

**Compare the ways in which poets explore human history in 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright' by Sean O'Brien and 'Arundel Tomb' by Philip Larkin (30 marks)**

Both Philip Larkin in 'Arundel Tomb' and Sean O'Brien in 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright' explore universal concepts relating to human history by examining specific people and time periods – O'Brien's poem centres on the mining communities of the northeast in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Larkin focuses on the legacy of a Renaissance Earl and his wife. Both poets emphasise the fact that prominent historical figures, be they members of the nobility or communities as a whole, will be remembered by future generations, but while O'Brien suggests that the legacies of these people are still widely felt, Larkin, perhaps owing to his presentation of a much longer period, implies that human history becomes distorted as time passes, to the extent that what the modern public believes to be true about particular historical figures may bear little resemblance to the realities of their lives. As such, both poems present different opinions on the significance of historical events to modern society.

In 'Arundel Tomb', Philip Larkin postulates that, although the memories of prominent figures will be preserved in history, the passing of time will inevitably mean that the details of their lives become forgotten or misremembered. Initially, Larkin suggests that the earl and countess whose tomb he describes have been memorialised in some detail, as the sculptor's "faithfulness in effigy" extends to the depiction of their clothing as "jointed armour" and a "stiffened pleat", with the specificity of the adjectives used suggesting that the figures have been rendered in a life-like manner. The tomb also carries a "faint hint of the absurd", suggesting that it marks the earl and countess out as individuals, rather than simply marking the site of their burial in an unremarkable fashion. However, even from the beginning of the poem, it is hinted that the couple have been preserved little beyond their manner of dress – which is apparently typical of the time period in which they lived, but this period is not specified, beyond the statement that it was "pre-baroque", itself suggesting that the finer details of the couple's lives have been forgotten – and one or two eccentricities; their faces are described as "blurred" implying that the erosion of the stone over time has erased the features by which they once would have been recognised, and the poet never mentions their names, indeed, he states that the only indication of their identities is "the Latin names around the base" of the monument, further demonstrating how the passing of time periods into history can cause individuals to be forgotten, as few people in the modern day read Latin, meaning that the inscriptions which the sculptor presumably desired to "prolong" have largely been lost, even if they are still visible. The poet also notes that the only significant detail which remains of their lives pertains to their apparent love for one another, but that this is only evidenced by the fact that the stone figures on the tomb have been sculpted so that "his hand [is] withdrawn, holding her hand", a detail which members of the public have seized on, turning the gesture into "their final blazon". Larkin, however, is less convinced, as he theorises that it may have been "hardly meant", and therefore cannot be viewed as an objective representation of what the couple's marriage was really like. Largely due to this, as the poem progresses, Larkin seems to reach the conclusion that this tomb, having had its details lost due to "endless" visitors and the passing of time "washing" them away, cannot be viewed as reliable evidence of how the earl and countess lived their lives, even going as far as to say that "Time has transfigured them into/Untruth", suggesting that he feels as though the historical artefacts preserved by humans may actually tell current societies very little about the past, as they have been interpreted and re-interpreted by so many generations of people.

Sean O'Brien, meanwhile, suggests in 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright' that the legacies of historical figures can still be keenly felt by modern communities. Like Larkin, O'Brien does not name anyone specifically among the miners he depicts, perhaps suggesting that their identities, too have been lost – however, the scope of 'Fantasia' is very different to 'Arundel Tomb', as instead of focusing on two particular people, O'Brien illustrates an entire society of miners, which could be seen to represent every mining town during this time period, potentially suggesting that it is large groups of people who will be most accurately remembered by history, rather than individuals. Throughout the poem, O'Brien depicts these historical communities as being an intrinsic part of the present, opening with the line "There are miners still" and continuing in the present tense throughout, suggesting that, although the "iron doors" of the mining industry have been "sealed once and for all", the spirit of the mining towns has not diminished. Indeed, O'Brien presents these communities as being very dynamic, describing the perpetual sounds of "guttering cap-lamps", "Explosions in the ocean floor" and "The singing of the dead inside the earth", which are reinforced by the use of plosive consonants ("black-braided banners") and fricatives ("flooding and firedamp"), all of which combine to create the image of a loud and ever-present group of people. The use of this evocative soundscape presents the community as one which can still be 'heard' in the memories of people in modern communities, suggesting that the miners, although "dead", have not been forgotten. The optimism of this poem is very different to the one of 'Arundel Tomb', as the earl and countess seem to make very little impression on the visitors to their tomb, with Larkin describing their long period of burial as a "soundless"

