



New Explorations

CRITICAL NOTES

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HIGHER LEVEL

HL 2019

HL 2020

HL 2021

HL 2022

ORDINARY LEVEL

OL 2019

OL 2020

OL 2021

OL 2022





HIGHER LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2019

2019

Elizabeth Bishop

Seamus Heaney

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Brendan Kennelly

D. H. Lawrence

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Sylvia Plath

W. B. Yeats





HIGHER LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2020

2020

Eavan Boland

Emily Dickinson

Paul Durcan

Robert Frost

D. H. Lawrence

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Adrienne Rich

William Wordsworth





HIGHER LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2021

2021

Elizabeth Bishop

Eavan Boland

Paul Durcan

Robert Frost

Seamus Heaney

Gerard Manley Hopkins

John Keats

Sylvia Plath





HIGHER LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2022

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Notes and Explorations: Carole Scully

HL 2020	OL 2020
HL 2022	OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

To My Sister

A slumber did my spirit seal

She dwelt among the untrodden ways

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

It is a beautiful evening, calm and free

The Solitary Reaper

from The Prelude:

The Stolen Boat [ll 357–400]

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Tintern Abbey

Wordsworth's poems in chronological order

Developing a personal response to the poetry of William Wordsworth

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INTRODUCTION

Early life

William Wordsworth was born on 7 April 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland in the north-west of England, an area noted for its beautiful scenery. He was the second son born to John Wordsworth and his wife Anne. Wordsworth's family was comfortable both financially and socially. His father was an attorney-at-law and a land steward, while his mother came from a respectable merchant background. Less than two years later, his sister Dorothy was born and the two children developed a close relationship that was to continue into adult life. Sadly, this stable childhood world was rocked by the death of his mother when Wordsworth was eight years old, and his father's death five years later. Some critics have suggested that the loss of his parents at such a young age had a lasting effect on Wordsworth, in that much of his poetry is underpinned by a sense of searching for an absent quality that will somehow fill a gap in his life. In one of his earliest poems, composed when he was about sixteen years old, Wordsworth writes:

*Now, in this blank of things, a harmony
Home-felt, and home-created comes to heal
That grief for which the senses still supply
Fresh food; for only then, when memory
Is hushed, am I at rest.*

Two of their uncles became guardians to the five Wordsworth children and ensured that they were brought up in a manner suitable to their social station. Wordsworth attended Hawkshead Grammar School and, at the age of seventeen, entered St John's College, Cambridge.

Wordsworth's career at Cambridge was undistinguished, but the long holidays gave him the opportunity to indulge in a favourite pastime, walking in the countryside. The appreciation of Nature and the first-hand experiencing of the natural world became increasingly popular towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the summer of 1790, Wordsworth and a college friend went on a walking holiday through France and Switzerland, 'staff in hand, without knapsacks, each his neediments tied up in a pocket-handkerchief'. Wordsworth was impressed by the majesty of the Alps and wrote a series of 'Descriptive Sketches' detailing the scenery:

*The rocks rise naked as a wall, or stretch
Far o'er the water, hung with groves of beech...*

In later life, Wordsworth came to view these pieces as representing a time when he was enveloped by the visual aspect of Nature, when he revelled in seeing, with little or no understanding of the spiritual quality of the natural world. At this stage, his writing was very much in tune with the poetry of the time, where natural beauty was described in detailed word pictures without intellectual consideration.

After receiving his BA, Wordsworth returned to France with the intention of learning French. However, he was diverted by





a growing interest in the revolutionary movement that was sweeping through France, and by his love affair with Annette Vallon, who bore him a daughter. However, under pressure from his friends and relations who were anxious about the political instability in France, Wordsworth returned to England and was not to see his daughter until she was nine years old.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

On his return from France, Wordsworth rather reluctantly published some of his work. The books were not particularly well received and sold slowly. However, another young writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, did read them and was immensely impressed, commenting: 'Seldom, if ever, was the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon more evidently announced.' The pair met in 1795 and became great friends, travelling and writing together. At Coleridge's suggestion they began to write a series of poems that was to become *The Lyrical Ballads*, generally recognised as marking the beginning of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. This collaboration resulted in Wordsworth producing some of his most uniquely individual poetry, such as parts of *The Prelude*, the 'Lucy' poems and 'Tintern Abbey'. Coleridge regularly visited Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy at Grasmere, in the Lake District. Although she was a talented writer herself, Dorothy devoted most of her energies to caring for her brother until his death in 1850. Even when Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson in 1802, Dorothy continued to live with the couple and was very much a part of the literary group that developed around Wordsworth. In 1810 the friendship between Coleridge and Wordsworth ended. During one of his

visits to the Wordsworths, Coleridge's addiction to opium led him to behave in an extremely difficult manner and Wordsworth grew tired of trying to cope with it all. When Coleridge discovered that Wordsworth had spoken dismissively of him to a friend, he was deeply hurt and the two men were estranged for quite a while. Finally they did patch up their relationship, but it was never the same. Coleridge wrote, 'A reconciliation has taken place – but the feeling can never return.'

Wordsworth's poetic theory

It was a sad end to what had been a wonderfully creative friendship. Long discussions with Coleridge had led Wordsworth to formulate his theories on poetry, which he expressed in his famous 'Prefaces'. He saw poetry as originating 'from emotion recollected in tranquillity': that is, sensory memory is used to recreate a moment arising in 'everyday life', made significant by 'powerful feelings'. By revisiting the emotionally significant moment through sensory memory, a further quality is added to the original experience. The moment is uniquely personal to the poet, but because of the way in which he expresses it the moment takes on a more general relevance to all people. For Wordsworth, the poet has 'a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels'. But he is, above all, 'a man speaking to men'. For this reason, the poet should use 'a selection of language really used by men' in such a way that 'ordinary things are presented to the mind in an unusual aspect'. In this way, the poet creates a new moment that has significance not only for himself, but also for his reader. It encapsulates 'truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony,





but carried into the heart by passion'. For Wordsworth, Nature played a vital role in this truth, since the poet 'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature.' Thus, 'Poetry is the image of man and nature.' Wordsworth believed that Nature was symbolic of the essential Truths that could give coherence to an apparently disordered world and, because of this, it triggers significant moments of emotion in the poet. Poetry, that expressed these moments of significance, enabled the reader to understand something of the great truths underlying both his or her own existence and the society and world in which he lived. For Wordsworth, this act of poetic creation helped both the poet and the reader to restore something that could be lost, all too easily, in everyday life: the power to escape from the physical limitations of time and place, to grow positively and strongly in the face of an apparently confused universe, to improve the social context of human existence, to experience joyfully the emotionally significant moment.

The later years

Wordsworth, by the poetic theory that he had formulated, came to view the poet, and therefore himself, as an individual set apart. His focus was on his own emotional reactions. In *The Prelude*, composed between 1799 and 1805, he traced the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind', that is, his own mind, with a series of vivid and immediate descriptions. Although Wordsworth himself considered this an acceptable poetic stance, and many of his devoted readers felt that it was an approach justified by his incisive

observations, an equal number of his contemporaries viewed it as indulgently self-centred and egotistical. Indeed, this divergence of opinion regarding Wordsworth still exists today. Nevertheless, despite the mixed reactions, he continued to write in this personalised manner, stating that 'Every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.' Yet, in truth, Wordsworth began to lose his creative way after 1808. For ten years he had written with an uncompromising vitality and an unshakeable self-belief. When he completed 'The White Doe of Rylstone', he seemed to lose touch with the impetus that had driven his creativity. Perhaps he had simply used up all the self-focused moments of emotional significance from his memory. For whatever reason, after this time Wordsworth's work is never more than competent. He had peaked by the time he was thirty-eight and for the next forty years he tried, but failed, to climb again to that heady summit of creativity. Nowhere is this more evident than in his two versions of *The Prelude*. The first version of 1805 is separated from the second of 1850 by some forty-five years, but by an eternity of emotion. The older Wordsworth seems to feel embarrassed, or at the very least uneasy, in the face of the intensities of his youth. However, by this stage of his life he had seen his great works achieve widespread recognition and approbation. As Thomas de Quincey, a contemporary of Wordsworth put it, 'Up to 1820 the name of Wordsworth was trampled underfoot; from 1820 to 1830 it was militant; from 1830 to 1835 it has been triumphant.' In 1843 Wordsworth was appointed Poet Laureate and received a state pension. He died at his home, Rydal Mount, at the age of eighty in 1850. He was buried in Grasmere churchyard, in the same beautiful





north-west region of England where he had been born and had lived most of his life.

Wordsworth – the Romantic poet

The terms ‘Romantic’ and ‘Romanticism’ are deceptively easy to use in a literary context, probably because they have a distant branch in everyday language. We tend to use ‘romantic’, with a lower-case ‘r’, to denote a particular aspect of being in love. It also represents a kind of idealised quality connected with fictional characters. In the case of women, the ‘romantic’ heroine carries the connotation of intensity of repressed emotion, an apparent vulnerability concealing strength of passion; while with men, the ‘romantic’ hero usually exhibits an irresistibly attractive disregard for the rules of social behaviour, a sense of freedom from convention. In the 1980s ‘New Romantics’ appeared in the world of popular music, representing a backlash against the overt brutality and harshness of punk music with a less aggressive, gentler, more feminine ethos encapsulated by their white, frilly shirts and use of make-up.

There is a general sense of what ‘romantic’ means, but it is a great deal harder to actually define ‘Romantic’, with a capital ‘R’, in a literary context. Perhaps the most important factor to understand about ‘Romanticism’ is that it is a term that was applied after the fact to a particular style of writing and a group of writers. It was not until the nineteenth century that the ‘Lake School’, comprising Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, and the later poets Byron, Leigh Hunt, Shelley and Keats, were grouped together under the title of the ‘Romantic School’, in a deliberate attempt to connect

this disparate group with the ‘Romantics’ of Germany and France. At this time, the term carried a historical connotation, as Thomas Arnold explained in 1862: ‘By romantic poems we mean, poems in which heroic subjects are epically treated, after the manner of the old romances of chivalry.’ In the context of this definition, Coleridge, Byron and the novelist Sir Walter Scott were viewed as the great ‘Romantic’ writers. Indeed, Wordsworth was, to a large extent, placed on the margins of the Romantic group.

However, by the 1930s Wordsworth had been allocated a central role in ‘Romantic’ writing. Writers such as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis reawakened an interest in his work. Although Wordsworth did not write about the historical subjects that Arnold, in the nineteenth century, considered prerequisite to ‘Romanticism’, he did express many of the features that were regarded in the twentieth century as characteristic of it. First, Wordsworth represented the self-conscious individualisation of the poet when he advocated that the poet ‘ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides’. Allied to this was his idealisation of the poet’s role to a prophet-like status: ‘the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion’. In some twentieth-century definitions of ‘Romanticism’, this idealised individualisation was seen as enabling the poet to arrive at an understanding that would benefit human society in general. F. R. Leavis commented that Wordsworth showed the reader ‘the significance of this poetry for actual living’. He believed that Wordsworth’s poetry was ‘the expression of an order and the product of an emotional and moral training’.





