

## Q7

Bernard McLaverty's short story "Father and Son" uses the political tension of the city in which it is set to mirror the conflict between the two eponymous characters. The problems faced by the titular father and son build up to a dramatic climax, and through his use of setting, characterisation and a significant final scene McLaverty portrays the events of the story in a poignant and eventually shocking way.

The setting of Belfast provides a background which is particularly appropriate given the divided relationship between the father and son. It is clear from the beginning that conflict will play a major part in the story ("the sound of ambulances criss-crosses the hours of dark"). However, even the home of the men alludes to violence; the "snap" and "click" of switches are reminiscent of the sounds of a rifle, and the newspaper that "crackles like fire" has connotations of an incendiary bomb. By establishing this conflict McLaverty directs the reader's sympathy to the characters and simultaneously builds up to the shocking ending.

The character of the father is perhaps the most important, and the first thing one learns is that, due to a combination of anxiety and poverty he often goes hungry:

"I will hear him not eating anything and going about the kitchen with a stomach full of wind."

The crude description adds to the reality of the situation. However, this is the least of the old man's worries. His first words demonstrate his fear of losing his son:

"Here lies my son who let me down. I love him so much it hurts, but he won't talk to me."

This ominous epitaph is a chilling hint towards the ending. It is also indicative of the barriers in communication between the father and son, whether embodied by a closed "door" or feigned "sleep". The father loves his son, but procrastinates his expression of love:

"I must speak to him. Tonight at tea."

As a result, his love is often expressed through recriminations. His son is a former drug addict, and "rides pillion on a motor-bike" alludes to his possible paramilitary activities. The father reminds him of his sins:

"I let you go once – and look what happened.  
Not this again"

The son's brusque reply contrasts with his fluid thoughts, demonstrating the problems in communication that will only be overcome at the end. At this point the reader pities the father, who suffers because of his son.

However, through the character of the son, one gains a more balanced view of the reasons behind the problems. He is annoyed by his father's over protectiveness:

"What are you going to do today?  
What's it to you?"

As a result he often resorts to expletives ("shit") to express his frustration. This reminds us that the father has no authority over his son, who feels that he has no appropriate male role model ("he is an old woman"). Again this is an issue resolved

only by the ending. Both characters have archetypal notions of masculinity to which the other does not measure up:

“Why don’t you have a girl like everyone else?”

The reason for this is the young man’s deceased mother. Both men sorely miss her and dream of past times when the whole family could share experiences. Much of the story’s imagery is drawn from these memories. Since his father used to be a keen gardener, it is appropriate that the son should summarise his neglected relationship by saying:

“The weeds have taken over.”

Just how inaccurate this suggestion of apathy is will be revealed at the end; thus McLaverty builds up the reader’s emotions until the final, shocking paragraph.

Since the father learns more about his son’s whereabouts from “the news” than from the young man himself, it is significant that the ending opens with:

“The News begins.”

To continue this idea of a journalistic style, McLaverty becomes the omniscient narrator. This reflects the father’s confusion, which is embodied firstly by his misplaced jealousy of the murderous “friends” and secondly by his assumption that his son is merely “hurt”. The calm atmosphere is a form of litotes, bringing out the importance of

“My son, let me put my arms around you.”

With this tragic climax one understands that only in death have the barriers in communication been overcome. With this reference to the Pieta one understands that the father has abandoned his masculine role to become the perfect mother; his neglect was merely a result of procrastination. With the death of his son, he can never express his love; and one cannot help but feel sorry for this broken man.

In “Father and Son” Bernard McLaverty makes use of the violent setting of Belfast to reflect the divisive conflict between two men. Through characterisation he describes barriers in communication and expected roles, which will only be resolved by the dramatic and shocking ending to which they build up. The ending helps one to appreciate this stark parable as a warning against the corrosive effects of bitterness and procrastination, and ensures that the reader’s sympathy is always effectively evoked.