



LETTERS FROM YORKSHIRE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



Context – *Letters from Yorkshire* was written by Maura Dooley, and published in her *Sound Barrier* anthology of 2002.

Maura Dooley – Maura Dooley (1957) is a poet and freelance writer who was born in Truro, Cornwall. Although she has lived in London for 25 years, she also spent many years living and working in Yorkshire – she graduated from the University of York and was employed for 5 years as a creative writing organiser at Lumb Bank within the county. She has a PGCE from the University of Bristol, and is now a Reader of Creative Language at Goldsmith's College in London.



Yorkshire – Yorkshire is a county in northern England in the United Kingdom. Yorkshire is the largest county in the United Kingdom, and within its boundaries it holds vast stretches of unspoilt countryside, (e.g. the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors) in addition to a significant rural and farming land – over 70% of its land is reserved for agriculture. It produces 650,000 tonnes of milk! As a result of its natural beauty it has acquired the common nickname of 'God's Own County.'



Sound Barrier – Published in 2002, *Sound Barrier* contains poems written between 1982 and 2002. Most of the poems in the collection are tender and lyrical, and focus on the themes of love, memory and life. They also contain depictions of contrasts between the city and the country. Critics have commented about the collection that Dooley 'has the ability to enact and find images for complex feelings' and that she 'combines detailed domesticity with lyrical beauty.'



Modern Employment – In most developed nations across the world, employment has shifted over the past few hundred years to being primarily commercial/retail jobs. Much of this work involves work in indoor offices, using technology to work and communicate online. This is in stark contrast to work for the majority of human history, which was largely manual outdoor work. Some may argue that this type of work constitutes a more real, 'natural' existence.



Language/Structural Devices

Straightforward vs. Figurative Language – Straightforward language is used to describe the ordinary lives of the speaker and the letter-writer, however this is mixed with colourful figurative language which helps to convey the deep emotions in the poem. For example, there is the simple language used to depict the man 'digging in the garden, planting the potatoes', but then the metaphorical idea of him 'pouring air and light into an envelope.'

Urban/ Rural Imagery – Dooley disperses a range of specific vocabulary choices across the poem to present the contrasting images of urban and rural life. The urban speaker seems to deride her 'blank' life dealing with a 'heartful of headlines', whilst viewing the rural setting of her pen friends as the considerably more positive 'air and light.' The speaker, however, seems to be dismissive of the beauty of his own lifestyle, viewing it more as graft ('not a romance').

Quote: "pouring air and light into an envelope. So that at night, watching the same news in different houses,"

Quote: It's not romance, simply how things are. You out there, in the cold, seeing the seasons"

Alliteration/ Assonance – These sound-evoking techniques are used sparingly throughout the poem, but to clear and deliberate effect. For example, in line 12, the alliteration of the 'w' sound and the assonance of the 'o' sound emphasises the sense of wonder that the speaker feels when reading about the man's rural lifestyle. The repeated 'h' in line 7, emphasises the feelings in the speaker's heart.

Personal Pronouns – Personal pronouns throughout the poem allow the reader to infer a great deal about the relationship. The third person 'he' used throughout the 1st stanza shows separation, especially before the introduction of 'me' in line 3. Later in the poem, the letter-writer is addressed in the second person 'you', before the speaker uses 'our' in the final line, to show their close bond despite the 'icy miles.'

Quote: "clearing a path through snow. Still, it's you who sends me word of that other world."

Quote: "You wouldn't say so, breaking ice on a waterbutt, clearing a path through snow. Still, it's you"

Form – The poem contains 5 stanzas of unrhymed tercets. The irregularity of rhyme, and the use of enjambment, is suggestive of a stream of consciousness form of communication - the style that one might communicate in a letter. Punctuation and caesura is used in points in order to pause on thoughts (e.g. 'blank screen') or to show alternative perspectives (as in the middle of line 11).

Narrative Structure – In the first stanza, the man is working in a rural setting, before coming in to begin writing his letter. In stanza 2 the speaker considers the man's rural life, before considering her own urban setting in stanza 3. Stanza 4 gives insinuates his opinions of his own lifestyle, before changing topic, onto the power of their communication/relationship, which continues over stanza 5.

Quote: "You wouldn't say so, breaking ice on a waterbutt, clearing a path through snow. Still, it's you"

Quote: "at night, watching the same news in different houses, our souls tap out messages across the icy miles."

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Distant Relationships - The poem focuses on letters between two people who are apart from one another. Whilst the messages between them may be simple, the act of communicating is presented as being much more extraordinary and precious. The idea is that relationships can endure across many miles if 'souls' are united.



