

# Paul Durcan | Sample answer

**“Paul Durcan explores a variety of personal and universal themes in his own distinctive style”. Discuss this statement, with reference to the poetry of Paul Durcan on your course. (Mock 2015)**

Paul Durcan is one of modern Ireland's foremost and most prolific poets. His unique style is both captivating and striking, and greatly aids his portrayal of contemporary themes and issues throughout his poetry. Often using subtle humour and personal experience, Durcan explores the themes of troubled relationships, falling in love and inequalities in society throughout his work. The searing honesty present in his poetry creates a bond between Durcan and the reader, and for this reason, his poems are etched in my memory. In his poems ‘Nessa’, ‘Father’s Day, 21 June 1992’ and ‘Sport’, Durcan puts a personal slant on issues that are relevant in the lives of many. While his poem ‘Wife Who Smashed the Television Gets Jail’ is less personal, its theme of injustices against women is incredibly relevant in today’s society.

In Durcan’s poem ‘Nessa’ he details the story of his relationship with his wife, from their falling in love to the end of their marriage. This theme of doomed love is one so many can relate to, yet Durcan makes this theme his own through his use of his wife’s name, “Nessa”, and by sharing his personal feelings with the reader, “I very nearly drowned”. Durcan takes on a narrative style when describing his first encounter with his future wife. He details how “She took me by the index finger”, which suggests to the reader that Nessa is a controlling, yet mesmerising character. As failed marriages and relationships so often consist of at least one party who enchants, but leads the other, this sense of foreboding that Durcan creates strikes a chord with many readers. As the poem progresses, Durcan takes on a somewhat self-critical tone as he recounts his own eagerness to please his wife, “And I hopped into the Irish Sea”. It appears to me that on reflection, Durcan has realised that his eagerness to please Nessa was to his own detriment. This idea of reflecting on one’s own feelings and behaviours is something that all human beings can empathise with, and through this personal and reflective style, Durcan establishes a connection with the reader. In my opinion the poem takes on a wistful and remorseful tone in the third stanza when Durcan uses nature imagery to describe what might have been, “I’d have lain

in the grass with her all my life". The poet's use of nature imagery is very effective as it perfectly captures how love and relationships change, just as nature and the natural world does. The use of the personal pronoun "I" creates the idea that Durcan is speaking from the heart and from his own experiences, yet the use of nature helps to enforce that this concept of lost love is universal and common to all. Durcan openly displays his human vulnerability in the final stanza. Through asking his wife a series of questions, the reader can hear the pleading in his tone, "Will you come for me into the Irish Sea/ And for me let your red hair down?". The emotion in Durcan's tone and in his language is strikingly vulnerable, and this greatly contributes to his unique style. Durcan also points out his own flaws in wanting to save an obviously doomed marriage, "Will you stay with me on the rocks?". Although the poet seems to present his want to save his failed marriage as a weakness, I believe that this highlights to the reader a universal trait present in all humans; a want for love. Durcan's use of the metaphor of the sea throughout to describe his turbulent marriage, as well as his repetition of the line "And I was very nearly drowned" effectively portrays the dangers of falling in love and getting hurt, a theme which many can relate to. In his poem 'Father's Day, 21 June 1992', Durcan again discusses his strained relationship with his wife, but this time from the perspective of a man who is also a father.

Durcan gives an incredibly honest portrayal of his personal life throughout 'Father's Day, 21 June 1992'. His language is casual and conversational, which makes it easy for the average reader to comprehend, as well as facilitating our engagement with the theme of changing relationships, "Just as I was dashing to catch the Dublin-Cork train". I believe that this mention of trains and travel is a metaphor for the inner journey the poet has embarked on, where he comes to realise his role as father and husband has changed. This reflective style causes the reader to think about changes that have occurred in their own relationships. The introduction of "The axe – all four-and-a-half feet of it" shows how destructive this relationship between husband and wife has become. This portrayal of a toxic relationship is further enhanced by the poet's inclusion of a polite, yet sarcastic and uncaring dialogue between the couple, "a Blue Cabs taxi ticking over outside/ And the whole world inspecting it,/ I'll bring her down the axe". I feel compelled to admire the brutal honesty with which Durcan depicts his failing marriage, as most poems only deal with the beauty of married life, yet this theme of bitter marriage is becoming increasingly common in today's society. As the poem progresses, Durcan openly discusses his own "Guilt feelings", making the poem all the more personal. Durcan is again seen as self-critical when he discusses his behaviours which annoy his wife, "behold me eating spaghetti with a knife and fork". The humour in this image appeals to the reader as it is relatable, yet it is also reminiscent of how a

small child might eat, which reveals to us some of Durcan's personality. All humour is lost in the final stanza and there is a heart-breaking sense of loneliness, "All our daughters grown up and gone away". Watching their children grow up and move away is something every parent has to deal with, yet Durcan's dramatic portrayal of a child-less father, "we sat alone,/ The axe and I", makes me more aware of what a traumatic experience this is for parents. I feel a profound sympathy for Durcan as he struggles to navigate this difficult period of his life where not only has he grown apart from his wife, "she does not love me/ As much as she used to" but has also grown apart from his children. This idea of feeling no longer entitled to celebrate 'Father's Day' is a feeling I am sure fathers all over the world can relate to at some point in their lives. In his poem 'Sport', Durcan again discusses a difficult father-child relationship.

