Letters from Yorkshire

SUMMARY

In February, while planting potatoes in his garden, he saw the first lapwing birds return from their winter migration. He then went inside to write to me. His knuckles reddened in the warmth of the indoors, happy to be out of the cold.

There's nothing romantic or extraordinary about his outdoor lifestyle. It just is what it is. You're outside in the cold, watching the seasons change, while I'm indoors typing articles at a computer screen. Is your life more real than mine because you're a farmer and spend more time in nature?

You wouldn't say that's the case, especially while doing difficult winter chores like shoveling snow and breaking ice off of a water container. Still, you're the one who writes to me and tells me about this world that's so different from mine, and each of your letters brings a piece of that natural world to me. Even at night, while we're watching the same news in separate, far-away houses, our letters to each other help us to stay in touch across the cold distance that separates us.

THEMES

AGRARIAN VS. MODERN LIFE

In Maura Dooley's "Letters from Yorkshire," the speaker envisions an acquaintance (a friend, relative, or lover) writing letters to the speaker after working outside in his garden. This acquaintance's letters seem filled with the "air and light" of the natural world, causing the speaker to wonder if the letter writer's experience is "more real" than the speaker's own—which is spent indoors at a computer. This wondering on the speaker's part suggests a nagging anxiety about modern life—that is, that this life, closer to a computer screen than to nature, is emptier than that spent working outside with one's hands. Yet despite highlighting nature's importance, the poem also recognizes the degree to which a modern office worker might romanticize or misunderstand the reality of agrarian life.

Throughout the poem, the speaker links the physical labor of their correspondent to a sensory experience of nature that is both meaningful and desirable. The poem opens with the speaker's acquaintance "planting potatoes" while seeing the first "lapwings" (a kind of bird) return from migration. Even though it is "February" and likely uncomfortable outside, the speaker seems to think that these are pleasurable and worthwhile moments for the letter writer.

The speaker then describes his knuckles "singing as they reddened in the warmth" of the indoors. While this sudden reddening would suggest how bitterly cold it must be outside, the speaker's use of a pleasant, musical term gives manual labor a sense of beauty. It seems, then, that the speaker is envious of their acquaintance's ability to go "out there, in the cold, seeing the seasons turning," while the speaker sits at their computer "feeding words into a blank screen." Rather than being able to "plant potatoes," or give life back to the earth, the speaker interacts only with the virtual world of a computer. The feeling of being "cold" and the physical act of "planting potatoes" are tangible ways to relate to the natural world that the speaker cannot experience from her house.

The speaker then wonders if their acquaintance's life is "more real" because he is a farmer. With this question, the speaker makes explicit their doubt about how much life they are genuinely experiencing while sitting at their computer. The modern world, it seems, creates a barrier between people and the "real" world.

The speaker knows, however, that their own perception of agrarian life is not the same as that of their correspondent. The speaker thinks that their acquaintance "wouldn't" describe his agrarian lifestyle as "more real," especially as he completes the unpleasant tasks of "breaking ice on a waterbutt" and "clearing a path through snow." The speaker recognizes that their vision of outdoor labor is romanticized, and by acknowledging these multiple perceptions of agrarian life, the poem suggests that neither lifestyle (agrarian or modern) is "more real" than the other.

Even so, to the speaker, the acquaintance's letters contain "air" and "light," and become metaphors for the kind of experiences the speaker cannot have. The speaker seems to crave the connection to nature offered by the letter writer, while also sensing that the letter-writer does not crave news of the speaker's day-to-day in an office. The poem implies that a connection to nature is crucial to living a fulfilled life, and that this connection is something that modern life does not sufficiently provide.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-13

COMMUNICATION AND CONNECTION

"Letters from Yorkshire" explores several kinds of communication: letter-writing, the "heartful of headlines" belonging to the speaker (implied to be a journalist, or some sort of writer), and the "nightly news." Of these three forms of communication, the poem ascribes the most

importance to letter-writing. Although the speaker can interact with the outside world via the news and her own articles, neither form of communication seems as meaningful to the speaker as do letters. This might be because, with a letter, the speaker receives a window into the life and world of another person whom the speaker can interact with individually. The poem thus subtly suggests that genuine connection requires a sense of intimacy and reciprocation.