Second, it was generally agreed that the impetus for the 'Romantic' writer sprang from his relationship with Nature. Once again Wordsworth epitomised this relationship with his view that poetry 'is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe'. His combination of personal memory, imagination and observation was seen as representing the 'Romantic' approach to Nature. M. H. Abrams described 'Tintern Abbey' as 'the joint product of external data and of the mind'. Finally, Wordsworth's poetry expressed the intensity that is fundamental to the twentieth-century interpretation of 'Romanticism', both in an emotional sense, when he tried to write of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and on a sensory level, when he stated that poetry should 'treat of things not as they are but as they appear; not as they exist in themselves, but as they seem to exist to the senses'.

Thus for readers in the twentieth century, Wordsworth is a perfect example of a 'Romantic' poet, if there can be such a thing as a perfect example of a rather vague definition. M. H. Abrams summed up the problematic nature of the word 'Romantic' when he commented that it is 'one of those terms historians can neither do with nor make do without'. Perhaps the best way to ensure that we treat the term with caution is to remind ourselves that could we return to the eighteenth century and visit Wordsworth in his house, set in the beautiful mountains, he would undoubtedly react with bemused and disconcerted puzzlement if we were to greet him with 'You must be Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet'!





TO MY SISTER

Background

This poem was written and published in 1798, when Wordsworth was twenty-eight years old. At this point he was living with his sister Dorothy and was working closely with Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Structure

The poem consists of ten stanzas. Each stanza contains four lines with a rhyme scheme of *abab*. The final stanza largely repeats the fourth one, both for emphasis and to give a sense of unity to the poem.

A reading of the poem

The first two stanzas of the poem show Wordsworth at his descriptive best. Within the restraints of four-line stanzas and a strict rhyme scheme, he manages to create a vivid and evocative description of 'the first mild day of March'. He appeals to the sense of sight, the sense of hearing and the sense of touch in order to give the scene depth and realism. He uses 'the very language of men', but in such a way that it is expanded in the power of its communication.

In the third stanza he addresses his sister, attempting to persuade her to spend the day outside. He tells her to change into her 'woodland dress', perhaps implying that she will be much more comfortable in this relaxed outfit rather than the more formal clothes that she wears indoors. He suggests that they will spend

the day in 'idleness', so she should leave her book inside along with her indoor clothes. These ideas recur in the final stanza.

At this point, the poem changes from a simple description of a time and place to a reflection on the effects of Nature on Man. In this way, the moment becomes significant. Wordsworth describes these effects in the context of his group, but the implication is that the message applies to all men. The ordering of Time by a calendar is portrayed as arbitrary and restrictive, whereas the internal time that governs Nature is natural and positive. Wordsworth feels that by being outside, within Nature, Man opens himself to the Great Truths that Nature symbolises. Love, perhaps the greatest Truth of all, fills the natural world.

Wordsworth does not simply mean that Spring is the time of growth and procreation in the natural world. Love, for him, is the instinct to exist in a positively creative way. It is an instinct that Man can all too easily lose by locking himself into the inside world of daily tasks, books and calendars. The spaciousness of the outside world fills and extends the very essence of Man. Then Man, in his turn, surrenders up something of his creativity to Nature. It is a mutually beneficial relationship that moves 'From earth to man, from man to earth'.

Just as Wordsworth sees a clear contrast existing between the inside and outside worlds, so he also views the way Man learns in each world as being distinctly different. In the inside world, learning is made up of 'toiling reason' for the intellect; but outside, learning becomes effortless and spontaneous. It is a complete experience for the mind and the body: 'Our minds shall drink





at every pore'. Nature creates a situation where Man learns in a holistic way: that is, the learning becomes relevant to his very spiritual essence. What is absorbed outside, close to Nature, has a fundamental effect: 'We'll frame the measure of our souls'. It works in a positive and constructive way, not only for the individual but for society as a whole, because it generates a willingness to be 'tuned to love'.

In the final stanza, Wordsworth once more repeats his request that Dorothy should change her clothes and leave her book, so that they can spend the day in 'idleness'. However, now that we have read the poem we, like Dorothy, fully understand just what Wordsworth is suggesting. We know exactly what 'idleness' means, so we can join Wordsworth and his sister in smiling at his gentle joke.

Style

It is always important to remember that Wordsworth believed that poetry was created out of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. So although he places his poems in the present, and creates a sense of spontaneous immediacy, he is writing about an incident from the past. Wordsworth uses memory to recall this past incident and its accompanying emotions so that he can re-experience the moment in a new context, in 'tranquillity', and this enables him to draw out the depth of meaning that is embodied in the incident. In this way the moment becomes more significant. Therefore, with Wordsworth, spontaneity and immediacy are to be treated with caution!

Alternatively

'It is possible enough, we allow, that the sight of a friend's spade, or a sparrow's nest... might really have suggested to such a mind a train of powerful impressions and interesting reflections, but it is certain that to most minds such associations will always appear forced, strained and unnatural.'

So wrote Francis Jeffrey, a contemporary critic of Wordsworth. Is this a justifiable criticism of this poem and Wordsworth's other works on your course? Does he take incidents that might have a limited value and expand their relevance to such an extent that they are in continual danger of exploding; are they the poetic equivalent of an over-inflated balloon?





A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL

Background

See the Background note for 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways'.

A reading of the poem

The opening two lines of the poem appear to communicate an image that is readily understandable – that of Wordsworth falling into a sleep. He depicts the condition as a pleasant one that has 'no human fears'. The first line reinforces this by its use of the 's' sound, giving a relaxed and sleepy quality to the words. His use of the past tense clearly indicates that this incident is a recollected one. However, with lines 3 and 4, the poem begins to move away from this apparent clarity. There is an underlying uneasiness as we encounter the puzzling 'She'. Who or what is 'She'? Could it be Wordsworth's 'spirit' of the first line, given a kind of timeless immortality by the protective 'seal' of sleep? Or does the 'She' refer to a separate person? By linking 'She' with the word 'thing', Wordsworth further confuses the matter. Can a 'thing' be human? The use of 'seemed' further increases this uneasiness. There is the strong implication that the ability of this 'She' to resist the effects 'of earthly years' was, in truth, only an appearance. Is there a haunting sense of disappointment, perhaps even distress, underpinning these words, although they are set in the past? Wordsworth deliberately leaves these questions hanging as he leads us into the second stanza.

The second stanza opens with an unsettling change of tense. We are now in the present. However, as the past was filled with an appearance of ability, so the present is filled with real inability. 'She' now has 'no motion', 'no force'; she is unable to hear or see. The image is clearly indicating a change in condition; but in what way and for whom? The negatives of 'no' and 'neither' suggest a ceasing of something that was present before. Furthermore, in spite of the overwhelming image of being unable to move, or hear, or see, there is a surprising lack of emotional reaction. Finally, Wordsworth describes an image that is stunningly vivid yet profoundly enigmatic. He seems to suggest that although 'She' is no longer able to actively move, 'She' is, nevertheless, still participating in movement: 'Rolled round'. 'She' has become part of the greater motion that propels our Earth through Time and Space. Whether this final image is to be understood as positively comforting, or negatively disturbing, is unclear. Reference to Wordsworth's poetic philosophy and his other works supports the view that Nature is a force for good in his world. However, because 'She' is never fully defined, because 'She' is altered in a fundamental yet unspecified way, because Wordsworth himself appears to be suspended in a world that is both conscious and unconscious, wakeful and sleeping, this last image neither clearly answers nor finally resolves the questions that were posed in the first stanza of the poem.





Alternatively

It is significant that, here again, the female figure is viewed as in some way having the ability to connect with Nature in an instinctive and unconscious way, an ability that Wordsworth by implication felt that he lacked.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge guessed that this poem was written as an epitaph (words composed in memory of a person who has died), after Wordsworth had a premonition of the death of his sister Dorothy.

Given that the poem was published in a group dealing with the death of Lucy, it is tempting to view it as simply another aspect of Wordsworth's reaction to this event. Yet we have to pose the question whether the poem itself supports this interpretation. Indeed, should the meaning and relevance of a poem be dictated by its published context? Or should a poem be taken as a separate and distinct entity, with its own uniquely individual meaning? Does it matter when or where a poem is published, or what was happening in the poet's life at the time of its creation? By linking a poem to all these details are we simply taking the easy option and, although we may arrive at a satisfying explanation, have we sacrificed the essential quality that made it a poem in the first place? Wordsworth expressed the following view on this topic: 'Our business is with their books – to understand and enjoy them. And, of poets more especially, it is true – that, if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished...'.





SHE DWELT AMONG THE UNTRODDEN WAYS

Background

Wordsworth appears to have written the group of 'Lucy' poems when he was in Germany in the winter of 1799. They were first printed in the *Lyrical Ballads* collection in 1800. This poem appeared second in a group of three, with 'A slumber did my spirit seal' the third of the group. The poems have an elegiac quality in that they lament the death of someone. However, the traditional elegy usually laments the passing of a notable person, such as a great poet or military hero. Wordsworth seems to deliberately emphasise how unknown Lucy was in order to highlight the fact that her importance came from her effect on him. Similarly, there is a sense of mystery in each of these poems not usually found in the traditional elegiac form. Wordsworth avoids the standard approach of detailing facts about the deceased in order to heighten the sense of loss. Instead, he simply suggests certain qualities while placing most of the emphasis on how he was affected by the death.

A reading of the poem

In the first stanza Wordsworth introduces three important ideas in connection with the deceased Lucy: (a) she lived closely with Nature; (b) she had a delicate, gentle quality; (c) she lived away from the company of people. Lucy lived 'among the untrodden ways', suggesting an isolated and unspoiled countryside. This sense of unspoiled Nature is reinforced by the 'springs of Dove'. Modern advertising still uses the idea of 'natural spring water' to

represent purity and untouched Nature. The connecting of Lucy with a spring called 'Dove' signifies a gentleness about her; this is certainly not a raging waterfall. There is the feeling that Nature in its extreme form would have been too overwhelming for Lucy. She found her home in a quiet and protective natural environment. Wordsworth emphasises the lack of human relationships in Lucy's world by using the words 'none' and 'few'. Lucy did not experience the positive side of human interaction, where 'love' and 'praise' support the individual. However, there is no real sense that she missed this – rather it appears that she accepted her condition; perhaps there is even the feeling that she neither knew nor cared about such things.

