



GCSE

English Literature

‘Decomposition’ (Zulfikar Ghose)

The poet (AO3)

- The Pakistani-American poet Zulfikar Ghose wrote the poem ‘Decomposition’ in 1967.
- Ghose was born in 1935 in Punjab, but his parents moved to Bombay (where the poem is set) in 1942. Bombay is now known as Mumbai.
- After the Partition of India in 1947, Ghose moved to England with his parents. The Partition of India was the dividing up of British India into two independent countries – India and Pakistan. This led to large-scale migrations across the countries’ borders, as people moved based on religion and beliefs. There were often violent outbreaks, along with widespread homelessness and starvation. It is thought that the poem is set against this background and in this time of Indian history.
- Ghose is also a well-known novelist who lived in Texas, America, until his death in 2022.
- Much of his work explores the themes of poverty, helplessness, death, decay and selfishness.

The poem (content and context)

What is the poem about? (AO1)

The poem is about how the speaker sees a photograph he has taken of an old beggar sleeping on the pavement in Bombay. The beggar is so thin – his limbs ‘could be cracks in the stone’ – and insects run over his body. It looks as if his body is already decomposing and decaying.

Behind the beggar, a crowd has gathered to watch a ‘pavement trickster’ performing in the hope of receiving money from them. The crowd does not pay any attention to the starving beggar, as it is not an unusual sight.

The poet calls his picture ‘The Man in the Street’, but then regrets having taken and named the picture, as he realises he should not exploit or take advantage of a person’s suffering for his art. The poet feels ashamed of himself at the end of the poem.

Deeper meaning (AO1)

The poem explores human suffering and questions the ethics of exploiting that suffering for artistic reasons. It raises the question of whether it is right to benefit from someone else’s pain.

The poem deals with the themes of decay and identity, and encourages the reader to consider the cruelty of a society that remains indifferent to suffering and the marginalisation of some individuals.

It also highlights ideas of loneliness and dehumanisation in its portrayal of the beggar. The poem challenges readers to reflect on how they might behave when confronted with such a sight.

The poet further explores the theme of self-reflection and guilt as he comes to realise his mistake by the end of the poem.

Context of the poem (AO3)

- The poem is set in Bombay – modern-day Mumbai – which is India’s largest and most densely populated city. It is the commercial and financial capital of the country.
- Today, it has a population of over 18 million, with the majority living in slums and in poverty.

Structure and form (AO2)

- It is written in free verse, with no regular rhythm which lends itself to the creation of a sombre mood.
- The lack of rhyme and rhythm emphasises the serious nature of the poem and the ethical questions it raises.
- It is written in the first person, so we can appreciate the thoughts and feelings of the speaker.
- The poem moves from the past to the present, as it is suggested that the poet has taken the photograph some time ago. At the end of the poem, he reconsiders his actions in the present, feeling guilt and regret for exploiting the man’s suffering as a way of furthering his artistic endeavours.

Connections and contrasts (AO3)

- **‘Drummer Hodge’ by Thomas Hardy:** Both poems are about the dehumanisation of people.
- **‘Catrin’ by Gillian Clarke:** Both poems explore the idea of identity.
- **‘Kamikaze’ by Beatrice Garland:** Both poems focus on the themes of identity, isolation and the marginalisation of individuals.
- **‘War Photographer’ by Carol Ann Duffy:** Both poems focus on the themes of society’s indifference and ignorance, as well as desensitisation.
- **‘Remains’ by Simon Armitage:** Both poems consider ideas about guilt and regret. They also both deal with the themes of dehumanisation and lack of power.
- **‘Origin Story’ by Eve L Ewing:** Both poems focus on ideas of identity and isolation.



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Key questions to ask about the poem

1. Why do you think the photographer wanted to take a picture of the sleeping beggar? (AO1)
2. Why do you think the title ‘Decomposition’ was used? (AO1)
3. What is the effect of the simile ‘his shadow thrown aside like a blanket’? (AO2)
4. What does the line ‘His arms and legs could be cracks in the stone’ mean? (AO1)
5. What is the effect of the metaphor ‘a fossil man’? (AO2)
6. Why do you think the crowd is ‘indifferent to this very common sight’ of the sleeping beggar? (AO1/AO3)
7. What is the effect of the adverb ‘glibly’ in the line ‘glibly called it ‘The Man in the Street’”? (AO2)
8. Why have the poet’s feelings changed at the end of the poem? (AO1)
9. Do you think the poet was right to take the photograph? Explain your answer. (AO3)
10. What do you think is the main message of the poem? (AO1)

Key quotations (AO1)

1. ‘I have a picture I took in Bombay’
2. ‘a beggar asleep on the pavement’
3. ‘his shadow thrown aside like a blanket’
4. ‘His arms and legs could be cracks in the stone’
5. ‘routes for the ants’ journeys, the flies’ descents’
6. ‘he lies veined into stone, a fossil man’
7. ‘quite / indifferent to this very common sight’
8. ‘and glibly called it ‘The Man in the Street’
9. ‘chides me now for my / presumption’
10. ‘at attempting to compose / art of his hunger and solitude’

“ ”

Language and imagery (AO2)

- The poet uses a contrast in the line a ‘beggar asleep on the pavement’. The adjective ‘asleep’ suggests he is in a vulnerable and defenceless position because of his poverty. The idea of sleep usually implies comfort and peacefulness, but this is sharply juxtaposed with the image of the hard, uncomfortable ‘pavement’.
- The imagery of being ‘Brain-washed by the sun into exhaustion’ suggests how the oppressive nature of the heat has forced the beggar to accept his situation and despair. The assonance in the line also adds to the feeling of lethargy and tiredness.
- The juxtaposition of the crowd being ‘bemused by a pavement trickster’ but ‘indifferent’ to the beggar stresses how unfeeling society can be to those who are marginalised. It emphasises the shallowness of a society more concerned with fleeting entertainment than with true human suffering.
- The photograph’s title ‘The Man in the Street’ is ambiguous, as it could have more than one meaning. It could refer literally to the sleeping beggar, but it could also act as a metaphor for all those people who are displaced or marginalised in society. The noun ‘Man’ could have a universal relevance.

Links for further research

- You might want to read another poem to help with your understanding of some of the themes in ‘Decomposition’, such as [‘Living Space’ by Imtiaz Dharker](#) – which deals with physical poverty in the Mumbai slums through poorly constructed housing.
- [A YouTube interview with Zulfikar Ghose](#)

