

Examen ou concours :

Série* :

Spécialité/option :

Repère de l'épreuve :

Épreuve/sous-épreuve :

(Préciser, s'il y a lieu, le sujet choisi)

Numérotez chaque page (dans le cadre en bas de la page) et placez les feuilles intercalaires dans le bon sens.

Note :

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Appréciation du correcteur (uniquement s'il s'agit d'un examen) :

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Version

Il est en uniforme ; ses médailles sont comme des trous percés dans le tissu, au travers desquels on peut voir le scintillement terne de son vrai corps métallique. Derrière lui, invisibles, se tiennent ses frères - les deux garçons disparus, les seuls qu'il a le sentiment d'avoir perdus. Ma mère est là, dans sa plus belle robe, son accoutrement tenu par une ceinture, avec des ourlets, et un chapeau avec des rubans ondulés. Elle sourit timidement. Aucun des deux ne sait trop quoi faire. L'appareil photo du journal les surprend avec son flash ; ils le fixent, comme

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surpris en train de commettre un crime.

Mon père porte un cache noir sur l'œil droit. Son œil gauche regarde d'un air menaçant. Sous le cache, non encore révélée, se trouve une taille de chair atrophiée, son œil manquant c'est l'araignée.

« Le héros héritier de l'axe est de retour » trompetera le journal. C'est un autre point : mon père est désormais l'héritier, c'est-à-dire qu'il n'a plus de père en plus de n'avoir plus de frères. Le royaume est dans ses mains. On dirait de la boue.

Ma mère a-t-elle pleuré ? C'est possible. Ils ont dû s'embrasser d'un air gêné, comme à un match de boxe, un pour lequel il aurait acheté le mauvais ticket. Ce n'était

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pas ce dont il s'était souvenu, cette femme pragmatique, rongée par l'anxiété, avec des lunettes à pince-nez comme celles de quelque vieille fille qui scintillaient à une chaîne en argent autour de son cou. Ils étaient deux étrangers désormais, et — ce dont ils ont dû se rendre compte — ils l'avaient toujours été. Que la lumière était cruelle. Combien plus vieux ils étaient devenus. Il n'y avait plus nulle trace du jeune homme qui s'était autrefois agenouillé avec déférence sur la glace pour lacer ses patins, ou de la jeune femme qui avait tendrement accepté cet hommage.

Commentaire

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In Lord Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses", the homecoming of the hero is rendered sour by his tiredness and ageing: the Trojan war has exhausted Ulysses, who laments that he and his companions were "made weak by time and fate". Likewise, in this passage from The Blind Assassin by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, the narrator, Iris Chase, recounts the bitter return of her father, a First World War veteran, to his wife and hometown. The narrator shatters the myth of the glorious victor triumphantly returning to his homeland: here, the father appears irreversibly maimed — both physically and psychologically. Moreover, this story, which is seemingly written by the narrator in her diary, is introduced by an evocation of 21st century current affairs, namely climate change, which raises the issue of its relevance for our times. I shall therefore study how this passage succeeds in expressing the lingering trauma caused by the war and how it gives it

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resonance for our times. I shall first study how the passage presents a disenchanting homecoming, then how this tale of a bygone age holds significance for contemporary woes, and lastly how the narrator achieves an expression of her parents' unspoken trauma.

In this diary account of her father's return from the war, the narrator depicts a sobering picture of a profoundly shocking and unheroic moment. The passage thus turns the tables on the tops of the glorious triumph: from the outset the return is underwhelming, as the father "missed the jubilant welcome" (line 22) because he was recovering from an injury. The narration establishes here an inverted proportionality between the efforts and their reward, which is further reinforced by the fact that the veteran's scars are not perceived as feats of glory but

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rather as gruesome infirmities. On seeing him, the hands that were ready to help "then hesitated" (l. 24) and his missing eye becomes a metaphorical "spider" - a symbol of fear. A feeling of disappointment permeates the passage, the medals are mere "holes" (l. 35), the newly acquired kingdom "feels like mud" (l. 44). As the abrupt shift from preterit to present shows - at line 34: "There they stand" - , the reunion turns into a moment of bitter reckoning of the horrors of the war.

This reckoning is carried out mostly through the looks which unveil the harsh reality behind the expectations. As the oxymoron "bright shadow" (l. 27) suggests, the characters were in a blissful ignorance of the father's state until his return shed a "meridian light" (l. 28) on it. The veteran is discovered to be heavily maimed, three times wounded and with one eye and one leg missing. But his demise is broader: his whole body has withered, as the enumeration at line 27 shows: "and every spot and pore and wrinkle and brittle". The repetition of "and" starkly highlights the gravity of the wounds. Yet his wounds are not merely

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physical but also psychological: more than his age, the father is missing two brothers, whose absence is made unbearably felt by their avocation as "invisible" figures lingering behind him (l. 36). The father is thus depicted as weakened and fearsome, which clashes with expectations of a hero's return.

