

Unseen Literature Exam Preparation: Poetry

How does the poet make his thoughts and feelings about the athletes so memorable?

The poem "Dignified" expresses admiration for athletes, mostly by comparing athletes to ordinary people and through using hyperbole to make the athletes seem super-human.

To begin with the poet's description of normal people or the "us" of the poem, the poet creates a clear divide between athletes and the rest of the population. In stanza one the setting is created as the poet suggests that the athletes get up very early "at dawn" on "grim estates", making the training process required to be an athlete seem arduous and unglamorous, a daily grind/ commitment. The enumeration: "in rings, in wheelchairs, velodromes and pools" emphasises the extent to which these athletes exist in society, always practising their chosen sport as we "snore towards our heart attacks".

This last comment implies that the rest of society is lazy and unhealthy, preferring to sleep while the athletes train.

To continue with the idea of the athletes as being described as superior, in stanza four: "the rest of us, left waiting at the start", conveys a memorable image of the ordinary people being left behind by the athletes, only capable of waiting and observing. The phrase "everybody's claims for more" implies how the general public pay great attention to the actions of the athletes, which is memorable because it makes us consider the value of athletes' role in society, as a spectacle that people enjoy worldwide as they watch their heroes "on a billion TVs".

Another memorable element is how the athletes' actions are made to seem so special, almost other-worldly. Phrases such as "change the world" and "sign gold in an ordinary name", as well as "supernatural ease" make the athletes

seem extraordinarily talented and heroic. The personification that we see in the line: “applauded by a planetary roar” is hyperbole and implies that the whole universe is affected by the victories of the athletes. This same technique is used in the phrase: “the gods adore”, with allusions to the Greek Gods Zeus and Apollo: “athletes who amazed Zeus and Apollo” having a similar affect. The alliteration here (repetition of A) creates a more awestruck feeling as we imagine the reaction of the gods to the athletes’ triumphs.

The poem’s form is also interesting as the content develops towards the final stanza. Throughout the poem the poet has eluded to other-worldly and supernatural talents of these special people that “will re-write the body and its rules”, and in the last stanza takes this idea further as s/he begins to relate the athletes’ skill to the theme of immortality. In the phrase: “the swimmer who escapes her wake” it is implied that the athletes undertake death-defying acts as they train.

In conclusion, the poet’s thoughts and feelings about the athletes are made particularly memorable through the comparisons of athletes to supernatural entities, through allusions to heroic figures from the past and through the use of hyperbolic language that makes the athletes seem so special and so distinct from the rest of the population.