

Poet Ben Okri on London's Grenfell Tower fire: "It has revealed the undercurrents of our age"

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The fire at Grenfell Tower on June 14 that killed at least 80 people has had an immediate impact on political life in Britain. It has had an impact on artistic expression too. There have been fundraising concerts, of course, but direct creative responses are also appearing.

Within days of the conflagration, the *Financial Times* commissioned a poem on the tragedy from the Booker-Prize-winning Nigerian author Ben Okri. The newspaper published *Grenfell Tower, June 2017* on June 23 and Okri subsequently filmed it for Channel 4 News.

The poem encapsulates well the position now confronted by artists. Okri's performance is dignified and moving, pointing to the work's stronger aspects. As poetry, however, it is not so uniformly convincing.

Okri reveals a deep empathy for the victims and a disbelieving horror at the criminal administrative decisions that led to the tragedy. He recognises that this is not an individual failure. Okri's declaration "It has revealed the undercurrents of our age" is absolutely on point.

Within certain limits, the poem points to the gulf between rich and poor and how each is treated. As Okri puts it in the poem, "*If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower.*" Grenfell has forced home the realisation that class remains the fundamental division in society. In Okri's words, "Poverty is its own/Colour, its own race ... They were young/And old and beautiful and middle aged."

This recognition of the importance of class brings with it a requirement to see what lies behind such a division of society. Okri recognises the capitalist profit motive in the decisions that led to Grenfell: "It happened in the profit margins. It happened/in the laws. They died because money could be saved and made."

With this in mind, the poem summarises the spending decisions made around Grenfell, from the deadly cladding intended to prettify the tower for its rich neighbours to the skimping on safety measures. "But in twenty four storeys, not a single sprinkler./In twenty four storeys, not a single

alarm that worked./In twenty four storeys not a single fire escape/ ... That's the story of our times," Okri writes.

In the poem's final passage, Okri points more broadly to the way social and cultural provisions are being axed—"Nurseries and libraries fade from the land"—and concludes "In this age of austerity/the poor die for others' prosperity." He also recognises the gulf that has developed in political representation, although he seems to blame the working class for this with his comment about "The poor who thought voting for the rich would save them."

None of this is quite so pointed as it appears. The empathy of the poem is Okri's solution as well as response. He is clearly sincere in his feeling for the victims, but he is addressing himself here above all to those in power with an appeal to pay closer attention to the effects of their actions ("...if you can pull/Yourselves from your tennis games and your perfect dinners").

"A sword of fate hangs over the deafness of power," he writes, clumsily, suggesting that they just need to listen better in order to avoid a ferocious reaction. If only they would go and see the horror of Grenfell and witness the way the local community has rallied round, he seems to be saying, their humanity could be revived—"See the tower, and let a new world-changing thought flower"—and politics overcome: "The heart reveals itself beyond political skills."

It is noteworthy that the "See the tower ..." line is part of a repeated chorus that punctuates the poem, and what will flower is, in sequence, a "dream," a "deed" and finally this "thought."

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*, with its determination to "teach ... injured countrymen how to resist" (as Mary Shelley described it), Okri's poem is not.

There has been a noticeable tendency lately for poems on social themes to be primarily performance pieces, often written by poets who emerged from the rap scene (poet and spoken-word artist Kate Tempest springs to mind). What makes a good performance poem, given the flexibilities of

the medium, does not always look so convincing on the page, particularly with directly documentary political pieces like this by Okri.

Okri is perhaps best known as a novelist. His novelistic style relies much more on what he has called a “dream logic” than his more directly political poetry. This poem works much better heard aloud than read, allowing some of the clumsier and more trite imagery and lines to become more obvious. The poem is largely free verse, and its occasional rhymes are not always beneficial, as in the particularly awkward concluding passage already quoted:

*“Nurseries and libraries fade from the land.
A strange time is shaping on the strand.
A sword of fate hangs over the deafness of power.
See the tower, and let a new world-changing thought
flower.”*

I have already commented on “the deafness of power,” but the previous line reads as if written mainly to fill the couplet.

The poem’s chorus, each line of which is also used as a refrain to close a stanza, is also rhymed and awkwardly scanned:

*“Those who were [are] living are now dead
Those who were breathing are from the living earth fled.
If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell
Tower.
See the tower, and let a world-changing dream
[deed/thought] flower.”*

Not all of the poetic imagery is unsuccessful, by any means, and some of the political points are well served by the imagery, as in his description of “... Political cladding./Economic cladding, intellectual cladding—things that look good/But have no centre, have no heart, only moral padding.”

Grenfell has thrown a spotlight on how artists will respond to changing times and conditions. The sincerity of Okri’s feeling for the victims is not and should not be in question, as is clear from his reaction to graffiti artist Ben Eine’s use of his poem in an east London mural: “Anything that can draw attention to that outrage to humanity, anything that can commemorate the dead and help the survivors has my support,” he told the *Evening Standard*.

Eine’s Shoreditch mural was the first contribution to a social justice art project, Paint the Change, founded by filmmaker Maziar Bahari as a way of discussing social issues through the arts.

The question of artistic and social interaction has come up even more sharply in the area around Grenfell Tower. Nearby, Opera Holland Park (OHP), whose front-of-house worker Deborah Lamprell died in the fire, staged a benefit performance of Verdi’s *Requiem* a month ago, raising £40,000 [US\$53,000] for survivors.

OHP became an independent charitable organisation two years ago, when the last of its local council funding was cut. At the time there was criticism that the company was given a final £5 million grant from council reserves to enable it to continue its accessibility and outreach schemes at the same time as local services were under threat. As one protester said, “It’s high time [the council] stopped spending money on art frippery and concentrated on providing vital services.”

Michael Volpe, OHP’s general director, outlined the conundrum to the *Guardian*: “If we were asked the question: ‘Should money be spent on opera or social housing?’, you’d only get one answer. *But we don’t believe it should be a choice*” [emphasis added].

He is right. The crisis that Grenfell has laid bare touches on every aspect of social and cultural life. Artistic responses are a significant part of the necessary addressing of this crisis. They have the ability to influence the thinking and feeling of masses of human beings. But for this to happen the artist must know something important about the world, society and history and to show life and reality as they are and not retreat into self-absorption and social indifference.

Grenfell is a sign that we have entered a new stage of development. The economic and social crisis, along with relentless wars and militarist violence, are fueling popular discontent and have created the conditions for an immense movement to the left that will lead inevitably to revolutionary struggles.

It is giving artists the opportunity to understand and reveal the truth about the complex, often confusing and intense experiences that millions of people are passing through.

This new art will be incompatible “with pessimism, with skepticism, and with all the other forms of spiritual collapse” (Trotsky) and will have an unlimited, creative belief in humanity and its future.



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