So powerful is this sobering realisation that it affects not only the moment of the reunion but also the past and future of the family. Indeed, the time before the war is retroactively tainted with bitterness: the father and mother realise that "they always had been" strangers to each other (l. 48) so that they may not even find solace in the past. Their relation is likewise irretrievably damaged for the future, because the father's infidelities cut like a "sword" (l. 52) their marital bond whereas the mother's "forgiveness" eventually turns out to be unbearable for the father (l. 60). Such is the impact of the shock that it also reverberates through time to the narrator, who feels compelled to tell this story.

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By retelling this story at the beginning of the 21st century, the narrator invests it with significance for contemporary times also. The sheer horror of the First World War is so overwhelming that the narrator, who was only a child when it ended ("It's one of my first memories", l. 15) still feels the need to write about it in her old age. Consequently, the war itself is absent, known only from the horror of the aftermath. What little events transpire of the fightings are known only because of the wounds (l. 18-21), more paramount to the passage are the consequences of the war: the subsequent "quandary" (l. 33), the awkwardness of the reunited couple, who feels as though "surprised in a crime" (l. 39), and the metaphorical "sword" (l. 52) that separates the couple. All of this underlying violence is conveyed by the narrator, so that the shock takes place on three levels: at the intra-diegetic level of the characters, at the level of the narrator, and that of the readers.

The implications of the story for the reader's time are further emphasised by

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the parallel the narrator draws between the war and today's world. The introductory paragraph puts the 1918 story in regards to 21st century channel news: the reader is thus entreated to seek similarities between the two situations. The narrator helps in this by underlying common traits: the war is compared to a "hurricane" (l.33) whereas climate change induces another act of God: "floods" (l.2). In both cases, the blame befalls on men, yet there is not one culprit "you could put your finger on" (l.33). In this regard, the insistence on the word "rage" at lines 6 and 7 is telling: just as the wars rage, the characters, narrator, and readers are enraged, holding unjust "grudges" because they are passive victims.

Through this comparison, the passage encapsulates a universal trait of human nature, a common cause to all its woes: now as then, the reason is "greed and hunger (...) as usual" (l.4).

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Interestingly, the distance to the 1918 events allows the narrator to show more clearly the dismal consequences of this greed, in order to, in turn, denounce the current situation with more clarity, as can be seen in the cynical sentence:

"People must stop burning things up (...) they won't stop" (l. 3). Thus, the reminiscence of the past is given, through the prism of the narrator, a political significance for contemporary readers.

This message is all the more potent because the narrator succeeds in encapsulating the unspoken sorrow of her parents. The narrator would at first appear to be unreliable, for she has barely lived the episode she writes about. Indeed, this phase was just a child at the moment of the armistice, which is one of her "first memories" (l. 14), and the whole event is shrouded in uncertainty, as shown by her question: "Where was Mother?" (l. 17). The narrator extrapolates information from documents: what is presented at first as a memory - "there they stand" (l. 34) - is actually the description of the

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newspaper picture as the reader later understands through subtle clues:

"the newspaper camera catches them" (l. 39),

"his left eye glares balefully" (l. 40). Yet,

the narrator dares to make conjectures and inferences from this inquiry to unveil the feelings of her parents, as can be seen through the use of modal verbs: "They must have..." (l. 45) and "He must have been" (l. 54). By writing about her parents, the narrator brings back the liveliness of their experience.

Indeed, the pen of the narrator writing her diary is presented as an almighty tool that allows her to go in search of lost time. As she notes at line 6 - "I turn back the page" - the narrator freely goes about in her memories to try to give them meaning. The saying "the pen is mightier than the sword" is here literally realised as she announces: "I will cause the war to end - I alone with a stroke of my black plastic pen." (l. 8) This power of the writer is put to good use in this passage, as the narrator strives to express the unspoken trauma.

The sufferings of her parents

stem from their inability to express them,
a well-documented consequence of
post-traumatic stress disorder. As Iris
Chase notes: "how can you repudiate
something that is never spoken?" (l.64).
The narrator does speak those woes,
diving boldly into the horrors of the wounds,
exposing "scarred flesh" (l.44) as well as her
father's affairs. She is unafraid "not
to mince a word [her] mother would never
have pronounced" (l.54) and even makes
a point of outing the ugly truth at all
cost. To quote the epigraph of Therapy by
David Lodge, "writing is a form of therapy"
and whereas her parents suffered in
silence from the "sword" and the
"forgiveness" that they dared not
talk about, their daughter tackles
old wounds upfront.

This passage therefore calls to
life the shock of an unromantic reunion
between a war veteran and his homeland.
By exposing old wounds and trauma,
the narrator may not heal them
retrospectively, but setting this
story against the backdrop of current

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"Maging" issues may succeed in drawing wisdom and awareness from the past. In this sense, what first reads as a morbid association of a bygone age may also be, as often with Margaret Atwood's novel, a caution tale for our times.

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