one, reinforced by the prevalent use of sibilance (for example, “A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace”), which softens and quietens the overall sound of the poem, suggesting that the buried couple do not leave nearly the same impression on modern society as Larkin’s miners. The difference in tone of these two poems may be due to the very different historical periods they centre on. The setting of ‘Fantasia’ is towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presumably during the 1980s, as the reference to “spent economies” and the demise of the mining industry could allude to the miners’ strikes against closures by Margaret Thatcher’s government. This makes the poem far more culturally relevant to current society, as O’Brien himself, as well as many readers, lived during this time period, and can remember its events. As such, it could be argued that the full effect of history – that is, the collective forgetting of historical figures by society – has not yet occurred for this time period, as there are many people alive today with first-hand memories of the era. This effect is seen much more keenly in Larkin’s poem, which focuses on a couple from a “pre-baroque” period, meaning that they lived at least 400 years ago, and consequently that the only accounts of daily life during this point in history come from secondary data sources and artefacts, such as the tomb, giving rise to misinterpretation and the loss of information about people such as the earl and countess. Therefore, it can be implied that, although the mining communities described by O’Brien have bestowed a lasting legacy on current generations, as time continues to pass, these miners will be forgotten and reduced to legend, just like the couple in ‘Arundel Tomb’.

Because of the different time periods explored by each poet, the two poems also differ in how they present the notion of history itself. In ‘Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright’, for example, O’Brien presents a history which is almost tangible, as he describes the striking image of miners “going down in good order,/Their black-braided banners aloft” – visuals which are not just a figment of imagination or conjecture, but are supported by photographic and media evidence from the time, making the events O’Brien alludes to indisputable – while tying them to the modern towns of “West Moor and Palmersville”. Through these descriptions, O’Brien implies that human history is based on objective facts, which can be preserved and confidently classed as truthful by subsequent generations. Moreover, the final line of the poem states that, while the legacy of the mining communities is dynamic and present, it remains that “history [is] done”, suggesting that the poet feels that the facts of the past are constant and unchanging. Larkin, on the other hand, takes a different view, depicting history – particularly that pertaining to much earlier centuries – as a subjective and somewhat unreliable view of the past. This is also demonstrated by the poem’s focus on the position of the two stone figures holding hands, which has been “transfigured” over “lengths and breadths/Of time” to become the most significant aspect of the earl and countess’ legacy, with Larkin stating that the message which modern visitors glean from the tomb is that “What will survive of us is love.” This seems to be an optimistic message, suggesting that a person’s significant relationships can transcend time and continue to be remembered when other details about them have been forgotten – however, Larkin does not present this final statement as a fact, instead demonstrating that it is an opinion formed by “succeeding eyes” who know little about the couple (having not read or understood the inscriptions on their grave, the only public message which comes directly from them), and which is not supported by any concrete evidence, being based solely on the artistic decision of a long-dead sculptor. As such, Larkin concludes that history, in this case, has been reduced to “almost instinct [and] almost true”, rather than being, as O’Brien suggests, unchanging and completely factual. The structure of Larkin’s poem echoes this, as the use of regular stanzas and a fixed rhyme scheme could be seen to represent the perpetual passing of time, and the inevitability of historical events becoming distorted in the way he describes (O’Brien’s poem uses a similarly regular stanza structure – however, ‘Fantasia’ uses tercets, making them half the length of Larkin’s stanzas, perhaps suggesting that he expects these changes to occur at a much slower rate).

Overall, Philip Larkin and Sean O’Brien present very different views of human history, with ‘Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright’ implying that historical events are concrete, and have a profound effect on those who remember them and their descendants, while ‘Arundel Tomb’ suggests that history is altered by successive societies in order to make the past seem more relevant to the modern day, which has the effect of erasing important details about people’s lives. However, both poems seem to agree on one aspect, which is that the memories of abstract concepts, such as the spirit of a community or the relationship between a couple, survive much longer than the legacies of individuals, making history ultimately the documentation of the human condition and its progress, rather than an effective method of remembering specific people as time passes.