Nature – The poem differentiates between urban life (where the speaker resides) and rural life (where the letter writer is living). Vivid, contrasting images are given of the natural, rural life based on the varied perspectives of the speaker and the letter-writer – for example she considers the 'air and light' whilst his perspective dwells on the 'ice' and the 'snow.'

Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	In February, digging his garden, planting potatoes,	The poem begins by describing a man's work outside, using <u>simple language</u> , which mirrors the description of a <u>practical task</u> . The mention of the <u>lapwings</u> in line 2 connotes the coming of spring, and also may also symbolise the <u>freedom</u> that he has in comparison to the speaker (birds often symbolise freedom). It is as though the joyful scene of the birds returning reminds him to go inside and write to her. The use of the <u>personal pronoun 'me'</u> pronounces the speaker's involvement in the poem, although for now he is referred to in the <u>third person 'he'</u> , highlighting distance/ separation between them.
	2	he saw the first lapwings return and came	
	3	indoors to write to me, his knuckles singing	
2	4	as they reddened in the warmth.	The <u>enjambment</u> between the two stanzas could mirror the <u>close relationship</u> that he and the speaker share, even though they are <u>separate</u> from one another. On a literal level the colour change in his hands is due to the temperature alteration, but on a deeper level red symbolises the <u>warmth/passion</u> that writing to her evokes. The speaker visualises every small detail – demonstrating her affection for him. She explains that whilst she may <u>romanticise</u> the rural way of life in Yorkshire, for him it is just <u>reality</u> . The <u>monosyllabic words</u> in line 6 reflect this <u>simplicity</u> . However, the shift to 2nd person address ('you') creates a more personal feeling – as though the letter is drawing them closer.
	5	It's not romance, simply how things are.	
	6	You out there, in the cold, seeing the seasons	
3	7	turning, me with my heartful of headlines	Once again there is <u>enjambment</u> between stanzas, reflective of the naturalness of the changing seasons. The <u>alliteration of 'h'</u> highlights the speaker's awareness of the feelings in her heart. <u>Figurative language</u> is also used to compare her 'feeding words onto a blank screen' with him feeding people with potatoes. The use of the word 'blank' creates <u>negative connotations</u> , as though the tasks that she performs are dull and futile in comparison to his. This is further emphasised through the <u>rhetorical question</u> – the reference to 'dig and sow' suggests that the <u>spiritual elements</u> of cultivating are more 'real' – regenerating and renewing.
	8	feeding words onto a blank screen.	
	9	Is your life more real because you dig and sow?	
4	10	You wouldn't say so, breaking ice on a waterbutt,	It is implied in the <u>opening line</u> of the stanza that the man would see little beauty in his life, only the hard <u>physical work</u> . However, the speaker finds <u>romance</u> in it because it is associated with nature and with him. <u>Harsh sounds and words (breaking, ice)</u> are interpolated with the <u>beauty of nature</u> and their connection to one another (<u>snow, path</u>). The <u>caesura</u> in the middle of line 11 separates the <u>two perspectives</u> of the same stimulus – he sees practical tasks (e.g. clearing a path) whereas she perceives some fantastical 'other world.' <u>Assonance</u> is used in the final line to depict this sense of wonder.
	11	clearing a path through snow. Still, it's you	
	12	who sends me word of that other world	
5	13	pouring air and light into an envelope. So that	The use of the interesting verb 'pouring' to open the final stanza suggests something free-flowing and plentiful, portraying the <u>abundance</u> of joy (air and light are a metaphor for joy) that she extrapolates from the letters – they make her almost feel as though she is there, with each one of her senses. The envelope <u>metaphorically</u> encapsulates each of these feelings and emotions. Line 14 depicts a mundane activity conducted separately, but the use of 'our' in the next line shows their enduring closeness – their souls are portrayed as united, even over the 'icy miles.'
	14	at night, watching the same news in different houses,	
	15	our souls tap out messages across the icy miles.	

Poems for Comparison Influences on the Poet

Sonnet 29: 'I think of thee'	<i>Letters from Yorkshire</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem through its presentation of distant relationships.	<i>"I've written poetry since I was a child. I've just always loved it. Both my older brothers wrote poetry, it seemed like a normal thing to do. I love John Donne and Thomas Wyatt, John Clare and Patrick Kavanagh. I read contemporary poetry all the time so it's hard to single out a few that I particularly love. I have some amazing students where I teach at Goldsmiths – I enjoy reading them too." www.literature.britishcouncil.org</i>
Neutral Tones	<i>Letters from Yorkshire</i> can be compared and contrasted with these poems through its presentation of nature.	