The poem's opening lines make the intimate power of letter writing apparent. The poem begins with the speaker looking through the letter-writer's eyes as he plants potatoes and watches "lapwings" return. The speaker also ascribes a musical quality to the act of letter writing. In the third line of the first stanza, the speaker perceives their acquaintance's knuckles as "singing" as he begins crafting a letter indoors. This musical act seems more intimate and positive than the speaker's later description of "feeding words onto a blank screen." Unlike letter-writing, the poem suggests, writing articles isn't a two-way form of communication; instead, it is a one-way stream of thoughts and information. As such, the blank screen cannot offer the same warm connection that a letter can.

The poem ends with the lines "So that / at night, watching the same news in different houses, / our souls tap out messages across the icy miles." Both the speaker and their correspondent may be engaged in the nightly news in separate houses, but their habit of letter writing gives them a warm, soul-level intimacy that transcends "icy miles." In this closing image, letter writing is portrayed as a more powerful means of communication than nightly news. Even though current events are obviously important, the speaker seems much more interested in the news of their correspondent, which is that of agriculture and the natural world. Rather ironically, this intimate news seems to make the speaker feel more connected to the world than does any nightly broadcast about the state of that world, for the letters brings "air" and "light." These two qualities ("air" and "light"—two things that every living being needs to survive) underline the vital necessity of one-on-one communication for the speaker.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 11-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

In February, digging ...
... in the warmth.

The poem opens with an image of the speaker's penpal working in his garden. Even though the penpal is the one writing to the speaker about farm life, this scene is presented from the point of view of the speaker; this is how the speaker images the penpal spends his time. Right from the get go, then, the speaker's fascination with and romanticization of farm work starts to become clear.

It is still wintertime ("February"), but when looking through the speaker's eyes, the outdoor work seems peaceful rather than cold or harsh. The penpal digs in his garden, "planting potatoes," and sees a kind of bird (called a "lapwing") return, perhaps from a long migration. The alliteration and consonance of these descriptions imbue them with a sense of musicality, elevating the penpal's humble labor. Note the hard /g/ sounds of "digging," the popping /p/ and /t/ of "planting potatoes." His knuckles, despite being subject to the cold air and soil, are "singing" as they "reddened in the warmth" of the indoors.

On a literal level, this refers to the way that people's hands turn red when coming in from the cold, due to increased blood flow. "Singing" evokes the tingling warmth that accompanies this reddening. And by personifying the knuckles as "singing," the speaker also imbues this reddening with a subtle sense of beauty and joy. This seeming joy is likely due, in part, to the relief of being inside, out of the cold. The knuckles might also be "singing" in joyful anticipation to "write" about the natural world they just experienced. Either way, the speaker instills the entire scene with a sense of comforting, welcoming warmth, even though the farm work itself was cold and probably unpleasant to perform. At this early stage, the speaker seems to set up the natural world, and farm work, more specifically, as an enviable and important aspect of their penpal's life.

LINES 5-8

It's not romance, ...
... a blank screen.

These next lines show the speaker acknowledging the fact that their idea of farm work is likely a bit romanticized—that is, that it paints an overly rosy or idealized picture of the farmer's life. The speaker seems to catch themselves in the act, definitively declaring: "It's not romance, simply how things are." The caesura in the middle of this line plus the strong period end-stop add to this speaker's sense of assuredness. This line might seem a bit blunt in contrast to the peaceful, warm descriptions of farm life in the previous stanza, but the speaker is clearly aware that their penpal does not see his own work as "romantic." Instead, for the penpal, farm life isn't anything interesting or exotic; it's just "how things are," as he spends his time "in the cold," watching the "seasons turning" year after year.

The speaker, meanwhile, is occupied by a totally different line of work, sitting at a computer and "feeding words onto a blank screen." The word "headlines" suggests that the speaker is a kind of journalist, while "heartful" implies that the speaker's

writing is important to them. At the same time, the speaker doesn't seem to appreciate how that writing is shared, via the lonely act of typing words onto a "blank screen." While the penpal plants tangible nourishment in the form of "potatoes," all the speaker can "feed" are "words" onto a computer. The screen being "blank" reflects the fact that there isn't a tangible person receiving the speaker's "heartful of headlines." Instead, these words seem simply to be sent out into the ether, into a blank space, with the speaker unable to know how they are received. This contrasts with letter writing, which is presented as an intimate and reciprocal form of communication in the poem.

As in the first stanza, the speaker ends the second stanza with enjambment. Line 6 flows across the stanza break into line 7. Not coincidentally, these two lines present the stark difference between the speaker and the penpal's lives:

> ... seeing the seasons
> turning, me with my ...

