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Last Night's Review: Wordsworth's trip is poetry in motion

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A Poet's Guide To Britain, BBC4

Endgame, Channel 4

POETRY is notoriously hard to do on TV, but gossip is easy. I thought that **A Poet's Guide To Britain**, in which Owen Sheers looks at the connections between poets and places, was going to take that easy option, when he began by saying that the key to a William Wordsworth sonnet lay in "the story of his love life".

But I was wrong, for this was a subtler programme than that. Sheers did explain the background to the writing of the sonnet *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*, which begins "Earth has not anything to show more fair" and was written as Wordsworth and his sister journeyed to France, via London, on an awkward mission: he was going to tell the mother of his child, unseen for a decade as their two countries had been at war, that he was now going to marry someone else.

But on the way he was captured by the beauty of the city, its industry and architecture celebrated as much as any of his more famous poems about the Lake District. Sheers's obvious love for this one sonnet shone through as he convincingly picked apart its meaning, line by line, in an approachable way. Well-chosen experts, including poet Simon Armitage reading his own modern ode to the urban landscape, added interest.

And readings of the poem - repeated several times after more background, including readings by what looked like random passers-by in the city streets - worked well to ground it for the viewer. Simple, perhaps, but this little film was well thought out and effective. Nice work.

If poetry is hard to dramatise, so is a group gathered round a table in an English country house discussing an agenda. But the agenda in *Endgame* was the end of apartheid in South Africa, the negotiators included a future president and the stakes were high: preventing a war.

An excellent script by Paula Milne and fine, dramatic direction by Pete Travis turned this true story into a thriller, particularly the opening scenes as Jonny Lee Miller, playing a British gold mining executive, persuaded ANC and Afrikaaner representatives to attend secret talks he thought could bring about a peaceful solution (and protect his company's business). Filmed from odd, sniper angles, with tense music playing as he drove nervously between lonely phone boxes to

make hurried calls, it both showed the paranoid, dangerous atmosphere of the time and managed to make a virtue out of necessary, but potentially boring, scenes.

While the substance of the talks was only briskly sketched, the personalities were well drawn as trust gradually built up between the players. William Hurt - a much more interesting actor now that his leading man vanity has apparently disappeared - was world weary as the Afrikaaner professor and government go-between, aware that, despite appearances, their cause was already lost. And Chiwetel Ejiofor lived up to the hype his career attracts with a sparkling performance as the wry but bullish Thabo Mbeki, who would become South Africa's second black president.

His predecessor, Nelson Mandela, still in jail at this point, was gently underplayed by Clarke Peters (Lester in *The Wire*), while Mark Strong was solid as ever as a smooth government thug. In fact, all the cast (and most of the accents) were good: this was a case of all the elements coming together to make a drama that will probably win a few prizes.