In the second stanza Wordsworth reinforces these ideas with the images that he uses in connection with Lucy. By using the metaphor of the violet that is 'half hidden', Wordsworth implies a shy delicacy. There is the suggestion that the violet is content to remain hidden by the stone, just as Lucy was content to remain 'among the untrodden ways'. The fact that the stone is 'mossy' conveys a more comfortable image than if it had been simply cold rock. It also indicates a sheltered environment, one where the delicate 'violet', and by implication Lucy, would be protected. The simile of the star is used in a similar way. Lucy is as 'Fair as a star' in that she is undoubtedly beautiful. The star image also conveys a sense that Lucy is somehow not of this world. She is set apart not simply by her physical isolation, but also because she is from a different physical environment. Man can observe the star from the earth, but he cannot come into contact with it because it is physically impossible for him to travel the vast distance that





lies between him and the star, nor can he survive in the star's environment of space. So Wordsworth implies that although he was one of the few to have seen Lucy, there was, even for him, something unattainable about her. The idea that the star is the 'only one' shining also reinforces the sense of Lucy's isolation from normal human life.

In the third stanza, Wordsworth repeats the idea that Lucy was unknown in the general world of men. His use of the phrase 'few could know' suggests that to know Lucy was a privileged or special experience – that he was lucky to have witnessed her existence. When it comes to communicating Lucy's death, Wordsworth does so in an undramatic way; Lucy simply 'ceased to be'. The very sound of the word 'ceased' reinforces the gentle, almost natural quality of her passing. There is no feeling of a violent separation caused by death. Wordsworth has carefully structured the poem so that this moment appears with a quiet inevitability. Lucy's existence is written about in the past tense. She is portrayed as having a delicacy and gentleness that almost melts away. Her close connection with the quiet things of nature implies that the manner of her death was simply an extension of the manner of her living. There is an acceptance of the fact of Lucy's passing in the phrase 'she is in her grave'. Wordsworth does not shy away from the reality of the situation, but the 'grave' image is not a very frightening one. After all, Lucy spent her life 'half hidden' by the natural world – it was not a great change for her to become completely hidden. Wordsworth ends the poem with a clear statement that Lucy's death had a significant emotional impact on him. However, he does not express exactly what he felt. This

serves to highlight his avoidance of any specific details about his relationship with Lucy. There is a haunting air of mystery about his connection with her and, indeed, about Lucy herself.

Style

A mysterious death, often of a young and beautiful person, was a popular theme among the Romantic poets, not only in England but also in Germany and France. There was the sense that death was simply Nature reasserting its power over the person in a magical and inescapable way. Wordsworth takes this theme and uses it in an original way to communicate the emotional and psychological effects caused in him by the death.

In a similar way, the simple rhyme scheme of the poem and the use of such words as 'dwelt', 'untrodden' and 'maid' give the poem a historical, fairy-tale atmosphere, customary in this type of poem. However, Wordsworth was not content simply to relate the incident. For him, an incident gained impact by his meditating on it ('emotion recollected in tranquillity'), so that he was able not only to recreate the original incident but to weave into it the emotional and psychological depths that he had developed in his meditations. It is not really important for us to know exactly what effect Lucy's death had on Wordsworth; what is important is that we understand that it did affect him in a profound and lasting way.

Alternatively

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the nineteenth-century artist and poet, commented that Wordsworth was 'good, you know, but unbearable'. Perhaps Wordsworth is 'unbearable' in the way that he portrays Lucy as being perfectly happy with her rather limited





life. She is the ideal fantasy girl dreamed up by Wordsworth. Their relationship is obviously unreal and not very well expressed. He could be regarded as even more 'unbearable' in the way that he is more worried about his own reaction than about Lucy's death. He simply uses the idea of Lucy as an excuse to write about his 'unbearable' concern with his own 'unbearable' feelings!





COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE, SEPTEMBER 3, 1802

Background

This poem was composed in 1802 and published in 1807 under the title *Miscellaneous Sonnets*. Wordsworth subsequently increased the number of sonnets and rearranged their order. Although the sonnets deal with a wide variety of subjects, Wordsworth seemed to feel that they could be organised into a sequence.

Structure

Like 'It is a Beauteous Evening', this is a Petrarchan sonnet. It is made up of an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The rhyme scheme is *abbaabba cdcddc*. Wordsworth does not stick strictly to the general arrangement of having the octet descriptive and the sestet as a meditation on the description; he mixes description and meditation together throughout the sonnet.

A reading of the poem

The first line of this poem is deliberately designed to catch the reader's attention. By stating 'Earth has not anything to show more fair', Wordsworth creates a sense of expectancy and curiosity in the reader. He reinforces this in the following two lines, where he suggests that only a spiritually deficient person would not be affected by this scene. Not only does this reflect Wordsworth's belief that the appreciation of beauty involves the spirit of Man, but it also encourages the reader to read on. No one wants to be seen as being 'Dull... of soul!' The suggestion that the scene has 'majesty'

contributes to this sense of expectancy. Rather like a presenter on X Factor, Wordsworth has given the scene a terrific build-up.

In the second quatrain (four lines), Wordsworth sets about actually describing the scene. In a beautifully constructed phrase, he uses the vivid and significant image of 'a garment' to suggest the beauty of the City. Wordsworth employs the 'garment' image effectively to convey a number of levels of meaning. It implies the transitory nature of the beauty; Wordsworth is well aware that the quietness and tranquillity of the scene will not last; it has been put on, like a special outfit. The City, by its nature, is a place of noise and activity. Connected to this is the suggestion of illusion. A 'garment' is frequently worn to transmit a particular message about the wearer. Both of these meanings relate to Wordsworth's emotional reaction to the early-morning City. Although he is moved by the view, his reaction is ambiguous. His appreciation of the beauty of the City is very specifically linked to the particular moment when the City is quiet, deserted and therefore tranquil. However, once this moment passes, as it inevitably must, Wordsworth realises that he will no longer view the City as a thing of beauty. In fact, he will see it as ugly, chaotic and dehumanising. For an instant, the City is as beautiful as the countryside, but, unlike scenes from Nature, the beauty of the early morning City has no permanence. Wordsworth's psychological acknowledgement and emotional awareness of this fact underpin his use of the image of the 'garment'. The words 'silent, bare' take on a resonance, coming as they do after this image. They fill the sweep of the City landscape as far as the distant fields and the domed sky. The 'silent, bare' City is, at this moment, able to 'lie open'. Its restricted confines become





opened out and expanded. Even the physical appearance of the built environment is altered to 'bright and glittering', and, for this moment, the grimy air is 'smokeless'.

In the sestet (six lines) Wordsworth expresses the perfection and beauty of the early morning City by comparing it to a country scene. This, in his view, is the ultimate comparison. In their deserted state, the 'ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples' are as good as 'valley, rock, or hill'. Consequently the City, in this moment of 'natural' beauty, affects Wordsworth in a positive way. He feels a tremendous sense of tranquillity, 'a calm so deep'. This emotion is echoed by the movement of the river, that briefly flows undisturbed by busy river traffic. The very sound of the line 'The river glideth at his own sweet will' evokes a sense of peacefulness. However, the final two lines of this sonnet introduce a subtle, yet inescapable, feeling of unease. The use of the expression 'Dear God!' with its exclamation mark injects an emotional intensity at odds with the tranquillity. At first, this appears to be Wordsworth just overdramatising the fact that 'The very houses seem asleep'. It is all rather reminiscent of the scene from 'The Sleeping Beauty' when the entire castle falls asleep under a magic spell. London is spellbound. But the final line communicates an image that is chillingly ambiguous, for 'all the mighty heart is lying still'. If we connect this to the sleeping houses, then it can be interpreted simply as a description of the sleeping City. However, the heart does not lie 'still' when the body is asleep; the 'heart is lying still' only when the body is dead. The pathos that Wordsworth feels because of his awareness of the transitory quality of this scene spills over into this final line. This beauty that affects him so

deeply is tragically and inevitably limited, because it occurs for a brief and unrepresentative moment. Wordsworth does not regard the City in its entirety as beautiful, in the way that he views the whole world of Nature as representing beauty. The underlying sense of unease in the poem arises out of Wordsworth's awareness of the ambiguity in his reaction. For him, the City as a built environment is negative, because it separates Man from the positive influences of Nature. But Wordsworth has been stimulated to react positively to the City in the moment when Man is not in any way apparent in it. Wordsworth realises that once Man appears, the City will no longer be beautiful. Against this background of confusion, his assertion that he feels 'a calm so deep' has a hollow ring to it.

Alternatively

This sonnet represents the intellectual and philosophical 'straitjacket' that Wordsworth created for himself. His insistence that Nature was infinitely good and beautiful, and a profoundly positive force on Man, compelled him to portray the constructed worlds of towns and cities as essentially bad and ugly and deeply negative influences on Man. By doing this, he restricted his creativity. He cornered himself into rejecting a large part of the human condition. As the critic Lionel Trilling commented about Wordsworth: 'To the ordinary reader he is likely to exist as the very type of the poet whom life has passed by, presumably for the good reason that he passed life by.'





IT IS A BEAUTEOUS EVENING, CALM AND FREE

Background

This poem was first published in a group of various sonnets in 1807. It was actually composed in 1802.

Structure

The poem is a sonnet: it consists of fourteen lines and is divided by the rhyme scheme into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). This type of sonnet is called a Petrarchan sonnet, because it was first used by an Italian writer called Petrarca in the fourteenth century. Usually the rhyme scheme is *abba abba cdecde*. However, Wordsworth changes the sestet to *cdecde*, so it is not strictly Petrarchan.

Generally the octet is descriptive, telling the reader about a particular situation. The sestet then meditates on, or presents a reaction to, the octet. This difference in content between the two parts of the sonnet is often reflected in a change of mood or tone.

A reading of the poem

Wordsworth opens the poem with an accomplished description of a sunset over the sea. The octet is carefully structured so that there is a sense of immediacy for the reader; he wants us to feel that we are standing alongside him and witnessing the scene with him. Although we know that Wordsworth felt that poetry was created by using the memory of a significant moment, he deliberately uses the present tense throughout this poem, as if he is actually writing as the incident occurs. His description uses not

only the sense of sight but also the sense of hearing. This gives a greater depth to the picture and reinforces the immediacy of the scene.

Although the scene in the octet is not obviously dramatic, as a huge storm might be, Wordsworth describes it in such a way that it has great impact. He stresses the peacefulness of the sunset with such words as 'calm', 'quiet', 'tranquillity', 'gentleness'. For Wordsworth, this quietness comes from a sense of natural order. The sun sets according to an established pattern. The sea rises and falls in a rhythmic and regular way. Each natural object behaves in a constant and appropriate way, just as a nun follows her religious rituals with a dignified and quiet reverence. Wordsworth holds us in a moment of stillness. For it is only a moment. Although the sea moves 'everlastingly', there is the strong feeling that Wordsworth is only too aware that this scene is anything but everlasting, and that gives it an added impact.