The fact that the description of the penpal "seeing the seasons / turning" spills over into the line that reveals the speaker's own line of work ("me with my heartful of headlines") subtly suggests the connection between these two people—speaker and penpal—despite the vast difference in their circumstances. Again, their letters allow a form of deep intimacy (this will be reflected again in the poem's final stanza, which describes these two people's "souls" communicating "across the icy miles").

LINES 9-11

> *Is your life ...*
> *... path through snow.*

After acknowledging the difference between the speaker's modern life and the penpal's agrarian one, the speaker moves deeper into introspection. The speaker wonders if their penpal's life is "more real" because he "dig[s] and sow[s]"—that is, because he is a farmer, someone who works directly with his hands and with nature. The speaker here suggests that a life involving nature, a life that allows physical interaction with plants and the outdoors ("dig and sow"), is more fulfilling or rewarding somehow than a life tied to a computer screen. This question also amplifies the dissatisfaction the speaker has with their computer-driven occupation, which shelters them from nature instead of allowing them to embrace it. The speaker ends the third stanza with this thought, the subsequent white space allowing the question to briefly linger in the air.

Of course, immediately after posing this question, the speaker seems to refute it at the start of the next stanza. The speaker acknowledges that their envy for their penpal's outdoor lifestyle may not take into account the harsher reality of farm work. In the next lines, the speaker clarifies that such work involves "breaking ice on a waterbutt" (a kind of outdoor container for liquid) and "clearing a path through snow," both of which are physically draining tasks. As such, the penpal himself certainly wouldn't say that his life is any more "real" than the speaker's. The full stop caesura in the middle of line 11 seems to put an end to the speaker's wondering, suggesting an acceptance of the penpal's point of view here.

This dose of self-awareness makes the speaker's affection for the outdoors seem more genuine. The speaker is able to acknowledge that the natural world they long for is probably too idealized to be real, and that while they genuinely desire a connection with nature, they also simply want what they don't have.

LINES 11-13

> *Still, it's you ...*
> *... into an envelope.*

Even after accepting the reality that the penpal's outdoor work is a lot harder and less enjoyable than the speaker imagines it to be, the speaker still longs for a deeper connection with nature. Following the full stop caesura of line 11 ("... through snow. Still, it's you ...") the speaker describes the necessity of experiencing the natural world vicariously through their penpal.

Of note here is the fact that the speaker labels this agrarian lifestyle as an "other world," a simple, but distancing phrase that underlines how far removed the speaker feels from nature. The letters the speaker receives become more than letters, and are instead vessels of "air and light." Air and light are the building blocks of all life, and the speaker's decision to incorporate them here is significant on a few levels.

First, the penpal's letters being full of air and light suggests that that the speaker does not receive much of either on their own, and that they rely on these epistolary exchanges as a kind of life source. To the speaker, news of the natural world is as important as receiving "air and light," which may sound extreme, but it puts into perspective the degree of seclusion the speaker feels as a result of working at her computer every day.

Second, "air and light" bolster the speaker's earlier doubt that their computer-based lifestyle is not as "real" as being in nature. If "air and light" are required to live but are only found in the natural world (albeit the penpal's described world), then how could the speaker's darker, more secluded lifestyle seem as "real"? Via this description, the speaker seems to make a larger claim about modern life itself, which is that it does not have the capacity to include the natural world (or maybe even life in general) in a meaningful or fulfilling way.

Again the speaker uses enjambment across stanzas here, with line 12 overflowing right across the stanza break into line 13:

> ... that other world

pouring air and light ...

This enjambment echoes the lines' content, evoking the penpal's sending of that "news" to the speaker. It's as though that "news" is also being sent across the stanza break, which here could represent the distance between these two "worlds."

LINES 13-15

So that ...
... the icy miles.

Up until the last stanza, the poem spends most of its time highlighting the differences between the speaker's modern lifestyle and the penpal's agrarian one. But in these final lines, their lifestyle differences are set aside for a simple description of intimacy. The poem shows both the speaker and their penpal "watching the same news in different houses." Even though they are far apart, separated by "icy miles" during the winter, their "souls tap out messages" (a metaphor for letter writing) and they are still thinking about each other as the nightly news plays.

