

Ocean Vuong: Always and Forever / In Newport...

"I watch my father lay his cheek to a beached dolphin's wet back..."

These two poems further explore Ocean's memories of his father in his efforts to reconcile his complex feelings about him. Together, the poems deepen our understanding of a man who is capable of moments of tenderness, but who also displayed uncontrolled violent behaviour. In *Always and Forever*, Ocean's father kneels at his son's bedside and gives him a gift, telling him to open it when he needs him the most. Years later, after his father has left, Ocean takes out the box, and unwraps the gift to find a gun.

In Newport... remembers an incident when Ocean's father ran to the aid of a dolphin that had become stranded on the beach. He intersperses the action of this incident with fragments of his father's experience during the war in Vietnam. At the end of the poem, he runs out of the car towards his father, drawn once again by the sound of his father's voice.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What is the shoe box Ocean's father leaves wrapped in?

- (a) Sellotape
- (b) Christmas paper
- (c) Duct tape
- (d) A red ribbon

2. What feature does Ocean have above his brow?

- (a) A mole
- (b) Wrinkles
- (c) A birthmark
- (d) A scar

3. How many years pass before Ocean opens the shoe box?

- (a) Three
- (b) Seven
- (c) Ten
- (d) Fifteen

4. What is Ocean's father wearing as he kneels by the bed?

- (a) A boiler suit
- (b) Camouflage gear
- (c) Grey overalls
- (d) A hi-vis vest

5. Which word describes the way the father hugs his son?

- (a) Clutch
- (b) Grab
- (c) Embrace
- (d) Grip

6. What tattoo is inked on Ocean's father's arm?

- (a) Three phoenix
- (b) Three tear drops
- (c) Three torches
- (d) Three hearts

7. What is the make of car they are driving in?

- (a) Ford
- (b) Toyota
- (c) Chevrolet
- (d) Nissan

8. Ocean remembers his father chasing his mother holding what?

- (a) A baseball bat
- (b) A chainsaw
- (c) A hammer
- (d) A bunch of flowers

9. Which of these words is NOT in the poem?

- (a) Tomahawk
- (b) Machine gun
- (c) Sniper
- (d) AK-47

10. the dolphin is described as a wet... what?

- (a) Refugee
- (b) Visitor
- (c) Outpatient
- (d) Satyr

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What **imagery** is used to create an impression of Ocean's father in *Always and Forever*? Is there a shift or development in the image you form in your mind?
2. What gift does Ocean's father leave his son? How is it described? What reaction does Ocean have once he opens the gift?
3. How do you interpret way the father touches his son? Is there a sense of tenderness, danger, finality? Support your idea with detail(s):
4. What do you learn about Ocean's father's past from the *Beached Dolphin* poem? How does this poem add to your understanding of this figure? How has the presentation of Ocean's father shifted or developed across part one of the poetry collection?
5. How does the poem's layout or **shape** (also called **spatial form**) relate to the ideas of the poem?
6. What is the significance of Ocean's actions in this poem, especially towards the end?

Poetry Study: *alliteration and consonance*

“Open this when you need me the most he said as he slid the shoe box... beneath my bed.”

Poems are made of words. No other choice a poet makes is more important than words, which are the bricks and mortar of the poem. Words stimulate: our ears prick up with the pleasure of listening to familiar or unfamiliar words arranged in new combinations. Sometimes, people listen to poems read in a language they cannot understand; the sentences *sound* real and arouse feelings regardless. People listening to African writer Isak Dinesen said her voice sounded like rain falling. Little children love listening to the sound of their parents reading, even if they are too young to follow the story. Just sounds, and patterns of sound, connect to our senses and stimulate our imaginations.

Poets strengthen certain aspects of language, including sound, on purpose to create effects. **Alliteration** is one of the oldest formal devices in English poetry. Repeating an initial consonant sound used to be called **head-rhyme**; *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon epic poem composed between 650 – 750AD, has 3,182 short, alliterating lines! In these lines from a fifteenth century anonymous poem, a vexed writer was kept awake by the clattering anvils of a blacksmith working at night, and he wrote:

*Swarte smeked smithes smattered with smoke
Drive me to deth with din of here dintes.*

Consonance differs from alliteration only in that repeated letters can be found anywhere in the words, not only the first letters. Overall, there are eight major **types of alliteration / consonance**:

Aspirant	H	Made by expelling air from the throat; can connote a release of emotion or a rush of air (like the wind)
Dental	D, T	Made by pressing the tongue against the back of the front teeth; creates hard sounds like impacts
Fricative	F, Th, V, (J)	Made by forcing air through the lips and teeth; a soft sound that can create effects similar to aspirant
Guttural	G, hard C, K	Made by ‘clicking’ at the top of the throat; a hard sound that creates a variety of negative effects
Liquid	L, R, (W)	Made by touching the tongue to the roof of the mouth; an obscure sound that creates effects to do with movement, water, time, and so on