I find Durcan's poem 'Sport' to be the most upsetting and emotional of his work. Similar to Durcan's other poetry, 'Sport' is an incredibly raw and honest poem in which he discusses his longing for his father to approve of him, as well as his own mental health difficulties. This theme of wanting a better relationship with a parent, as well as that of mental health, are incredibly relevant to young people today, particularly to sixth year students whom are under a lot of pressure from themselves and from parents with regard to exams. The poem opens with an overwhelming sense of sadness, "There were not many fields/ In which you had hopes for me", which suggests his father's disappointment in him. While I am sure I have disappointed my parents many times, I would never go as far to say that they have no hope for me, and therefore I find it difficult to relate to Durcan on this personal experience he is describing. However, tremendous sympathy for Durcan is evoked within me when he opens up about being a patient in "Grangegorman Mental Hospital". At a time where mental illnesses are becoming more and more common, this reference to mental health is incredibly relevant in the life of the modern reader. Furthermore, the openness with which Durcan discusses his illness, as well as his ability to create a humorous description of the other patients, "Men with gapped teeth, red faces/ Oily, frizzy hair, bushy eyebrows", somewhat removes the stigma that exists around mental health in this country and encourages the reader to talk about their own difficulties. The poet's descriptive style enables him to create a vivid image of his performance the day his father came to "observe" him, "three or four spectacular saves,/ Diving full stretch to turn/ A certain goal around the corner". While the theme of the mental hospital football match is undoubtedly personal, the want to do his father proud is a theme which appears in every son or daughter's life. Despite his team's spectacular win, Durcan did not achieve the victory he desired. The image of his father "Sniffing your approval, you shook hands with me" highlights the lack of closeness in their

relationship, which unfortunately is so common in relationships between children and their parents nowadays. It is made clear that Durcan's father views his son's winning of the football match as his greatest achievement, "Seldom if ever again in your eyes/ Was I to rise to these heights", even though he achieved many other great things in his life, such as going to college and writing poetry. The final line effectively captures not only what his father viewed as an achievement for a man, but what society in general views to be important traits for men to possess – sporting abilities and physical strength. It is clear that Durcan's talents in the humanities, such as writing, meant nothing to his father, "In your eyes I had achieved something at last". I believe Durcan is subtly critiquing the expectation our society has of males, an issue which is as relevant today as it was when Durcan played for the Grangegorman team. Durcan can also be seen to be criticising the roles men and women adopt in society in his poem 'Wife Who Smashed the Television Gets Jail'.

Although less personal, "Wife Who Smashed the Television Gets Jail" is undoubtedly a powerful and thought-provoking poem. What is initially striking about this poem is that it is written in the style of a news report, which we usually deem to be factual and unbiased. However, Durcan is quick to reveal the prejudices held against women in both private and public spheres of society. The poet uses humorous irony when describing the man of the house and the children "peacefully watching Kojak", a violent T.V show. This use of irony causes the reader to view the scene from Durcan's point of view and notice the unfair bias that societies all over the world have towards men. Durcan reveals to us that this violence towards women is even evident in our T.V shows, "Kojak/ After shooting a dame with the same name as my wife", yet we have become so accustomed to it that in our blissful ignorance, we let our children watch this violence and learn the same prejudices, "I had to bring the kids around to my mother's place". Durcan's style of creating a regular, household scene to portray the universal issue of violence against women is tremendously effective as it opens the reader's eyes to the fact that this violence occurs all around us, yet we have become blind to it. The poet's use of formal language, "my Lord", helps to portray how this violence against women is a serious issue in society. Durcan implies that the television has taken the place of the wife in the family, "I didn't get married to a television". This interesting observation forces the reader to think about how technology-orientated our lives have become and how this is the real "threat to the family". The sheer fact that the only way the wife could get her family to listen to her was by expressing her "preference in forms of/ violence" highlights how voiceless women are, even in their own homes. The isolation of the word "violence" helps to portray the main theme of this poem – violence against voiceless women. This poem is startlingly

similar to a recent court case in which a woman, who in my opinion had evidently been raped, failed to receive the justice she deserved. Durcan's portrayal of a society where women are discriminated against for doing the right thing, "I don't see why my kids of anybody else's kids/ Should have a television for a father or mother", is incredibly relevant in today's society, and once again through his sarcastic, yet honest style, Durcan has proven to be a poet of great knowledge about the issues present in society.

In my opinion, Durcan's powerful and passionate poetry gives the reader great insight into universal themes, yet through his own personal style. I personally found Durcan's narrative style to be thoroughly engaging and I often became lost in the stories his poetry tells, yet at the same time I gained valuable insights into themes and issues that are relevant in all our lives. Durcan's deeply personal and honest poetry allows me to form a connection with him and experience a range of emotions while studying his work. Durcan is undoubtedly my favourite poet which I have studied as his casual and conversational style makes his poetry very accessible and increases the impact his poems had on me. As Durcan once said himself, "That's what poetry is about: getting out of your miserable self and opening your eyes", and I cannot but agree that Durcan's poetry opened my eyes and allowed me to experience the world from a different perspective.