By ending with this image, the poem suggests that the speaker's doubt about the "realness" of their modern lifestyle is not as important as is the communication they share with their penpal. The sibilance of these lines, in turn, creates a gentle, hushed sound that perhaps echoes the whispering of their "souls":

.... same news in different houses,
our souls tap out messages across the icy miles.

With their mention of the "nightly news," these lines also perhaps echo the speaker's occupation as hinted at earlier in the poem. The fact that the speaker deals with "headlines" implies that they're a journalist, or at least someone who works in news. Given that both the speaker and the penpal are watching the "same news" in the end suggests that the speaker's life is more real than it's been made out to be. Perhaps the speaker's work touches the farmer, connecting him to the modern world, just as the farmer's work helps the speaker feel more in touch with nature.

All that said, despite knowing about the agrarian life of the speaker's penpal, there is much about him that readers still don't know by the poem's end. The speaker, in fact, portrays him more as a resource for their *own* sustenance (especially when he pours "air and light" into his envelopes) than as someone engaging in a dialogue about the pros and cons of living closer to nature. Readers do not know, for example, if this penpal has a positive impression of modern life, or if he feels any kind of detachment or isolation as a farmer. The question of what this penpal thinks of the speaker's lifestyle is thereby left open, although the poem seems to suggest that a life closer to nature is more fulfilling, overall, than a life spent at a computer screen.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The poem uses contains apostrophe throughout as the speaker addresses a penpal who is not actually present. One of the most striking instances comes in line 9, when the speaker wonders if this penpal's life is "more real" because he digs and sows—that is, because he is a farmer and thus works with his hands in the natural world. Readers can tell from this question that the speaker is dissatisfied, to some extent, with their modern lifestyle because it does not allow them to be in nature on a more regular basis.

The word "real" could also imply a lack of tangibility or physical interaction in the speaker's life. Based on their descriptions of their penpal's farming, the speaker seems interested in the tangible ways he interacts with the natural world. For example, the farmer digs in his garden, "planting potatoes," and he understands the pleasure of his hands reddening with warmth after being out in the cold. The speaker's main means of physical interaction, by contrast, is the simple act of typing words into a computer. The speaker likely believes their own life to be less "real" because they do not have as many different things to touch and feel, and cannot relate to the world in as physical a way. Instead, they are stuck in the virtual (perhaps the opposite of "physical") world of computer work.

It's also worth thinking about how apostrophe functions given that this poem is in part about communication. The poem ultimately suggests that intimate, reciprocal communication (such as letter writing) is more meaningful than one-way, mass communication (such as news stories). Here, the speaker is asking a question to a figure who is not actually present, meaning the speaker's question is sent off into the world much like the speaker's "headlines" are fed "onto a blank screen." The poem's use of apostrophe, then, subtly bolsters the speaker's sense of isolation in the modern world.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-7
- Line 9
- Lines 10-15

ASSONANCE

Although "Letters form Yorkshire" does not have a rhyme scheme, it does contain several instances of assonance that add to its musicality. In the first stanza, for example, the words "digging," "planting," "lapwings," and "singing," all contain the same internal short /i/ sound. Though these words are spread throughout the stanza—and thus perhaps not *true* assonance in

all cases—the /i/ sound repeats often enough that it still rings out clearly to the ear. This repetition links these words via sound, all of which are associated with elements of the farmer's work. The speaker seems enchanted by this outdoor labor, and the shared sounds here add a sense of lyricism to its description. In other words, the speaker's assonance in *describing* nature reflects the beauty that the speaker *perceives* in nature.

Similar vowel sounds pervade the rest of the poem too; while these are often quite spaced out—and thus not really assonance—the poem is short enough that the sounds still bounce and echo off one another. For instance, note the many long /e/ sounds that reverberate across the second and third stanzas in "seeing," "seasons," "feeding," "screen," and "real." And there is undeniable assonance in the poem's final two lines. Note the shared /ow/ sounds in "houses," "our," and "out" (further mirrored, on a visual level, by "souls"), as well as the long /i/ of "icy miles."

The poem may be written in free verse (in terms of its non-rhyming nature), but the quantity of repeated vowel sounds throughout gives it a melodious feel. The repetition of these vowel sounds elevates the poem, making it feel almost like a kind of ode to the natural world. The speaker conveys uncertainty about the realness of their own modern life, but seems consistently enchanted by nature and its potential to offer fulfillment. The sounds throughout the poem seem like a way for the speaker to reflect the beauty of nature within the poem's language.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 2:** "i"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "e," "e"
- **Line 6:** "ee," "ea"
- **Line 14:** "i," "i," "ou"
- **Line 15:** "ou," "ou," "i," "i"

CAESURA

The poem is broken up into three-line stanzas, but it's actual sentences/phrases don't always match up with that structure. Instead, the speaker's thoughts frequently run over one line to the next (enjambment) and come to end in the middle of lines. The caesuras in the poem add to its free-flowing quality, and also are ways for the speaker to convey meaning.

