judgement on the man is 'sometimes he was this, sometimes he was that' (the man punches his wife in the face). the words shock you but what’s more shocking is that the narrator takes such a neutral tone to what the man does.

Because the man has no name, it makes us feel like it could be someone among us. Perhaps the narrator doesn’t want to ‘name and shame’. Is this the problem? Is Armitage saying that if we don’t pass judgement, bad behaviour continues? Or is he saying that there is good and bad in every one of us? Does the repeated

‘sometimes’(line 14) force us not to make a final judgement?

It is difficult to judge people?

TITLE

The title ‘Poem’ is blank; it’s impossible to interpret. This links to the theme of failing to pass a proper judgement on the man - or the difficulty of passing judgement.

**CRAFTMANSHIP**

STRUCTURE

Sonnet – usually associated with love – why did Armitage choose this form? What is he challenging?

Unusually begins with the conjunction ‘and’ – as if the narrator is speaking and the reader has just come into earshot – into the middle of something

The regular structure - with three stanzas of equal length and equal length lines creates a tightly controlled feel. The repetition of ‘And’ at the start of most lines adds to this, as does the fact that most lines are only one sentence long. Each line feels abrupt. It also creates the sense of a huge list (of evidence) as Armitage details the actions and life of the man which is held up for judgement.

The very regular, tightly controlled structure of the poem suggests balance and control, yet, it feels deeply unbalanced and some of the behaviour is very out of control e.g punching his wife in the face. Armitage shows that one good act doesn’t cancel out a bad act. The bad act still stands.

Each idea is balanced: good deeds and bad - as if they’re equal - and cancel each other out or there’s two sides to every person. He ‘tucked’ his daughter up in bed, which is sweet and domestic, but also ‘slippered her’ which is violent.

In the second stanza there are three good deeds, using a rule of three - ‘tipped up’ his wage’, ‘saved’ hard, and ‘praised’ his wife. This is emphasised by the fact he does them consistently: there are three absolutes: ‘every’ (2x) and ‘each’. This seems to tip the balance towards him being a good man, but then comes the short, shocking sentence, ‘And once, for laughing, punched her in the face.’

Armitage is careful to say he only does it ‘once’, as if it’s only a small thing, however, the juxtaposition of all the good deeds and the happy word ‘laughing’ makes ‘punched’ come as even more of a shock.

Armitage deliberately constructs the sentence to put ‘punched’ near the end, which intensifies the dramatic effect. Because this is at the end of the stanza, just like ‘slippered’ we link the two ideas, and begin to think that he’s not a nice man at all: but the omniscient narrator never passes judgement.

LANGUAGE

The third stanza uses colloquial language ‘taxied’, ‘blubbed’ and ‘lifted’ - colloquial language shows he’s an ordinary man, using familiar language to create an everyday, friendly feel. The language is also euphemisitc: ‘bad to worse’ suggests death, and ‘lifted’ means steal. This adds to the theme that the truth is hidden. Just like the truth of this man’s character is hidden in the final judgement ‘sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that.’ The non-specific ‘this’ and ‘that’ suggest balance - that it’s all the same in the end. But really it isn’t. The omniscient narrator prefers euphemisms to the ugly truth. His final judgement is very unsatisfying.

Very little emotive language, it's all clean and without judgement. This is a factual poem – no imagery

IMAGERY

Lots of repetition – suggests dull routine

Deliberately 'blank'; there are very few mood or describing wor

MOVEMENT

Steady rhythm which changes in the last stanza. Iambic pemtameter until final rhyming couplet. Effect of this?

SOUNDS

Strong rhyme scheme in the poem AB, AB. Rhyming vowel sounds change in the last line of each stanza (i, a, u)

Actions in the poem are balanced – ‘sometimes’ adds to the balance in the final coupet

SUMMARY