Although Wordsworth has put a great deal of effort into making us feel and experience the 'beauteous evening', it is only with the sestet that we realise why he considers this a significant moment. It is not the scene in itself that is significant; it is the contrast between his own reaction and his companion's reaction to it that moved Wordsworth to recreate this moment from memory. His companion does not react to the sunset in an intellectual way – she is 'untouched by solemn thought'; whereas Wordsworth, as we have seen by the type of language he uses in the octet, has been filled with solemn thoughts. But Wordsworth realises that his companion's reaction, although different, is a valid one; she is in no way 'less divine'. Indeed, he suggests that he is rather





envious of the spontaneous way in which she does react. Just as the sunset is impressive because it is driven by a natural order, so his companion's reaction is enviable because it too is natural. For Wordsworth, Nature symbolised, or represented, Great Truths of existence. His companion, by reacting naturally, is more able to come to an understanding of these Truths; she can go into 'the Temple's inner shrine'. The implication is that Wordsworth, because his reaction is more self-consciously intellectual, is not admitted into the 'inner shrine'. Indeed, the final line of the sonnet summarises just this. He understands that his companion is always close to the Truth of existence, is always near to 'God', because she reacts to God's creations in an instinctively natural way. She does not continually think about it: she just enjoys it. She is happy not to 'know' intellectually, and as a result she knows in a much deeper sense. Once again, there is the strong suggestion that Wordsworth regrets that he cannot react in the way his companion does. The 'dear girl' is accompanied by God, while Wordsworth is accompanied by the need to know.

Alternatively

This sonnet simply shows the confusion underlying Wordsworth's whole Poetic Theory. After all, he stated in his 'Preface' that 'poems to which any value can be attached' are produced 'by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply'. So he emphasises the importance of thinking. Yet in this sonnet he suggests that thinking, or intellectualising, is not a good idea; rather it is better to react in an instinctive way!

In 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways' and 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free', Wordsworth presents the female figures as idealised and unrealistic. This is in contrast to his very realistic descriptions of Nature.





THE SOLITARY REAPER

Background

'The Solitary Reaper' was composed in November 1805 and published in 1807. Wordsworth was reading a friend's manuscript about a trip to Scotland, when one sentence triggered his memory of a solitary reaper from two years previously.

Structure

The poem is made up of four stanzas, each consisting of eight lines. Interestingly, the first and fourth stanzas have the rhyme scheme *abcddee*, while the second and third stanzas have a slightly different scheme of *ababccdd*. Equally noteworthy is the fact that Wordsworth opens the poem in the present tense, but closes it in the past tense.

A reading of the poem

Wordsworth commences this poem with a direct address in a conversational style of language. This suggests a sense of intimacy, in that we feel we are involved in an ongoing conversation. It also creates immediacy, because we are placed in the significant moment, with Wordsworth, observing the girl at work in the fields. With a few brief but well-chosen words, he conveys a picture of the worlds of Man and Nature existing in harmony: 'single in the field', 'solitary Highland Lass', 'reaping and singing', 'cuts and binds the grain'. Yet the first stanza is not simply descriptive. The line 'Stop here or gently pass' introduces the concept of reaction to the reaper. It is just what this reaction is that really concerns Wordsworth. His emphasis on reactions to scenes

separates him from the purely descriptive poems popular in his day. The choice of stopping or passing is decided by Wordsworth's image of the valley filled with the song. In such circumstances, only the 'Dull... of soul' would pass on.

The second stanza is taken up with two images of birds singing. The nightingale is used to introduce an exotic location, a 'shady haunt' set in the 'Arabian sands', while the cuckoo's environment is the wilds of the 'farthest Hebrides'. In eight lines Wordsworth sweeps us from the heat of the desert to the chill of the North Atlantic, not only to convey the unique quality that the Reaper's singing had, but also to communicate the emotional effect that this singing had on him. The nightingale sings 'welcome notes' to 'weary bands', just as the cuckoo breaks 'the silence of the seas' with his heralding of Spring. Both songs signal relief, comfort and hope in hostile settings. The implication is that the Reaper's song has the same effect on Wordsworth.

With the third stanza Wordsworth pulls us back to the scene described in the first. The question 'Will no one tell me what she sings?' is once again conversational; we are back in the significant moment, but only briefly. By asking this question Wordsworth propels us once more into the realm of reaction to the song. Different reactions to the song create different answers to his question. One listener might view it as being about 'old, unhappy, far-off things', while another may hear a 'humble lay'. Wordsworth answers his initial question with a series of other questions in an effort to convey a variety of equally valid reactions. His emphasis is on the effect of the song, not the song itself.





The final stanza reinforces this point with the phrase ‘Whate’er the theme’. He focuses on the way that she sang, since it is this that haunts him. The Reaper sang in a manner that was unrestricted. It seemed to Wordsworth that ‘her song had no ending’. This moment became significant for him because the commonplace and familiar activity of reaping coexisted with a uniquely special act of creativity that excited the human spirit. Wordsworth’s reaction of standing ‘motionless and still’ suggests that his outer physical self became unimportant, as all his energies were directed internally to his spiritual reflex. Once this reflex had occurred, the moment of significance had been absorbed: ‘The music in my heart I bore’; his energies were redirected once again and he ‘mounted up the hill’. But the Wordsworth who climbed the hill was profoundly and fundamentally different from the Wordsworth who had come upon ‘The Solitary Reaper’.

Style

This is a lyric poem, because it seeks to communicate the emotional and psychological state of a single speaker. The lyric poem is not concerned with narrative (telling a story), nor is it dramatic, but these elements often occur in it. Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics were particularly fond of the lyric style, as it allowed them to express their uniquely personal responses to a variety of situations.

Wordsworth and Coleridge came up with the title *Lyrical Ballads* for their collection of poems, and Wordsworth wrote a great many lyrical ballads in the course of his literary career. The ballad form can loosely be defined as having the following qualities: narrative,

in that it tells a story; easily understood, as it comes from an oral tradition; dramatic, because it deals with an event; and impersonal, with no intervention on the part of the narrator. The uniting of the lyric and ballad forms was, in Coleridge’s words, ‘an experiment’. Just how experimental and revolutionary the results were is still a matter of debate among critics.

Alternatively

The poet John Keats considered that Wordsworth suffered from ‘the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone’. In other words, Wordsworth’s Poetic Theory that ‘feeling’ gave importance to ‘the action and situation’ was just an excuse for him to describe, perhaps at too great length, his own emotions. ‘The Solitary Reaper’ is a perfect example of Wordsworth’s exaltation of his own reactions. He might have been better advised to take off his jacket and help the girl, rather than to wallow in the self-indulgence of this emotional dissection.





THE STOLEN BOAT

(extract from *The Prelude*)

Background

'The Stolen Boat' is another extract from *The Prelude*. It comes before 'Skating' in Book I of the fourteen 'Books'. See 'Skating' for further background notes.

A reading of the poem

Wordsworth opens the poem in a casual and relaxed mood. It has the feeling of a remembered tale from childhood, the kind we were all told by adults. Initially, it appears that the reminiscence is about his trip in a small boat. Wordsworth simply recounts his actions of going to the boat, untying her and jumping in. Rather than provide a detailed description of the setting for this incident, he implies it by the use of such phrases as 'summer evening', 'willow tree' and 'rocky cave'. By his careful choice of descriptive phrases, Wordsworth effectively communicates the surroundings in six words.

However, a change in the mood of the extract is introduced by his comment, 'It was an act of stealth'. There is something confessional about his admission. This feeling is reinforced by the phrase 'troubled pleasure'. We now realise that the jaunt is not entirely innocent. Yet this mood change is fleeting; almost before we have fully noticed it, it has disappeared. In a beautiful description of the moonlight glittering on the watery disturbances left by the oars, Wordsworth shifts the focus away from any sense

of unease. He leads us into the sheer physical delight that he feels as he rows the boat. He is doing it well and he knows it. The lines are filled with the young Wordsworth's elation and confidence; his strength and power seem to grow as he rows the boat skilfully. The boat moves easily like 'an elfin pinnacle'. He plunges the oars into the water 'lustily' to propel the boat forward as naturally and gracefully as 'a swan'. Wordsworth and the boat are made one through his expertise.

Carried along with Wordsworth, we too skim the surface of the lake, until suddenly the mood changes with the appearance of 'a huge peak'. The description has echoes of the language of a child. The peak is 'huge' and 'black and huge'. Rather like a monster coming out of the shadows it 'upreared its head'. The sense of unease, previously only hinted at, returns with an overwhelming force. Wordsworth's rowing takes on an air of panic; he 'struck and struck again', the violence implicit in 'struck' emphasising how desperation has replaced his earlier confidence. The scene takes on the elements of a nightmare, with Wordsworth frantically trying to escape from the peak, while all the time the peak comes closer and closer until it blocks out the stars. The boy who had wielded the oars 'lustily' now turns the boat with 'trembling oars'. By using the word 'stole' to describe his return journey, Wordsworth fully exploits the word's various shades of meaning to communicate not only how he rowed and what he had done, but also how he felt. Like a wounded animal he retreats 'back to the covert of the willow tree'.

The significance of this moment affects the young Wordsworth deeply. He goes home a 'grave' and 'serious' boy. In the days





following, he grapples with the implications of his experience 'with a dim and undetermined sense'. He is aware that the moment was significant, but as a child he is unable to rationalise and understand it. He is trapped in a world of 'huge and mighty forms' that haunt him 'by day' and fill his 'dreams' at night.

This extract shows Nature in a very different light from the way it is normally portrayed in Wordsworth's poetry. For Wordsworth Nature is a moral force, in that it encourages Man to live in a positive and creative way. Generally, this influence is shown occurring in a pleasant manner, as with 'It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free', or 'To My Sister'. Learning from Nature is a happy experience. But here, Nature's moral force is exerted in such a way that it is an extremely unpleasant experience for the young Wordsworth. By stealing the boat, he violates positive and creative living, and because of that Nature expresses her disapproval. Wordsworth feels guilt, but is as yet unable to grasp the full implications of the actions of Nature. His youth places limitations on his intellectual, emotional and moral powers. Thus, he is sensitive to the alteration in the way that Nature presents herself to him, but because he is unable to recognise the lesson that is being transmitted, he is powerless to move on. Consequently, he remains swamped by the overwhelming force that was revealed to him in this alteration and by his own sense of uncomprehending guilt. Nature requires him to resolve what happened to him and why it happened, but the young Wordsworth simply cannot.

Alternatively

William Empson believed that Wordsworth had 'no inspiration other than his use, when a boy, of the mountains as a totem or father-substitute'. In other words, Empson considers the guilt that Wordsworth experiences when the 'black and huge' peak confronts him as being indicative of a fear that he connected with his father. This fear arose from Wordsworth's feeling that his father's death was, in some unexplained way, a punishment. With his father's death, the young Wordsworth was forced into a state of solitude, on both a physical and emotional level, that he found frightening. In an effort to find some stability and comfort, he turned to Nature. Yet he was never able to eradicate his intense feelings of loss, nor to terminate his search for a parent figure.





SKATING

(extract from *The Prelude*)

Background

This extract comes from a long poem that Wordsworth began to write in 1799. He expanded it in 1805 and revised it at intervals until 1839. It was not published until after his death in 1850. The title *The Prelude*, which was chosen by his widow, means something that serves as an introduction. Wordsworth himself claimed that this poem was to serve as a 'preparatory poem' to another work called 'Recluse'. He intended to explain how he had arrived at a point where he could write 'Recluse'. Therefore *The Prelude*, in Wordsworth's own words, 'is biographical, and conducts the history of the author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour'.