For example, in the opening line—"In February, digging his garden, planting potatoes,"—the speaker pauses at regular intervals to give added weight to each component of the penpal's outdoor life. This same rhythm is echoed in line 6, which reads: "You out there, in the cold, seeing the seasons ..." The speaker doesn't have regular access to the outdoors, and in taking their time to describe it, slows down the pace of their writing to appreciate every detail, they demonstrate how important it is to them. Note that these caesuras are also part of examples of parataxis, given that each element in these phrases is as important as the next; the phrase order could be altered without any significant change in meaning ("planting potatoes, digging his garden" for instance). This creates the sense that the speaker is simply listing off elements of the farmer's life that the speaker seems to appreciate and admire, rather than building up a larger argument.

The caesuras are also meaningful based on where they *don't* appear. Most significantly, in line 9, the speaker asks: "Is your life more real because you dig and sow?" This is the only sentence in the poem that fits exactly onto one line. This line's lack of pause allows it to stand out from the rest of the poem, and it emphasizes the sincerity with which the speaker expresses doubt about the "realness" of her own modern life. The line is also close to the exact middle of the poem, a formal decision that perhaps shows this question to be at the center of the speaker's thoughts (in addition to the poem's physical "center").

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "February, digging," "garden, planting"
- **Line 3:** "me, his"
- **Line 5:** "romance, simply"
- **Line 6:** "there, in," "cold, seeing"
- **Line 7:** "turning, me"
- **Line 10:** "so, breaking"
- **Line 11:** "snow. Still, it's"
- **Line 13:** "envelope. So"
- **Line 14:** "night, watching"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Letters from Yorkshire." Like the previously discussed assonance, it helps imbue the poem with a musical quality that suggests a sort of reverence for the natural world. Take the first line, with its many energetic /d/ and /g/ sounds in "digging his garden" and popping /p/ and /t/ sounds of "planting potatoes." Later, the /h/ consonance of "heartful of headlines" pushes the reader to linger on this phrase, an important moment in the moment that suggests what the speaker does for work (likely, the speaker is a journalist) and how the speaker feels about it (the speaker seems to care, given that the group of headlines are described as a "heartful").

Especially prominent throughout the poem is the /s/ sound, technically an example of sibilance. This sound becomes more prominent as the poem progresses. In the second stanza, the words "romance," "simply," "seeing," and "seasons" all draw attention to the /s/ sound. Later, the sound is striking in the

poem's final line: "souls tap out messages across the icy miles." This imbues the line with a gentle, hushed tone, as if the speaker is whispering to the farmer across the distance that separates them. The /s/ sound here thus connotes a sense of intimacy and closeness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "gg," "g," "d," "p," "t," "p," "t," "t"
- **Line 3:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 5:** "c," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "m," "m," "h," "l," "h," "d," "l"
- **Line 8:** "d," "d," "k," "c"
- **Line 9:** "r," "l," "r," "r," "l"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "S"
- **Line 12:** "s," "w," "th," "th," "w"
- **Line 13:** "p," "r," "r," "l," "n," "n," "l," "p"
- **Line 14:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "ss," "s," "ss," "c," "s"

ENJAMBMENT

As mentioned in our discussion of caesura, the speaker in "Letters from Yorkshire" doesn't bother to make their thoughts conform to the poem's form. Sentences frequently spill over from one line to the next, and often even across stanzas. In general, the many instances of enjambment bolster the poem's free-flowing, reflective feel, and also add emphasis to phrases and words separated by line breaks.

Looking at line 6, for instance, readers can see that "seasons" is broken off from "turning." In one reading, this definitively separates "the seasons" from the speaker, who seems envious of their penpal's ability to be "out there" in the natural world. Because "seasons" is given added weight thanks to the enjambment, it feels, for a moment, as though the speaker is saying that they don't get to see *any* of the seasons in the first place (without even mentioning their ability to "turn"). Then again, this enjambment also allows the description of the *farmer's* daily life to share a line with the description of the *speaker's* daily life (line 7, "turning ... headlines") —perhaps suggesting that they're not as different as they may seem, and that both are equally "real."