Nasal	M, N	Made by trapping air in the nose; creates effects to do with being trapped, including trapped emotions. Alternatively, can sound musical, like humming
Plosive	B, P	Made by pushing air through closed lips; creates effects similar to dental, such as physical impacts, effort, hardship, and so on
Sibilant	S, Sh, Z	Made by creating a hissing sound; creates a variety of effects, such as the sound of wind and waves. Traditionally associated with evil or danger (hissing snake)

As well as contributing to a poem's tone and atmosphere, alliteration and consonance can be used to create **auditory imagery**. For example, in the opening couplet of *Always and Forever* Vuong writes: 'Open this when you need me the most he said as he slid the shoe box... beneath the bed.' This line contains **sibilant consonance** (*this, most, said, slid, shoe*) and **plosive alliteration** (*box, beneath, bed*). Initially, sibilance creates the auditory image of a tape-wrapped package sliding across a hard floor. Additionally, the traditional association of sibilance with the hissing of a snake comes into play. We are not meant to hear the sound of a snake literally; this poem has nothing to do with snakes! However, later in the poem the box is revealed to contain a gun; sibilance creates a sinister sense of hidden danger that foreshadows the reveal of the gun later in the poem. At the end of the line, plosive sounds are prominent. Again, not only do plosives create the auditory image of a heavy object being placed under the bed, but the hard, impactful sounds of plosive B foreshadow the contents of the box as being something associated with violence.



Return to the poems you have read and try to identify certain patterns of sound. Where do they occur strongly. Can you suggest effects based on the sound patterns you identify? Alliteration and consonance can also be used to create auditory images. Does this occur anywhere in these poems? Do the sound patterns shift? Are there any moments in the poem emphasized through sound? Spend some time with the poem and discuss this in pairs or threes to compare your thoughts and ideas.

Analytical Writing Practice

Once you have come to an understanding of **alliteration** / **consonance**, try to write an analytical paragraph commenting on the contribution of at least one incidence of sound to the images, ideas, or action of either *Always and Forever* or *In Newport...*

Important Theme: *the father figure / masculinity*

“Or maybe just a man kneeling at a boy’s bed, his grey overalls reeking of gasoline...”

The collection’s early poems frame *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* as a book that’s going to be about the search for the writer’s father. An imposing and powerful figure in his early life, later Ocean’s father disappeared.

Telemachus alludes to the mythical story of the son who waited for his father to return from war, finally setting out to search for the lost father. A figure washes up on shore with ‘a face... not mine’, a man ‘so still he could be anyone’s father.’ Ocean discovers the man has been shot in the back, and he tries to revive him: this work will continue throughout many of the poems in part one, and after.

Ocean’s relationship with his father is complex. He is a figure of love, anger and confusion whose tough exterior often contrasts with the vulnerability he privately shows. Ocean knows he is a wounded man, hardened by experiences of war, and aching from the PTSD he suffers. Nevertheless, he is freighted with violence and when his anger explodes, it’s usually directed towards his wife, Lan, Ocean’s mother. He abuses her verbally, physically, and absents himself from the lives of his family, even spending time in prison. *In Newport...* is a poem that best expresses the paradox of Ocean’s father: his compassion calls him to rush to the aid of a stricken dolphin, but the way he runs causes Ocean to reflect on the violence his father has committed as well: he says, ‘the last time I saw him run like that, he had a hammer in his fist, mother a nail-length out of reach.’ Although he extends concern for ‘the wet refugee’, the poem is fractured with bullets, snipers, and shrapnel that suggest the root of the man’s violence and inability to express affection for his family.

In this way, the complex figure of Ocean’s father represents an idea of masculinity by which vulnerability is hidden under a tough, brutish exterior. The key symbol of his father’s type of masculinity is the gun. In the poem *The Smallest Measure* (from part three) Ocean’s father instructs him in how to hold a Winchester Rifle. In *Always and Forever*, the father’s parting gift is a Colt .45, which he gives to Ocean as a substitute for himself: ‘Open this when you need me the most’, he tells the young boy. Ocean wonders what the gun might signify and imagines using it to blow holes in the sky, suggesting the son might inherit the father’s type of masculinity. In Parts Two and Three of the collection, in poems such as *To My Father/To My Future Son*, Ocean will explicitly compare his father’s masculinity to his own and consider an alternative masculinity, an alternative way of being ‘a man’, for himself. For example, he will explore what it means for him to be a young, gay man in Part Two.

Activity

Create a portrait of Ocean’s father as presented in the poems from Part One (and elsewhere if you can) of *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*. This portrait can take any form you like: a mini-essay, a character profile, a mind-map, a collage, a picture with annotations, another idea you might come up with. Include words, images, descriptions, and symbols from the poems that reflect both his tender vulnerability and also the violence that simmers below the surface, occasionally exploding into action. Display your understanding of the type of masculinity that Ocean’s father represents.