A reading of the poem

Wordsworth opens the piece with a vivid and expert description of the setting for the skating. The use of the word 'And' is suggestive of a continuing dialogue, which after all it is, as the full poem traces his development as a poet by means of incidents from his early life. By establishing the scene for this incident, Wordsworth quickly draws us into his recreated personal memory. He uses both visual pictures and sounds to achieve a surprising depth of description in a very brief amount of writing. He also introduces the emotional aspect of this memory at this early stage.

Wordsworth realised that memory is extremely important to

human beings, not simply in the sense that we enjoy remembering factual details, but because memory allows us to recapture emotions from past situations. In this way, Wordsworth is able to feel again the 'rapture' that he experienced as a young boy. Similarly, he compares himself skating to 'an untired horse', in an effort to communicate both the physical and emotional freedom that he felt. The group of boys are described as 'imitative of the chase', not only to suggest that they skate in a group trying to catch a front-runner, but also to convey their natural spontaneity.

Just as Wordsworth links factual memory with emotional memory, so he joins what is seen with what is heard. The sense of hearing plays a vital role in memory. For instance, most people have a special piece of music that recalls a particular incident for them. Wordsworth uses sounds to add a greater depth to his description. The village clock, the hissing of the skates on the ice, the shouting of the boys: all are carried through the still, cold air and out from the page. This is not a silent world, but a world filled with movement and noise, just like our world today.

At this point, the skating boys are at the front of the description, with the world of Nature present but in the background. However, rather like a camera panning from the boys to the surrounding landscape, Wordsworth gradually shifts the descriptive focus more and more onto the countryside. He does this by using the echoes of the boys to lead us to the 'precipices', the 'leafless trees', the 'icy crag' and the 'far distant hills'. He looks up from the enclosed village to the limitless night sky; the 'cottage windows' give way to the 'stars' and the 'orange sky of evening'.





This outer movement reflects the inner alteration that occurs within the young Wordsworth in the course of the piece. Whereas previously his whole attention and being had been absorbed by the act of skating, gradually he becomes aware of Nature. He begins to physically separate himself from the other boys, so he 'retired into a silent bay', leaving 'the tumultuous throng'. The world of activity and sound fades into the background as Wordsworth's awareness of his natural surroundings increases. The boy who 'wheeled about' is now 'stopped short' by the awesomeness of the world around him. Finally his physical movement, which has been so much a part of this description, becomes overwhelmed by the greater movement of the earth. By placing his emotional and psychological adjustment into a physical context, Wordsworth gives the whole experience a vividly dramatic effect.

Nevertheless, the final lines of the piece illustrate the limitations of the young Wordsworth. Although he becomes conscious of Nature, he is not yet able to understand the implications of this consciousness. He has not yet reached the mature perception of the Great Truths symbolised by Nature. At this point in his life, Wordsworth is not driven by Nature towards a significant moment. His reactions are limited, so that he simply 'stood and watched'.

Style

The Prelude contains some of Wordsworth's most vivid and descriptive blank verse. Blank verse is unrhymed verse that is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a way of dividing up the metre, or rhythm, of a line of poetry. With iambic

pentameter there are five divisions, called feet, in each line. In each of the feet there are two syllables, one weak and one strong. The opening line of this piece is a good example (the underlined syllables are strong):

And in/the fros/ty sea/son, when/the sun...

Alternatively

Matthew Arnold commented on Wordsworth: 'It might seem that Nature not only gave him the subject matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him.' Perhaps Nature wrote too much about itself in this piece. Should Wordsworth have edited some of his descriptions? Did he simply write a descriptive piece just to show off his abilities in this area, and then tack it on to a rather unbelievable incident from his youth just to give a point to the whole thing? Is it likely that a boy out skating and shouting with a group of friends, a boy who is having such a good time that he avoids going home, will suddenly go off on his own and look at the stars and the cliffs and think about the earth going round?





TINTERN ABBEY

Background

Wordsworth composed this poem on 13 July 1798 and it was published later that same year. The full title gives the exact details of his situation at the time: 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798.' However, biographical details, even when supplied by the poet himself, should always be treated with extreme caution.

Style

In the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote of 'Tintern Abbey': 'I have not ventured to call this Poem an ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites, of that species of composition.'

There has been considerable debate as to what Wordsworth actually meant by this statement. The ode is related to the lyric in that both are derived from classical literature. The ode was considered to be a form of poetry composed for performance, while the lyric was a personal style of expression. The Romantics took the classical idea of the ode form and reinvented it to suit their poetic ends. They retained the sense of flowing change both in rhythm and direction of thought and feeling, and the ode's fusion of reflection and praise, questioning and earnest pleading. However, they infused it with a greater intensity of personal expression and applied it to a wider range of topics.

A reading of the poem

Wordsworth opens the poem with an apparently simple statement of fact, 'Five years have past'. However, there is a subtle ambiguity behind these lines. Wordsworth gives the impression that he is looking back to the past from the present moment. Yet we know Wordsworth believed that poetry was created by viewing a significant moment from a distance in time. So, the present moment that Wordsworth seems to be functioning in is in itself a moment from the past.

Despite this aspect, Wordsworth successfully creates a sense of intense immediacy. We are standing with him as he surveys the scene laid out below him. As we have seen previously, by his careful choice of descriptive phrases, Wordsworth is able to convey a rich setting in remarkably few lines. We too see 'the steep and lofty cliffs', the 'dark sycamore', 'these orchard tufts', and 'these pastoral farms'. Wordsworth controls this descriptive section of the poem with considerable skill. He enriches the visual picture by suggesting sound, the 'soft inland murmur' of the mountain streams. Similarly, we can almost smell the 'wreathes of smoke'. The introduction of the Hermit, a favourite Romantic image, carries suggestions of a man withdrawn from the outside world in order to connect with some greater Truth. These ideas recur later on in the poem.

Wordsworth has worked so hard in conveying this wonderful scene to us that we are perfectly willing to understand and accept his estimation of the influence that it has had on him, expressed vividly in three beautifully phrased lines:





*But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, ...*

This is a deeply evocative image, one that is easily understood, since we all have mental pictures of treasured moments that provide comforting retreats in difficult times. But it is not just the imaginative conjuring up of this view that positively affects Wordsworth. He is convinced that his earlier interaction with this setting fundamentally affected his essence as a human being, by enabling him to develop ‘that serene and blessed mood’. By this phrase, Wordsworth means the positive inner strength that pushes the human spirit towards what is right and good. For Wordsworth, it is this ‘mood’ that helps Man to live constructively within ‘this unintelligible world’. It is this ‘mood’ that enables the human soul to encounter death without fear, because through death it will become ‘a living soul’ and will finally ‘see into the life of things’. In the face of such impassioned writing, how can we not believe him?

Yet in the very next line Wordsworth introduces an element of doubt; after all, it could be ‘but a vain belief’. He quickly dismisses the idea, almost too quickly perhaps. His images of the busy world are vivid and deeply disturbing, with the ‘joyless daylight’, ‘the fretful stir’ and ‘the fever’. We can all too easily visualise Wordsworth driven into illness by this world. Nor does it only affect him physically. Psychologically, it bears down on the very centre of his existence, ‘the beatings’ of his ‘heart’. There is the strong impression that Wordsworth’s speedy dismissal of his momentary doubt springs from his overwhelming need to believe that there has to be more to this world than ‘joyless daylight’.

The repetition of the phrase ‘turned to thee’ is filled with a terrible sense of need – a lingering echo from his parentless childhood?

Earlier in the poem, Wordsworth blended past and present; now, almost as a result of his emotional outburst, he joins past, present and future together in one breathtaking sweep:

*And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,*

The picture of the mind revives again:

*While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.*

For Wordsworth, there is a wonderful comfort in this disruption of the power of Time. When he visited Tintern Abbey five years previously, he recognised and mentally stored that significant moment. In the poem’s present he is able to look on the wonderful scene again, to recognise and store a second significant moment. By doing this, he alters the original significant moment. In this way the past and present interact. In a similar way, Wordsworth connects the present with the future. As he looks on the expanse of countryside below him, he experiences the second significant moment. But he is also aware that he is storing up the information that will, when he mentally returns to it in the future, contribute towards a third significant moment. This, in turn, will





deepen the two previous moments. As Wordsworth stands on the brink of this view, he exists in the past, the present and the future.

Wordsworth wants to make it clear that he was not born with these abilities fully developed. So he continues the poem with a brief history of how he, as an individual, came to be the poet who stands above Tintern Abbey. As a child, he loved to be outside experiencing Nature. But it was an unthinking form of experiencing; he 'bounded o'er the mountains'. He was completely taken up with the sensory experiences that Nature offered to him:

*The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite...*

But these sensory experiences were limited, for two reasons: first, he did not combine them with intellectualisation; and second, they were purely visual:

*A feeling and a love
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.*

But 'That time is past'. The mature Wordsworth may have lost the 'dizzy raptures' of his youth, but he has gained in that he can now experience Nature on a much more profound level:

*For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity ...*

He has come to understand that Nature is symbolic of a Greater Power:

*A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

For this reason, Wordsworth still loves Nature, just as he did when he was a child, but it is a more mature form of love for this his 'nurse', his 'guide', 'the guardian of my heart, and soul'. It is interesting to note the nurturing characteristics that Wordsworth attributes to Nature, given that many critics see his relationship with Nature as representing a search for the parent figures lost to him at an early age.

Indeed, Wordsworth's train of thought moves on to what was possibly his closest human relationship, his love for his sister Dorothy. References to Dorothy are frequent in his poetry, and in 'Tintern Abbey' he writes in a revealing way about her. He is absolutely clear that his relationship with his sister has been as fundamental to him as the one he shares with Nature. He recognises that even if he had not achieved his mature appreciation of Nature, he would still be happy at this moment because Dorothy is with him, she is his 'dear, dear Friend'. However, it is significant that Wordsworth describes this relationship with the focus very definitely on himself. Dorothy is a positive influence because she reminds him of what he once was. In her voice he hears the 'language of my former heart', and in her eyes he sees his 'former pleasures'. We have encountered the concept





before that Dorothy, along with other female figures, is, in some indefinable way, able to connect with Nature at a level that Wordsworth finds impossible. Notably, Wordsworth generally represents Nature as female. He assures Dorothy that through their love of Nature, they will be empowered to withstand the negative and destructive influences of the world – the ‘evil tongues’ and ‘the sneers’. Are these, perhaps, references to the critical reception his poetry received? Nevertheless, Wordsworth views himself as being united in a triangle of positive interaction, a ‘cheerful faith’, with his sister and Nature. This unity is so strong that it will not be broken by Time. He reassures Dorothy that, in the face of ‘solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief’ she will always be able to draw strength from this moment, but he connects this moment with himself. For although he implies that Dorothy is also able to experience Nature at a profound level – her mind is ‘a mansion to all lovely forms’ – he sees her ‘healing thoughts’ as coming from her memory of him, rather than the scene itself. He wishes her to remember him as a ‘worshipper of Nature’, one who loved Nature with a religious zeal. Finally, Wordsworth closes this poem with a series of images that have deep emotional resonances. There is the implication that his ‘absence’ and ‘wanderings’ do not merely refer to his travels, but are also suggestive of his emotional and spiritual wanderings. There is a moving intensity in the final image of Wordsworth himself, his sister Dorothy, and Nature in a close and intimate relationship:

*Nor wilt thou then forget
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,*

*And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!*

Perhaps the orphaned children did find a loving guardian to protect them after all.