Another notable example of enjambment occurs between lines 11 and 12: "Still, it's you / who sends me word of that other world ..." Throughout the poem, the speaker seems more concerned and interested with the *world* of their penpal rather than the penpal *himself*, and yet this small instance of enjambment suggests that the speaker does indeed care for him. The break after "you," meaning the farmer, allows the word to hang in the air for a moment. The speaker seems to want to underline that without the penpal, none of this wondrous insight into the natural world would be possible, in which case this line break becomes a way of showing respect and appreciation for the verbal companionship the farmer provides.

Finally, the enjambment between the fourth and fifth stanzas—"world / pouring"—evokes the lines' content: it's as though that "world" filled with "air and light" is pouring itself right across the stanza break.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "came / indoors"
- **Lines 3-4:** "singing / as"
- **Lines 6-7:** "seasons / turning"
- **Lines 7-8:** "headlines / feeding"
- **Lines 11-12:** "you / who"
- **Lines 12-13:** "world / pouring"

IMAGERY

The imagery in "Letters from Yorkshire" draws a distinction between the speaker's positive attitude towards the natural world and their negative attitude towards their own modern lifestyle. In the first stanza, even though it is February and likely cold, the speaker envisions their penpal enjoying the acts of "digging his garden, planting potatoes," and watching "the first lapwings return."

These descriptions build a sense of the farmer's daily world, which is only just starting to show signs of spring life. The "reddening" of the knuckles, meanwhile, reminds readers just how cold it must be outside. To the speaker, their penpal's knuckles aren't simply relieved when they finally come indoors, but instead are "singing ... in the warmth." "Singing" evokes the tingling sensation as blood rushes back to your fingers after being in the cold, and also has generally positive connotations. This imagery, then, shows that the speaker is starting to idealize the farmer's life of manual labor in nature.

When they turn to their own modern life, however, the tone of the speaker's descriptions becomes more negative. In the third stanza, the speaker says that their own work consists of "feeding words onto a blank screen." These words contrast with the penpal's capacity to physically relate to his surroundings through actions like planting potatoes in the ground or seeing his cold knuckles turn red. Instead of growing food, the speaker can only feed words into a repository that cannot interact with her in the way the outside world can. Later on, although the speaker acknowledges that working outdoors might be harder than the speaker thinks (in lines 10 and 11), they end the poem by describing their penpal's letters being full of "air and light." This ethereal image of natural elements being poured into a small envelope shows how much the speaker values having access to the outdoors, even if that access can only come in the form of reading a letter.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 11-13

PERSONIFICATION

There is one example of personification in "Letters from Yorkshire," and it occurs in lines 3 and 4. When the speaker describes their penpal stepping indoors to "write to me," the penpal's knuckles are "singing / as they reddened in the warmth." Literally, this refers to the fact that his hands are turning red as blood rushes to them after coming in from the cold. But the speaker's choice of words here is significant.

For one thing, "singing" is often associated with pleasure or joy. Even though the penpal just spent time in cold, uncomfortable weather, "digging his garden, planting potatoes," the penpal's knuckles are happily "singing" after they come indoors. The knuckles may be singing because they're glad to be warm, or perhaps they are looking forward to working on a letter to the speaker. But it is nevertheless clear that it is the speaker ascribing this joyful, musical quality to the penpal's daily life. Later in the poem, the speaker acknowledges that working outside in the "cold," accomplishing tasks like "clearing a path through snow" or "breaking ice on a waterbutt," may not actually be all that pleasant to perform, and that the speaker may be viewing the natural world with an idealized, romanticized perspective. In this case, the penpal's knuckles "singing" reflects the speaker imagined idea of what working outdoors must be like rather than the penpal's reality.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "his knuckles singing / as they reddened in the warmth."

METAPHOR

"Letters from Yorkshire" contains several metaphors in the final stanza. Both metaphors reflect the poem's main theme of communication between both human beings and between people and the natural world. The first metaphor begins in line 11. From the speaker's perspective, the acquaintance's act of writing letters is akin to "pouring air and light into an envelope." In other words, these letters about the natural world and an outdoor lifestyle are so rich and evocative to the speaker, who spends most of their time indoors, that they seem filled with the very elements they discuss. These letters provide the speaker with a glimpse into a completely different lifestyle, one full of "air and light" that the speaker does not experience much thanks to their time spent working on a computer.

