

# Grade 10 & 11 (*New Syllabus*)

## Appreciation of English Literary Texts



The Terrorist , He's  
Watching



Wisława Szymborska

## Wislawa Szymborska



## The poet....

Maria Wislawa Anna Szymborska was a Polish poet, essayist, and a translator. She was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1923 in Prowent, Poland. She was the Nobel peace prize recipient for literature in 1996. Her literary works have reached the level of the prominent literary figures at the international level. Most of her works have been translated into English and many other European languages as well as into Arabic Japanese and Chinese. In 1939 she was doing her studies in underground classes since the world war broke out in the same year. 1943 she began her life as a railroad employee. It was during this time that her career as an artist began. In 1945 she started studying Polish literature and switched to sociology at the Jagiellonian university in Krakow.

### The Terrorist, He's Watching

The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen  
twenty.

Now it's just thirteen sixteen.

There's still time for some to go in,  
and some to come out.

The terrorist has already crossed the street.  
The distance keeps him out of danger,  
and what a view -- just like the movies:

A woman in a yellow jacket, she's going in.

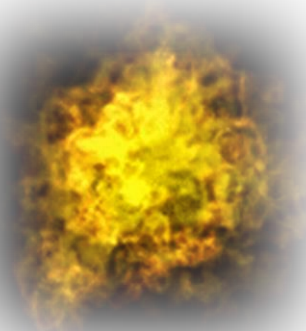
A man in dark glasses, he's coming out.

Teen-agers in jeans, they're talking.

Thirteen seventeen and four seconds.

The short one, he's lucky, he's getting on a  
scooter,

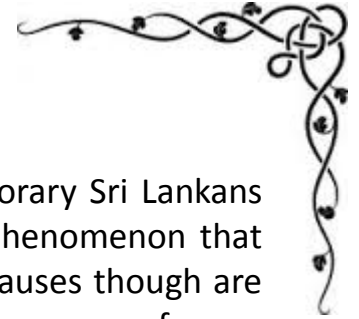
but the tall one, he's going in.



Thirteen seventeen and forty seconds.  
That girl, she's walking along with a green ribbon  
in her hair.  
But then a bus suddenly pulls in front of her.  
Thirteen eighteen.  
The girl's gone.  
Was she that dumb, did she go in or not,  
we'll see when they carry them out.  
Thirteen nineteen.  
Somehow no one's going in.  
Another guy, fat, bald, is leaving, though.  
Wait a second, looks like he's looking for  
something in his pockets and  
at thirteen twenty minus ten seconds  
he goes back in for his crummy gloves.  
Thirteen twenty exactly.  
This waiting, it's taking forever.  
Any second now.  
No, not yet.  
Yes, now.  
The bomb, it explodes.

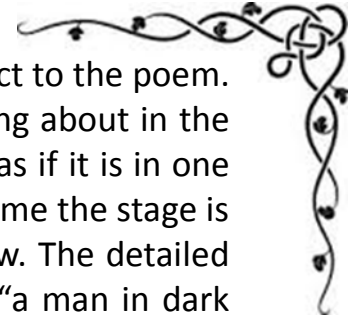


A literary comment on the poem....



Theme touches on a very common subject which the contemporary Sri Lankans are very familiar with. It has become a menacingly disturbing phenomenon that the present world order has to perpetually deal with. The root causes though are manifold in terms of breeding terrorism, the ultimate consequences are of same nature. Planting bombs in public places and suicide attacks are callous in form which render devastating shock waves and fear psychosis among the public. The incident described in the poem clearly depicts the callous nature of the ruthless act of terrorism. The poem opens with the clock ticking away the time. This seems to have given a subtle inference to the idea that our lives are numbered in the present chaotic world order. The count down begins with only four minutes left for the bomb to go off. The continuous reminding of time keeps the suspense and anxiety running high across the poem.

The poet also has ruthlessly generalized the phenomenon with simple language, diction and the casual tone that she maintains through out the poem. Though it looks as if it is an incidence reported matter-of-factly in impersonal perspective, it is a mockingly painful poetic experience for the discerning reader.



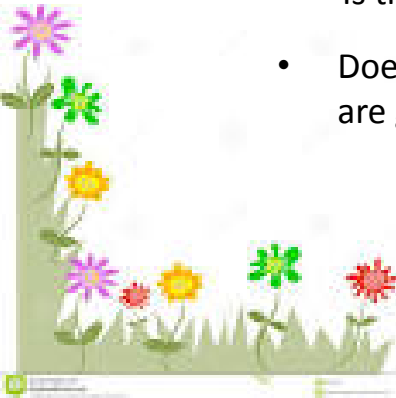
This impersonal reporting style seems to have given a cinematic effect to the poem. The terrorist crossing the street and the unsuspected civilians moving about in the vicinity, people going in and coming out of the shop sets the scene as if it is in one frame of a camera shot in a movie. With the clock ticking away the time the stage is set for a heart rending and nerve racking dramatic episode to follow. The detailed descriptions of the hapless civilians “a woman in a yellow jacket”, “a man in dark glasses”, and “teenagers in jeans” probably lay bare the fact that terrorism doesn’t spare any soul nor does it have mercy on anybody. It treats all in the same ruthless manner as it always does. People are driven by destiny to their unforeseen eventualities which the poet seemingly attempts to highlight can also be seen with “the short one, he’s lucky, he’s getting on a scooter “but the tall one, he’s going in”. But the fate of the girl “with a green ribbon in her hair” is comically yet painfully unknown.

The poet is not sure of the fate of the girl yet she is certain that it could be known when the dead bodies are carried. This shows the outright general insensitivity and thick-skinned attitude of the sundry. The last individual to be described is “another guy, fat, bald, is leaving” then in the last stanza which is relatively short marks the detonation of the bomb.

The poem though superficially looks simple carries the marks of all the tragic pathos of violence hatred and sadism rolled into one.

Some questions suggested in the T.I.M.

- What does he do after setting up the explosive device?
- Why has he crossed the street?
- Why doesn't he leave the place of the blast?
- Is this behavior usual with terrorists?
- Does the terrorist have even a twinge of conscience about the people who are going to get killed?





### Proposed answers for the questions

- The terrorist moves across the street to a safer distance to wait until the bomb goes off.
- He wants to be certain of his safety being at a safer distance.
- He wants to be sure if his action bears fruits before he leaves the place.
- This can't be always usual with all occasions.
- Absolutely not. This is sheer indiscriminate killing without any classified target.