Tintern Abbey and Wordsworth’s poetic theory

In ‘Tintern Abbey’, Wordsworth expressed many of the fundamental concepts that formed his Poetic Theory. Briefly, they can be summarised as follows:

1. Nature as a positive force on human emotions and spirit – lines 25–30, 55–7. See also Point 9.
 2. Nature as a provider of order and coherence in the face of a disordered world – lines 37–41, 155–9.
 3. Nature as an agency for spiritual growth – lines 43–9.3.
 4. The negative influence of the general world of men – lines 38–41, 51–4, 128–34.
 5. The importance of memory – lines 25–30, 55–7, 58–65, 137–42.
 6. The different ways in which nature can be experienced – lines 67–105, 137–42.
 7. The paramount need to develop the senses – lines 106–8.
 8. Nature symbolising a Greater Truth – lines 88–102.
 9. Nature fulfilling the role of parent/guardian/comforter/educator – lines 107–11, 122–34.
 10. The beauty of Nature – lines 2–22, 67–79, 134–7.
- ii. You may like to add other points to this list.





Alternatively

'The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism... We really think it right not to harass him any longer with nauseous remedies, but... wait in patience for the natural termination of the disorder.' This was written by one of Wordsworth's fiercest contemporary critics, Francis Jeffrey. Is 'Tintern Abbey' the ultimate in egotistical self-indulgence? Did Wordsworth function for so long in the rarefied world of his own self-centred Poetic Theory that he lost all touch with reality and, like a man who suffers from a fever, rambled through this poem in a confused and largely incoherent state?





WORDSWORTH'S POEMS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

To My Sister	1798
Tintern Abbey	1798
She dwelt among the untrodden ways	1799
A slumber did my spirit seal	1799
The Stolen Boat	1799
Skating	1799
It is a beauteous evening, calm and free	1802
Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802	1802
The Solitary Reaper	1805





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

1. What do you think of Wordsworth's Poetic Theory?
2. How did this Poetic Theory influence his writing?
3. Did he fulfil his own standards as set out in his Poetic Theory?
4. What themes reoccur in his poetry? Are they connected to his Poetic Theory?
5. Did the themes tell you anything about Wordsworth himself? Would you like him as a friend?
6. What aspects of Wordsworth's poetry did you like?
7. What aspects of Wordsworth's poetry did you dislike?
8. Did any of his poems stay with you in a lasting way? Why?
9. Has Wordsworth any relevance to the world of the twenty-first century?
10. Would you read more of Wordsworth's poetry? Why?





QUESTIONS

1. Read 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways' and answer the following questions.
 - (a) (i) What impressions of Lucy and her life emerge for you from your reading of this poem?
 - (ii) Choose two images from the poem that especially convey these impressions to you and comment on your choices.
 - (b) (i) What is the poet's attitude to Lucy? Support your answer by reference to the words of the poem.
 - (ii) Do you think you would have liked Lucy if you had met her?

What words or phrases from the poem help you to decide?
 - (c) Answer **ONE** of the following, (i), (ii) or (iii).
 - (i) Choose from the following descriptions of Wordsworth's relationship with Lucy the one that is closest to your reading and explain your choice by referring to the words of the poem.
 - Wordsworth and Lucy were in love.
 - Wordsworth did not really know Lucy.
 - Lucy was important to Wordsworth.

OR

- (ii) How would you describe the mood of this poem? What words or phrases in the poem convey this mood?

OR

- (iii) From your reading of this poem what 'difference' do you think Lucy's death made to Wordsworth?
2. Read 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free' and answer the following questions.
 - (a) (i) What sort of scene do you imagine from your reading of this poem?
 - (ii) Choose two phrases from the poem that especially convey this scene to you and comment on your choices.
 - (b) Why do you think Wordsworth uses words connected with religion in this poem? Support your answer by reference to the text of the poem.
 - (c) Answer **ONE** of the following, (i), (ii) or (iii).
 - (i) How is the Girl's reaction to the scene different from Wordsworth's?

OR

- (ii) How does the fact that this poem is in sonnet form affect the way that the poem is written?

OR

- (iii) Which do you think is more important in this poem, the description of the scene or the Girl's reaction to it? Or are they of equal importance?





3. Read 'Skating' and answer the following questions.
- (a) (i) What impression of Wordsworth do you get from this extract?
- (ii) What words or phrases from the poem help most to create this impression for you?
- (iii) Do you think Wordsworth was a typical boy? Why?
- (b) How, in your view, does the poet convey the excitement of skating? Support your point of view by reference to the extract.
- (c) Answer **ONE** of the following, (i), (ii) or (iii).
- (i) What is the tone of this extract? Does it change?
- OR**
- (ii) What is the point of this extract?
- OR**
- (iii) Choose a line from the extract in which the sound of the words adds to the meaning. Explain your choice.
4. 'In Wordsworth's poetry Nature is more than just a setting for his writing.' Discuss this view, supporting your answer by quotation from or reference to the poems you have studied.
5. 'Wordsworth's poems move from the highly personal to a wider relevance.' In your reading of Wordsworth's poetry, did you find this to be true? Support your answer by quotation from or reference to the poems on your course.
6. 'William Wordsworth – A Personal Response'. Using the above title, write an essay on the poetry of Wordsworth, supporting your points by quotation from or reference to the poems on your course.
7. 'Memory is the cornerstone of Wordsworth's poetry.' Discuss this view, supporting your answer by quotation from or reference to the poems you have studied.
8. 'Wordsworth's poems describe childhood in an unrealistic and idealised way.' Give your response to this point of view with supporting quotations from or reference to the poems on your course.
9. 'William Wordsworth's poems constantly seek for meaning in a world that is unintelligible.' In your reading of Wordsworth's poetry, did you find this to be true? Support your answer by quotations from or reference to the poems you have studied.
10. 'Fear, both explicit and implicit, plays a significant role in Wordsworth's poetry.' Discuss this statement, supporting your answer by quotation from or reference to the poems on your course.





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JOHN KEATS

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2021	OL 2021
HL 2022	OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

To one who has been long in city pent

Ode To A Nightingale

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Ode On A Grecian Urn

When I have fears that I may cease to be

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

To Autumn

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art

Overview of John Keats

Overview of poetic preoccupations and themes

Developing a personal response to the poetry of John Keats

Questions

Bibliography





INTRODUCTION

A brief view of a brief life

John Keats was born in Finsbury, near London, on 31 October 1795, the eldest child of Thomas Keats, a livery stable keeper (at the Swan and Hoop Inn), and Frances Jennings Keats. Two brothers, George and Thomas, were born in 1797 and 1799, respectively, and a sister, Frances (Fanny), in 1803. A fifth child, Edward, was born in 1801 but died in 1802.

From 1803 to 1811 John and his brothers attended Revd John Clarke's school in an old country house at Enfield, London. John Keats was a small boy (he was only five feet tall when he was fully grown), but he was athletic and liked sports, and although he had a quick temper he was generally popular. Clarke's was a liberal and progressive boarding school that did not allow the 'fagging' or flogging popular at the time. ('Fagging' was a practice where younger boys acted as servants to the older ones – polishing boots, cleaning, and resetting fires in their rooms.) The pupils, who were mostly of middle-class background and destined for the professions, received a well-rounded education. They had their own garden plots to cultivate, and interest in music and the visual arts was encouraged as well as the normal study of history, geography, arithmetic, grammar, French and Latin. Keats received a particularly good classical Latin education. For instance, he was able to compose a prose version of Virgil's long epic poem, the *Aeneid*. Classical mythology is used in Keats's own poetry, particularly in the long narrative poems

'Endymion', 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion' and also in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Keats was both helped and befriended by the headmaster's son and assistant master, Charles Cowden Clarke, who lent him books such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. He also introduced him to the *Examiner*, a weekly paper that advocated reform both in politics and poetry. It was edited by Leigh Hunt, later to become an influence on Keats's poetic career.

Keats's father died in a riding accident in 1804. His mother, Frances Keats, married again – to William Rawlings – but the marriage was unhappy. The Keats children went to live with their grandparents, John and Alice Jennings, at Enfield. In 1805 John Jennings died, leaving about £8,000 to the Keats children. This was a substantial sum: £50 was a typical annual wage for a worker at that time. But the will was complicated and led to legal disputes.

In 1810 Frances Keats, who had left William Rawlings some years earlier and had begun to drink heavily, returned to look after the children, but she died from tuberculosis in March of that year. Two guardians were appointed for the children, one of whom was Richard Abbey, a tea merchant and respected public figure. Both George and Tom later worked for a time as clerks in his office, and apart from four years at school, Fanny Keats lived with the Abbeyes until she was 21. It was a strict household and she was discouraged from visiting her brothers. Abbey proved notoriously mean about money and John Keats had great difficulty getting funds from his inheritance.

In 1811 Keats left school to begin an apprenticeship as a surgeon with Thomas Hammond. Surgery was at that time the manual side





of the medical profession, involving bone-setting, teeth-pulling and amputations, and was considered socially inferior to becoming a physician, which would have entailed expensive university education.

Keats's Grandmother Jennings died in 1814, and after some years as an apprentice he registered as a student at Guy's Hospital, London, in 1815, attending lectures in anatomy, physiology and chemistry.

In May 1816 the sonnet 'O Solitude' was the first of Keats's poems to be published – by Hunt, in the *Examiner*. In June Keats wrote 'To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent'. In July of the same year he qualified and was licensed to practise as a surgeon and apothecary, but by now he had developed an aversion to surgery, which was performed without anaesthetic and in primitive conditions. He devoted more of his time to writing poetry. His early poems reflected liberal attitudes and a rebellious outlook on life. For instance, he celebrated in verse Hunt's release from prison (Hunt had called the Prince Regent 'a fat Adonis of forty', among other things). Some of his poems show a romantic idealisation of women. He also formed a strong aversion to Christianity, as a poem of December 1816 demonstrates: 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition'. In October 1816 he composed 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. He made a number of important acquaintances and friendships, including Hunt, the editor of the *Examiner* and a supporter of Romantic poets, especially of Shelley, Byron and Keats; Benjamin Haydon, an unsuccessful painter; John Reynolds, a fellow poet with whom he exchanged many letters; and Joseph Severn, a poet and painter, who became a supporter and friend.