Later on in that final stanza, the speaker describes how they and their acquaintance watch "the same news in different houses" while their "souls tap out messages" to one another. Even though both individuals are watching TV, the suggestion that their "souls," or some interior, subconscious, part of their beings, are still in communication with one another implies that their act of letter-writing forged a deeper connection between them. They are both separated by a significant distance ("icy miles"), but they feel connected by their identical evening routines and by knowing that the other is still in their thoughts. Word of the natural world is so meaningful to the speaker that it has helped them achieve a soul-level appreciation for the relationship they have with their acquaintance.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-15:** "Still, it's you / who sends me word of that other world / pouring air and light into an envelope. So that / at night, watching the same news in different houses, / our souls tap out messages across the icy miles."

VOCABULARY

Lapwings (Line 2) - "Lapwings" are a kind of bird that appears in Britain (where the author of this poem, Maura Dooley, lives) and elsewhere across the globe.

Singing (Line 3) - The penpal's knuckles are not *actually* "singing." Rather, this is a moment of personification that shows the extent to which the speaker idealizes the feeling of coming inside from the cold.

Romance (Line 5) - "Romance," in this instance, refers to the speaker's idealization of the natural world.

Heartful of headlines (Line 7) - "Heartful of headlines" likely refers to the speaker's occupation, which seems to be some form of journalism (which would involve writing a "headline"). The word "heartful" also suggests that this act of writing is dear to the speaker, despite the speaker's longing to see more of the natural world.

Sow (Line 9) - "Sow" means to plant seeds.

Waterbutt (Line 10) - A "waterbutt" is a British term for an outdoor container used for storing liquid (especially rainwater).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Letters from Yorkshire" is broken into five, three-line stanzas. This form is steady throughout, creating a sense of measured pacing. At the same time, the frequent enjambment between stanzas suggests that the speaker isn't all that interested in making their thoughts adhere strictly to the poetic form in

front of them. Altogether, the poem is both structured and free-flowing, declarative and contemplative.

The stanzas seem to track the progression of the speaker's thoughts. In the first stanza, the speaker opens with peaceful descriptions of the natural world, seeming to envy their penpal's ability to spend time outdoors. In the next two stanzas, the speaker clarifies the difference between the penpal's life and their own, as well as wonders whether or not their life is less "real" because it involves being inside most of the time, away from nature. In the fourth stanza, the speaker acknowledges the reality that working outdoors may not be pleasant all the time, before returning, in the fifth stanza, to their affection for news of the natural world via "air and light" in an envelope.

METER

"Letters from Yorkshire" does not have a consistent, overarching meter. Instead, it is written in free verse. This adds to its natural, free-flowing and reflective tone. There are still some interesting metrical moments, however.

For example, in the first line, the two activities mention follow the exact same pattern of stresses, adding a sense of rhythm to the line and emphasizing that these are both equally important parts of the farmer's routine:

> digging his garden
> planting potatoes

As is also clear from this example, the poem makes frequent use of caesura to add a sense of deliberate rhythm and pacing to its lines in the absence of a strict meter. For instance, notice how the opening line, "In February, digging his garden, planting potatoes," pauses at a regular interval to give equal weight to each part of the penpal's outdoor life. This same rhythm is echoed in line 6, which reads: "You out there, in the cold, seeing the seasons / turning ..." All of these caesuras appear within descriptions of the penpal's farm life. The sonic effect of a caesura is to slow down the reading experience of a set of words or lines, and perhaps the slowing of descriptions of the penpal's life reflects the slower pace of an outdoor, computer-free world.

RHYME SCHEME

"Letters from Yorkshire" does not have a consistent, overarching rhyme scheme. Instead, it is told in natural, free-flowing prose that reflects the speaker's contemplative tone. That said, it does make use of assonance to string similar vowel sounds together throughout the poem and add a sense of musicality. Take, for example, the long /ee/ sounds in "seeing the seasons."

There are also some subtle moments of internal rhyme, most apparent in lines 9-11:

> ... because you dig and sow?
> You wouldn't say so, breaking ice on a waterbutt,
> clearing a path through snow.

