‘Letters from Yorkshire’

Yorkshire is a historic county in northern England.
Context: Maura Dooley

Maura Dooley (born in 1957) has Irish roots, but was born in Cornwall, grew up in Bristol, lived in Yorkshire and then finally moved to London. She is a successful writer and a teacher. Several collections of her poems have been published. Her poetry is often simple and reflective, but the images she creates represent deep and complex feelings.

This poem was inspired by letters she received from a friend which made her miss Yorkshire.

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Mindmap either:
Specific: If you left this school today, what would you miss?
Or
General: When you leave: place/house/holiday... what do you miss?
A man is working in his garden. He sees his first lapwings of the season and writes to the narrator about it.

The narrator reflects on their different lives – the man lives in Yorkshire and spends time outside, whereas she lives a long way away, presumably in a city, and spends her time inside writing.

The narrator wonders if his life is more fulfilling because he’s closer to nature. She feels as though he lives in a different world, but the letters he writes help her to feel connected to him and his way of life.
Feelings and Attitudes

The narrator appreciates the man’s way of life – she values his closeness to nature and how he experiences things that she doesn’t in her everyday life.

The narrator and the letter writer are close – it seems that he writes to her a lot, about the little things that happen in his life that are important to him, such as seeing the lapwings.

She seems to long for his lifestyle – she sees it as romantic and fulfilling.
In February, **digging his garden**, planting **potatoes**, he **saw the first lapwings return** and came indoors to write to me, **his knuckles singing**

Use of caesura shifts the focus from his ordinary actions to personification. The personification shows the delight he feels.

He’s connected with nature and its cycles.

Alliteration emphasises that it’s a repetitive, ordinary action.
While the narrator might romanticise this man’s life, for him it’s just reality. This could also be a description of their relationship.

as they reddened in the warmth.

**It’s not romance, simply how things are.**

**You out there, in the cold,** seeing the **seasons**

Monosyllabic words reflect his simple way of life.

Enjambment imitates the changing seasons.
The computer shows the contrast between their lifestyle and professions – “blank screen” sounds lifeless and empty compared to his “singing” knuckles.

**turning**, me with my heartful of headlines feeding words onto a blank screen. Is your life more real because you dig and sow?

Enjambment imitates the changing seasons.

Figurative language creates a contrast between her feeding people with his potatoes. Her actions seem artificial compared to his experiences of nature.

Rhetorical question in the middle stanza reflects how this issue is at the centre of what the poem is about.
Caesura introduces a contrasting perspective on his lifestyle – he wouldn’t say that there’s anything special about his life, but the narrator thinks there is.

Description of mundane, physical tasks shows how he sees his life as ordinary, but also reiterates his connection with nature.

You wouldn’t say so, breaking ice on a waterbutt, clearing a path through snow. Still, it’s you who sends me word of that other world.

Alliteration and assonance make these words sound similar, but they’re also different – this reflects how his words make the speaker feel close to his world, but also remind her that she’s distant from it.
More natural than the words she writes. He writes to her about his day-to-day life and she romanticises it by describing it in terms of “air and light” – an almost magical description.

Watching the same news hints that their lives aren’t so different – this shared experience make her feel closer to him.

**pouring air and light** into an envelope. So that at night, watching the **same news in different houses**, our **souls** tap out messages **across the icy miles**.

Spiritual language shows they have a deep and meaningful connection.

Communication brings them together, despite the distance between them. Describing this distance as “icy” suggests that she dislikes being so far away from him.
Personal response to the poem

1. Do you think the narrator dislikes her own life? Explain your answer.

2. Describe your impression of the relationship between the narrator and the letter writer.

3. Why do you think the poem is set in February?

Key Themes

Nature, longing, distance...
The narrator in ‘Follower’ also looks up to someone whose life is connected with nature, and longs to be like them. You could write about ‘Sonnet 29’ if you’re looking at the impact of distance on relationships.
Lapwings – a type of bird usually found on farmland
Waterbutt - an outdoor barrel which collects and stores rainwater