In December 1816, 'Sleep and Poetry' was written. Keats told Abbey, who was not best pleased, that he was going to be a poet, not a surgeon. In March 1817 Haydon took Keats to see the Parthenon Marbles (called the Elgin Marbles in England) at the British Museum. These were huge classical sculpture fragments taken by Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin, from the ruins of the Parthenon, with the permission of the Turks after they had conquered Athens. (The return of the Marbles is now being demanded by Greece.) Keats was fascinated by the imagery. The 'heifer lowing at the skies' in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' may have been suggested by a procession in one of the Marbles. Keats's first book, *Poems*, was published in 1817, and though it was favourably received it did not sell well. In April of that year he left London for six months to work on 'Endymion'. He also met Charles Armitage Brown, a wealthy educated gentleman who became a friend and patron. The 4,000-line poem was completed by the autumn. It tells the story of Endymion, a typical romantic hero, who achieves perfect love and immortality through loving and being loved by the goddess of the moon, Cynthia. There are two main themes, concerning the search for love and the quest for poetic achievement. The opening lines of the poem are famous:

*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness ...*

Keats now began to express his ideas on poetry. From his letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817 we get some idea of the value he placed on the imagination, the importance of feelings and the central place of beauty in poetry:





I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love, they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty ... the Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth ... O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!

In a letter to George and Tom Keats in the following month he talked about the essential attitude or operational mode necessary to be a great poet, which he called 'negative capability' – that is, 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. He began to denigrate the current classical tradition of correctness. In December he met William Wordsworth and Charles Lamb at a dinner given by Haydon. He much admired Wordsworth, though the feeling was not reciprocated.

The sonnet 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be' was written some time in January or February 1818. It deals with three important concerns in his life: love, death and his poetry. In April 'Endymion' was published to hostile reviews, in particular from the influential *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*.

In May, Keats's brother Tom became ill with tuberculosis. George lost his job and was forced to emigrate to America.

In the spring of 1818 Keats wrote 'Isabella', a poetic translation of a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It is a gruesome story of love and death with an unhappy ending, in which Isabella's brothers

murder her lover, Lorenzo. He appears to her in a dream and tells her where he is buried. She digs up his head, hides it in a pot of basil and weeps over it every day; eventually her brothers find it and take it away and she dies of a broken heart.

From June to August 1818 Keats toured the Lake District and Scotland with Brown. He returned to nurse Tom, who died of his tuberculosis on 1 December. During this winter of nursing Keats worked on 'Hyperion', an epic story from classical mythology featuring the overthrow of the old gods by the young Olympians. Its themes are change, progress and the victory of youth and beauty. But he abandoned it after Tom's death and it was published unfinished in 1820 as 'Hyperion: A Fragment'. It was much praised by his contemporaries Byron and Shelley.

In September Keats met Fanny Brawne. She and her mother rented part of Wentworth Place, Hampstead, where Keats's friends Charles and Maria Dilke lived. She was the great love of his life and they became engaged in the autumn of 1819. When Keats was dying he wrote to Brown: 'I can bear to die – I cannot bear to leave her.'

The year 1819 was an extraordinary one and the most productive of Keats's career. He was writing mature poems, sometimes dashing them off at great speed. In January he composed 'The Eve of St Agnes', a long narrative about the carrying off of a young woman by her lover. This incorporated the legend of St Agnes, the patron saint of young virgins, which stated that girls would dream of their future husband on 20 January, the Eve of St Agnes, provided certain ritual ceremonies were carried out. In February





he worked on 'The Eve of St Mark', an unfinished poem set in the Middle Ages. In April 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' was written.

Between April and May 1819 the five great odes were written, also known as the Spring Odes: 'Ode to Psyche', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode on Melancholy' and 'Ode to Indolence'. Keats's poetic reputation today rests chiefly on these, though their power was scarcely noticed when they were written, even by critics like Lamb and Shelley, as the long poem was then in fashion.

Keats was deeply in love with Fanny Brawne, as we can see from his letters, but, paradoxically, he tried to stay away from her, perhaps fearing the conflict between the real and the ideal that he deals with in his great poetry. In June he wrote:

*If I were to see you today it would destroy the half
comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright
perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead,
I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into a fire ...
Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and
trouble, I have been endeavouring to wean myself from
you ...*

Nevertheless, they became engaged in the autumn.

Between June and September he worked on 'Lamia', a long narrative poem and his third attempt at the theme of the sexual encounter between mortal man and immortal woman. This union symbolises the human being's desire to perpetuate eternally the moment of passion, the experience of love. Here, as in 'La Belle

Dame Sans Merci', the human hero ends up alone and abandoned; Lamia, the enchantress, is forced to return to her original state of being – a serpent – and Lycius, the lover, pines and dies. Of the three such poems, only 'Endymion' has a happy ending.

Keats then returned to the theme of Hyperion, composing 'The Fall of Hyperion', which he had to abandon unfinished. He worked on two plays, *Otho the Great* and *King Stephen*, which were undertaken because of financial need: Keats could not get his hands on enough of his inheritance to enable him to marry Fanny. He talked of going to sea as a ship's doctor in order to make money. With the famous actor Edmund Kean in mind for the principal role, Brown and Keats collaborated on *Otho the Great*, a gothic story of deception, unhappy love and death, involving the family of the tenth-century ruler who became Holy Roman Emperor. Drury Lane Theatre had accepted it, but when Kean left to perform in America they refused to go ahead with it. In the meantime Keats had begun work on *King Stephen*, another mediaeval play dealing with courage and chivalry, but he abandoned it after the disappointment of *Otho*.

'Bright Star', the sonnet to Fanny Brawne, dates from this time, as does the ode 'To Autumn', considered by some critics to be the best of the year's work. In 1820 Keats's brother George returned briefly from America, as he had had a financial setback and needed to raise some money. It is suspected that John Keats put himself further into debt on George's account.

In February Keats suffered a severe lung haemorrhage, the significance of which was apparent to him, as he wrote to Brown:





I know the colour of that blood; – it is arterial blood; – I cannot be deceived in that colour; – that drop of blood is my death-warrant ...

Indeed, it was the beginning of the end. That summer he spent being cared for by, and falling out with, various friends, including Brown and the Hunts, and eventually he ended up in the care of Mrs Brawne and Fanny, who nursed him in their home at Wentworth Place.

In July a volume of his poetry, *Poems, 1820*, was published, which included 'Lamia', 'Isabella' and 'The Eve of St Agnes'. The Shelleys invited him to Pisa, and since the doctors were urging him to avoid the English winter, he agreed to go to Italy. But Abbey refused him funds and he was forced to sell the copyright of his poems. In September he set sail, accompanied by his friend Thomas Severn as companion and nurse. After a violent stormy passage and quarantine at Naples they finally reached Rome in November and took rooms at 26 Piazza di Spagna. Though ably nursed by Severn, Keats deteriorated throughout the winter and he died on 23 February 1821, aged 25. He is buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, having requested as an inscription for his tombstone, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'.





TO ONE WHO HAS BEEN LONG IN CITY PENT

Background

By June 1816 lectures had finished, and as Keats was not on duty in the hospital as a dresser (a surgeon's assistant, a post he held while still a student), there was some time to study for his Society of Apothecaries licentiate examination at the end of July. Keats and his roommate would take their books into the fields and often swam in the river. But Keats was reading poetry rather than pharmacy, and the sonnet was, according to George Keats, 'written in the fields'. It was the first of three linked Miltonic sonnets that Keats wrote during June 1816.

Ideas in the poem

- The happiness brought to human beings by nature; the therapeutic power of nature for humankind
- Urbanisation – the unnatural state of people as city dwellers, pent up, fatigued
- Nature's power to rejuvenate the city dweller
- The healing force of literature – tales of love and languishment
- The transience of beauty and happiness ('he mourns that day so soon has glided by')

Form and structure

A Miltonic sonnet, the poem follows the Petrarchan division into octave and sestet, with a strict rhyming scheme: *abba abba cdcddc*.

The main thought is stated in the octave, with a volta, or turn, to the second idea (or a development or refinement of the first) in the sestet. Here, the octave deals with the happiness experienced by the poet while enjoying a summer's day in the fields and the sestet mourns the passing of that day. It has a simple, straightforward structure as the speaker moves from an awareness of the beauty of nature, to thoughts of love, to a realisation that beauty is transient. The mood also follows this pattern, moving from feelings of happiness, to tenderness, to a quiet sadness.

Imagery

The images are all linked to an extended metaphor of face, which is just discernible through the whole sonnet: 'fair/And open face of heaven', 'the smile of the blue firmament', 'an ear/Catching the notes of Philomel', 'an eye/Watching the smiling cloudlet's bright career', 'an angel's tear'. The imagery reflects the joy and sadness of the theme: smiles, music and a tear. As one would expect, images of nature are prominent.

Music of the language

There is a musical quality to the sonnet over and above the reference to the nightingale. The repeated strands of long vowel sounds give it its languidness: the long *a* of 'lair', 'air'; the long *e* of 'ear', 'evening', 'career', 'tear', 'clear', 'ether'; and the long *o* of 'notes' and 'mourns'. The enjambment of some lines (splitting a phrase over two lines) – for example, 'fair/And open face of heaven', 'lair/Of wavy grass' – gives the poem a momentum and a rhythm that add to this flowing, relaxed atmosphere.





ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

The nightingale as symbol

The nightingale has been associated with poetry and with love since classical times. In the Middle Ages it was associated with passionate courtly love, but it also carries connotations of suffering and sadness through the classical myth of Philomela. Philomela was seduced by her brother-in-law, but she and her sister took a terrible revenge and she was punished by being turned into a nightingale; hence the notion that suffering produces song and poetry. Renaissance English poets used the myth, as did T.S. Eliot later in 'The Waste Land'.

Keats uses the nightingale as the central symbol, and one of the main dramatic developments in this poem is the gradual transformation of the real bird into a symbol of visionary art. David Perkins (in *Keats: Twentieth-Century Views*) feels that the poem can be regarded as 'the exploration or testing out of a symbol'. He argues that the nightingale as symbol has the advantage of being a living thing, appealing to the senses, and so it is possible to identify with it. The disadvantage is that, unlike the urn, it does not easily lend itself to being thought of as eternal. But Keats, through a certain 'bendy' logic, attempts to give the song a sort of immortality, or at least a continuity through history, in stanza 7. The nightingale becomes a symbol of beauty and the immortality of art, which the poet explores and with which he wishes to identify.

Perkins also draws attention to the fatality of this symbol. Keats came to associate death with visionary journeys, fantasies and

dreams. He viewed the fainting or swooning that precedes the vision as a kind of death. Perkins noted the development of this ode from the 'drowsy numbness', a swoon, as it gathers momentum towards darkness and death, and temporarily accepts it in stanza 6. He asks whether the nightingale – the immortal bird – is somewhat similar in role to the Belle Dame, 'luring men to fantasy and death'.

