

City

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No fingers claw at the bronze gauze
Of a Hong Kong December dusk,
Only a maze of criss-crossing feet
That enmeshes the city
5 In a merciless grid.

Between many lanes
Of traffic, the street-sleeper
Carves out his island home.
Or under the thundering fly-over,
10 Another makes his own peace of mind.

Under the staircase,
By the public lavatory,
A man entirely unto himself
Lifts his hand
15 And opens his palm.
His digits
Do not rend the air,
They merely touch
As pain does, effortlessly.

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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?
2. What is the poem about?
3. What is the mood in Stanza 1? How is the mood created?
4. Contrast is used in the poem to show the solitude of the homeless in Stanzas 2 and 3.

(a) Identify 3 pairs of contrasts. Two examples are provided.

	Contrasts	
Stanza 2	many lanes of traffic	
Stanza 2		
Stanza 3		a man entirely unto himself

(b) What effects do these contrasts create?

5. What is the theme of the poem?

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set in the city area of Hong Kong in a winter evening.

2. What is the poem about?

The poem is about street-sleepers who make themselves a makeshift home somewhere in a hectic city.

3. What is the mood in Stanza 1? How is the mood created?

A sense of despair, loss and disorientation is conveyed in Stanza 1. It is achieved with the following means:

- The setting – the poem is set in the dark hours of the day in a desolate winter, which creates a gloomy and depressing atmosphere.
- The imagery of captivity – the bustling city is presented with words such as “gauze”, “maze”, “enmeshes”, “criss-crossing” and “grid”, which carry the idea of captivity and entrapment. With the use of words like “claw”, “enmeshes” and “merciless”, a sense of cruelty is added. The descriptions in Stanza 1 prepare the reader for understanding the helplessness of the street sleeper, who is entangled and lost in the callous city, in Stanzas 2-3.

4. Contrast is used in the poem to show the solitude of the homeless in Stanzas 2 and 3.

(a) Identity 3 pairs of contrasts. Two examples are provided.

	Contrasts	
Stanza 2	many lanes of traffic	island home
Stanza 2	thundering fly-over	own peace of mind
Stanza 3	public lavatory	a man entirely unto himself

(b) What effects do these contrasts create?

While “many lanes of traffic”, “thundering fly-over” and “public lavatory” portray a picture of a hectic and crowded city, “island home”, “own peace of mind” and “a man entirely unto himself” convey a sense of isolation and loneliness. These stark contrasts create an irony, pointing out that although street sleepers are living in a bustling and seemingly prosperous city, they are often neglected or almost

“invisible”. The use of contrasts is thought-provoking, urging readers to ponder on this social issue.

5. What is the theme of the poem?

The themes are helplessness, isolation and indifference. Throughout the poem, street sleepers are portrayed as weak (as suggested in “They merely touch as pain does, effortlessly”) and unimportant (as implied in the mentioning of isolated body parts such as “hand”, “palm”). They live alone in a cold and indifferent city. The poem can be seen as a silent cry of the homeless.