Interestingly, this is a description of the farmer's likely objections to the speaker's characterization of farm life. Here, the poem lays out the more difficult aspects of the penpal's work, yet it's also one of the only moments in the poem with any rhyme. Perhaps the speaker is attempting to add some sonic beauty even to these objections. Or perhaps the repeated /o/ sound here is meant to feel forced or rehashed, like this is some argument the speaker has heard many times before from the farmer.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is the recipient of the so-called "Letters from Yorkshire," which originate from a penpal who primarily works outdoors. From the poem, readers know that the speaker feeds "words onto a blank screen," and spends most of their day sitting at the computer. This suggests that the speaker is probably a journalist or works in news in some way. It's also clear that the speaker feels somewhat isolated and disconnected from the natural world.

The driving force behind this poem, arguably, is the question that appears in line 9: "Is your life more real because you dig and sow?" The speaker doubts that their life could be "more real" than one that involves the natural world, and feels compelled to express a great appreciation and longing for that world throughout the poem. By the poem's end, even after the speaker acknowledges that working outdoors comes with its own set of challenges, they deem the natural world as ultimately fulfilling. Each letter they receive from their penpal is full of "air and light," a suggestion that even basic news of the outdoors is enough to sustain their life.

SETTING

The poem contains several different physical spaces. Most prominently, it consists of "that other world," which is the world of the outdoors that is the object of the speaker's fascination. The speaker's penpal is seen "digging his garden, planting potatoes," while "the first lapwings return." The poem also mentions the speaker's indoor world, which involves sitting at a computer, "feeding words into a blank screen." In the final lines, both the speaker and their penpal watch "the same news in different houses," and continue to "tap out messages" to each other via letter. In other words, they're both home watching TV and writing to each other. Ultimately, the way "Letters from Yorkshire" navigates between indoor and outdoor spaces allows it to maintain a realistic perception of both while

highlighting how important nature can seem to someone living constantly in front of their computer.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Dooley's poem might best be thought of as falling into the current tradition of ecopoetry. Rather than simply denoting poems about nature, ecopoetry describes writing that relates to the natural world in a deeper, more meaningful way. Often, ecopoems will direct readers' attention to endangered or unprotected parts of the planet, or perhaps use nature as a vehicle for communicating a particular emotion, such as love or loss. Other ecopoems focus on the way nature interacts with the modern, technology-driven world, and it is this area that Maura Dooley's "Letters from Yorkshire" most easily fits in. After all, the poem is about someone who finds the natural world so fulfilling in comparison to their modern lifestyle that even their penpal's epistolary descriptions of it seem full of "air and light."

Other poets that have contributed to ecopoetry include Mary Oliver, Gary Snyder, Forrest Gander, and perhaps most famously, W.S. Merwin. Interestingly, Merwin is famous for not using punctuation in his poetry, a formal decision that could suggest a willingness to let his natural imagery flow unrestricted from the regulations of grammar, allowing the reader to focus more on the images themselves.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was published in the year 2000. Computers and the internet had both been around for quite a while at the time of the poem's composition, and were becoming more and more a part of regular people's everyday lives. People could communicate via email, get the news online, and talk to strangers in chatrooms. On the one hand, then, technology seemed to be having a positive affect on people's lives by increasing productivity and allowing people to stay in touch like never before.

At the same time, people worried about over-reliance on computers. Technological innovations led to increasingly sedentary lifestyles devoid of any significant interaction with the natural world (especially when compared to the time before electricity itself existed). Notably, the characters in the poem—or, at least, the penpal—use real paper and envelopes to communicate, suggesting a hesitancy to fully engage with the digital world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Yorkshire Farms Photograph — This photo shows the kind of rural lifestyle made possible in Yorkshire, England, that the speaker of Dooley's poem envies. The accompanying photo gallery shows other photos from similar regions in England and the United Kingdom. (https://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Europe/United_Kingdom/England/North_Yorkshire/Lealholm/photo414349.htm)
- Maura Dooley's Life Story — The British Council's website offers biographical information about Dooley and her poetry. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/maura-dooley)
- Dooley's Favorite Poets — A transcription of a short interview with Dooley from the Forward Arts Foundation, in which she discusses how she became interested in poetry as well as the other poets she most admires. (http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Maura-Dooley-Forward-Prizes-Interview.pdf)
- Maura Dooley Out Loud — A YouTube video showing Maura Dooley reading her poetry in England in 2007. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wfxNY4Xre4)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Kneisley, John. "*Letters from Yorkshire.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kneisley, John. "*Letters from Yorkshire.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/maura-dooley/letters-from-yorkshire.