

# Undertaker By Patricia Smith

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## Literary Emotion and Social Commentary

It is important for a piece of writing to produce emotions in the readers to ponder about the written issue. Otherwise, the purpose of writing is unfulfilled. The words and the tone must provoke the reader regarding the discussed topic to engage, see the problem, and assess it accordingly. The words must be as provocative as Patricia Smith's words in her poetry Undertaker. Undertaker is a persona poetry that discusses gun violence, gangs, and the vulnerability of black boys. The poem portrays the horrifying pictures of shattered bodies that the undertaker mends to make them available for their mothers. The poet has used Undertaker as the persona who takes care of the dead bodies of the black boys for burial and prepares funerals. The increased gun violence and the gang involvement of the black boys have increased work for the undertaker, as the mothers of the deceased want the bodies of their children. The poem, Undertaker, by Patricia, uses a provocative, apathetic, judging, and empathic tone to show the brutalities of gun violence. The Undertaker has heard the same stories of innocence repeatedly, but that is not helping the epidemic of gun violence. This presents a disturbing image of gun violence so that the mothers and the boys are aware of the consequences of being involved in gangs and gun violence.

## Gun Violence in Undertaker

Undertaker by Patricia Smith shows the disturbing reality of gun violence, which usually remains uncovered. (Smith, 2008) Moreover, the use of the persona of the Undertaker helps the poet in gaining authenticity and credibility in front of the audience. People and family members only know the number of dead. They are unaware of the injuries that gun violence inflicts on the bodies of the affected person. The use of the persona of Undertaker reveals the disturbing images of gun violence that remain hidden from the public eye. The use of the image of the Undertaker is to show that gun violence does not only kill young boys; it shatters their bodies into pieces. Those pieces of shattered bodies do not fix as "the head explodes," and the bullets have holed and "jagged gaps in the boy's body." He knows as he has "touched in places no mother knows" and "birthed new face" for the dead bodies. Therefore, using the persona of Undertaker helps the untold stories of ripped and shattered bodies to come to the surface. The persona of the undertaker gives credibility and authority to the poem about gun violence that the public does not realize. As the undertaker arranges the bodies for the funeral, his voice makes the story authentic, giving a realistic image of gun violence.

## Provocative Tone and Graphic Diction

In addition, the author uses a provocative, apathetic, judging, and empathic tone to show the brutalities of gun violence. The Undertaker seems apathetic as the mother pleads with him, he tells her the stories that “when a bullet enters the brain, the head explodes.” The story that no mother would want to hear about his son, even if it is a reality, must not be told to the mother how badly the bullet has cut into their children. However, the undertaker tells the boy’s mother the horrific stories of his death. He tells them that it will cost her money to get his son fixed. He does not show any interest or empathy when the mother gives him the picture of her son. His tone of describing the picture of the son is demeaning as he describes him as “smirking,” “cocky,” and “chiseled.” He assumes that the boy must have a “swagger” and “believed himself invincible,” implying that the boy was involved in the gangs even though their mothers were trying to show their innocence. Moreover, the undertaker shows no interest in the boy when he considers the picture “the building block of his business.” It ignites anger in the reader as the undertaker seems engrossed in his business and the price for collecting the body in response to the plea of the mother.

## Judgment and the Undertaker’s Perspective

The undertaker judges the boy based on other similar stories of gun violence. He does not seem to believe the “tales the mothers” brought him “to ease their own hearts.” He sneers at the mother, telling him the innocence of their children and trying to explain to him that the sun was not involved with the gangs, but their child was “trying to get off the streets” or “he was trying to help a friend.” The assumptions and the stories of the mothers of the young men and his sneers provoke the reader and make them restless.

## Empathy for Grieving Mothers

However, he shows empathy to the mothers who want to “fix” their boys. He is empathic to the mothers who are trying to find money to get the job done. The mother “has sold everything she owns” and “emptied their empty bank account” for the funeral, and she wants her baby to be in “tuxedoed satin.” He does not want his mother to go through all the pain of paying the heavy fees to “puzzle pieces, gluing, stitching,” and “plump shattered skull” because the boy is already dead, and nothing is going to change even if she spends thousands of money. He is emphatic to the mother and does not want her to spend all the money even if the child is innocent or “at the wrong place at the wrong time.” No mending will help her, and it is useless because her son is already dead. He “wants to take her down” to the pieces of her sons to show her the “terrible bounty” so that she realizes the uselessness of spending the money on mending the body.

## Reader Response to Violence

The tone and the diction of the poem make the reader restless, showing a brutal side of gun violence. Her provocative words and tone force the reader to understand and realize the problematic aspects of gun violence and gangs. The tone and diction apathetically shake the reader. The words such as “jagged gaps,” “shattered skulls,” and “exploded head.” The poem presents a horrifying story as the undertaker claims, “I work alone,” “I plump shattered skulls,” “I pop glass eyes” to reform the shapes of the young children who are dead due to guns. It awakens the readers and horrifies them with the consequences of gun violence. The words and tone used to present the gun violence evoke anger and empathy but engendering awareness about the gun violence. The poem depicts terrorizing images of the consequences of gun violence that people usually consider normal. It makes the reader reconsider their theories about guns and gun violence.

## Conclusion on Smith’s Poetic Warning

To conclude, in *Undertaker*, Patricia Smith uses a powerful, apathetic, and unapologetic picture of gun violence with equally powerful diction that terrifies the reader about guns and gun violence. (Norris et al., 2002) It warns the parents to be careful instead of crying for the innocence of a dead child. It shows the consequences of gun violence beyond the numbers and the narrations. It depicts the chilling picture of death by the guns. Smith uses the person of the Undertaker to tell the story uncovered stories of gun violence. The Undertaker, being present at the funeral and arranging the bodies for the funeral, becomes a strong voice to advocate for a gun-free society using the images of apathetic piercing of the young bodies by the bullets. Hence, her message is conveyed to the readers powerfully.

## References

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