The poem traces the twists and turns, rises and falls of the poet's creative mood as he explores this symbol and embarks on his imaginative journey with the nightingale. We could read the poem as an exploration of the process of creativity, centred on this symbol.

A reading of the poem

The ode begins with the poet in a drowsy state, as though sedated. The long vowel sounds ('aches', 'drowsy', 'numbness', 'pains') lull us into sharing that semi-conscious state. This suspension of consciousness seems to release the imagination and the poet begins to see the nightingale not just as a bird, but as a 'Dryad of the trees'. He is able to participate imaginatively in the creativity of the bird, and this brings him great happiness. He expresses his feelings in paradoxical terms (aching with pleasure): 'being too happy in thine happiness, –/That thou ... Singest of summer in full-throated ease'. The repeated s sounds in that last line, along with the long vowels of the last three words, evoke the sensuousness of the melody and allow the reader to share in the experience of the bird.





To prolong this drowsy, sensuous enjoyment, the poet appeals to wine in the second stanza ('O, for a draught of vintage!'). Wine catches the mood of his excited imagination as he recalls the rich, sensuous pleasures of its Mediterranean origins ('the warm South'). In an impressionistic confusion of senses the tastes, touch, smells, sights and sounds of its Mediterranean background are conjured up ('Cool'd a long age', 'Tasting of Flora', 'Provençal song', 'beaded bubbles winking', 'purple-stained mouth'). The nightingale is going to fade away and he wants to fade with it. This is not a fading into drunken stupor, but a journey of the imagination, as intimated by the reference to the Hippocrene (the fountain of poetic inspiration). Wine here is the medium of inspiration, the vehicle of imaginative flight, enabling the poet to continue sharing in the aesthetic life of the bird. This impulse to fade away leads in the third stanza to a recollection of the real world he is leaving, with its suffering, disease and despair ('Here, where men sit and hear each other groan'). This is probably the lowest point of the poem, when he recalls the transience even of beauty and love:

*Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.*

This is not a world to inspire poetry ('Where but to think is to be full of sorrow'), where he is thinking, or fully conscious, rather than in the drowsy state conducive to visions and poetry. So he attempts to escape with even greater urgency in the fourth stanza ('Away! away!'). Wine has failed to lift him from the horrors of life. Here, he realises that the only way of escape and of sharing in the happiness of the bird is 'on the viewless wings of Poesy'. This can be taken in two senses: through (a) an imaginative poetic sharing

in the life of the bird or (b) the poetry he is actually writing. His poetic imagination conjures up the natural world of the nightingale and so he shares in the 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways'.

The fifth stanza recreates the sensuous perfection of this natural world through the mingling of the senses of smell, taste, touch and hearing. This use of synaesthetic imagery (the production of a mental sense impression of one kind by stimulation of a different sense, as in 'soft incense' and 'embalmed darkness') evokes the richness of the imagined environment. The sensuousness of the experience is also conveyed through the repeated sound patterns in the language used –

*And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.*

– and also through the repeated *m* alliteration ('mid-May', 'coming', 'musk', 'murmurous', 'summer'), the *f* repetition ('full', 'flies'), the assonance ('child', 'wine', 'flies') and the repetition of the related *m* and *f* sounds. This stanza also demonstrates what David Perkins described as 'a vivid assertion of the power of the imagination to see more than the sensory eye'. These two stanzas (4 and 5) represent the zenith of imaginative power, a successful escape on the 'viewless wings of Poesy'.

The poet feels that the only way to prolong the ecstasy is to die at the moment of greatest sensual happiness, in stanza 6 ('Now more than ever seems it rich to die'). This desire for death is not a negative wish for extinction but an attempt to make the happiness





he knows to be transient last forever (see also 'Bright Star'). Death is desirable as a fulfilment of experience and a continuation of it. This has been prepared for through the emphasis on darkness in the previous stanza and by the sensuous adjective 'embalmed', which means fragrant but also carries connotations of death. But even as the poet suggests it, the rational side of his consciousness qualifies it. He has merely been 'half' in love with easeful death and it only 'seems' rich to die. So it is decisively rejected as a solution at the end of the stanza:

*Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.*

The onomatopoeia of the Germanic word 'sod' brings us back to earth with a realistic bump. Death would not have meant a prolongation of his union with the nightingale.

But he does find a type of permanence in art. In stanza 7 the nightingale's song as symbol of art is shown to have been present throughout history. Its manifestations are traced back through the Middle Ages, through biblical times to the archetypal world of myth and story, which is also Keats's own romantic world, with its 'Charm'd magic casements', 'perilous seas' and 'faery lands'. The song was present both at moments of consequence and of comedy ('was heard ... by emperor and clown'), at moments of human suffering and alienation ('the sad heart of Ruth') and throughout Romantic literature. The stanza asserts one of Keats's main philosophical beliefs: the immortality of art. Yet the stanza also traces the further fading of the nightingale's song back through time to the insubstantial world of legend, myth and magic.

With this dying of the song, the inspirational creative mood fades. 'Forlorn', with its onomatopoeic and semantic connotations of desolation and wretchedness, maintains the link with Keats's magical world of stanza 7 and also expresses the poet's feelings at the fading of inspiration. Together with the allusion to a tolling funeral bell, it recalls the Keats of stanza 3, who is bowed down with the suffering of the world ('Where but to think is to be full of sorrow'). We are returned to reality in stanza 8. Poetry cannot achieve a permanent transformation of life ('Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well ... deceiving elf'). Yet this is a reality somewhat transformed by the poetic experience: nature has been imbued with the nightingale's song ('now 'tis buried deep/In the next valley-glades'). The experience was of great power, yet the poet is in some uncertainty about its nature ('Was it a vision, or a waking dream?'). Was it a truly visionary experience, an aesthetic experience with the power to transform the everyday, or merely a dream, an illusion? (See the association of dream with death in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.)

The final stanza leaves Keats with this uncertainty, this niggling doubt about the value of the poetic experience to real life. And he leaves us with this uncertainty, an intellectual attitude he regarded as a prerequisite for the creation of good literature and which he termed 'negative capability' – 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without irritable reaching after fact and reason'. Whatever the theory, the effect is that Keats's poetry remains anchored to reality. Whatever mental flight his mind makes on the 'viewless wings of Poesy', his feet remain on the ground; he maintains a healthy scepticism.

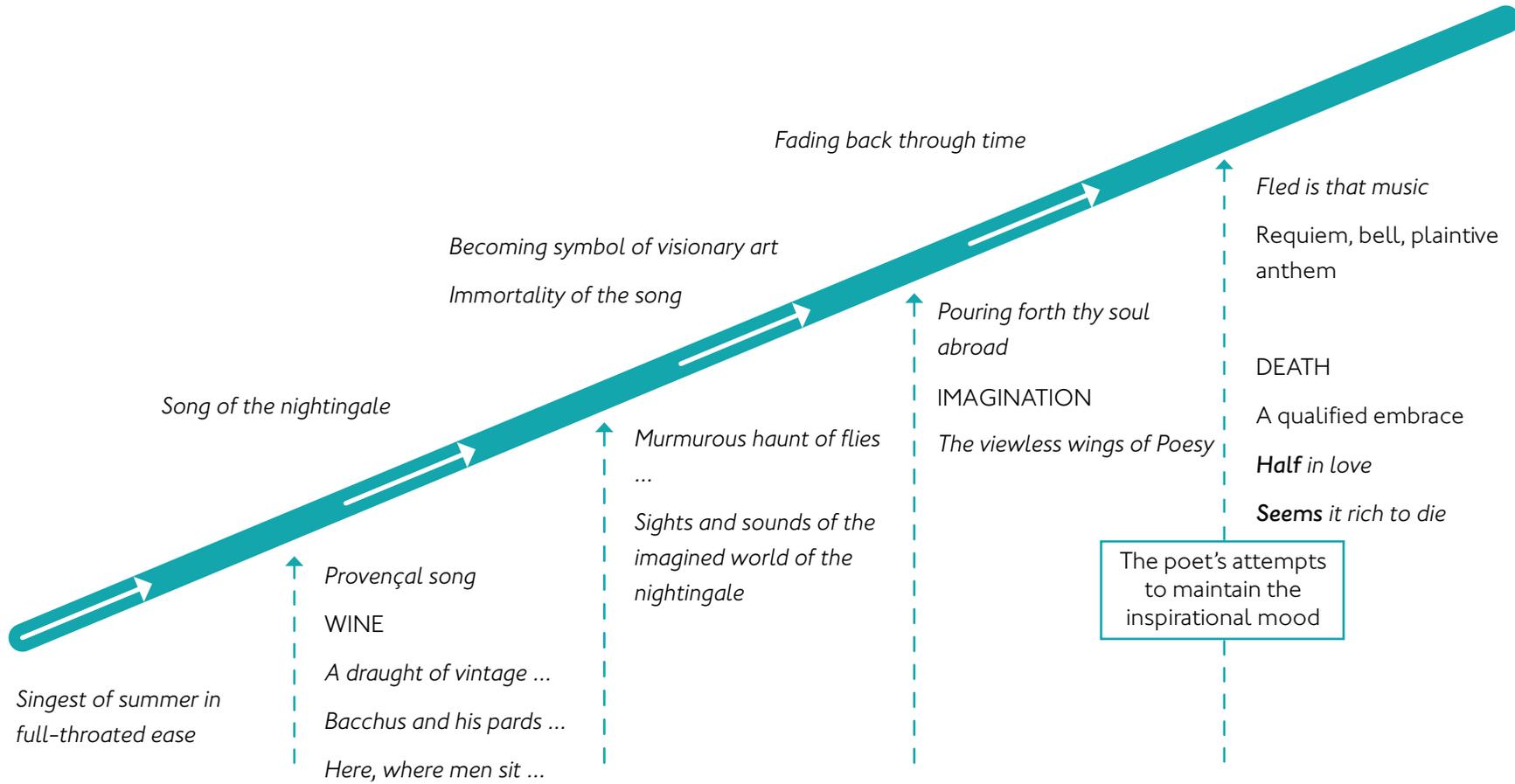




Poetic themes

- An examination of the power of the imagination ('the viewless wings of Poesy') and its limitations ('deceiving elf'). This was an issue that absorbed all Romantic poets. Does the imagination open a door to truth and higher reality – vision – or is it an escape from reality, a waking dream (see 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci')? This ode charts the poet's various attempts to maintain the imaginative inspirational mood engendered by the nightingale's song.
 - The ephemeral and transient nature of human happiness in contrast to the ever-present reality of suffering. Beauty and love are transient ('Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow').
 - A view of life that is deeply pessimistic. Life is a struggle ('The weariness, the fever, and the fret'), full of disease ('Where palsy shakes') and suffering ('where men sit and hear each other groan') and it features the tragic death of the young ('Where youth grows pale'). Beauty and love are transient and despair is the inevitable reaction ('Where but to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despairs').
 - The desire for an ideal state beyond the misery of the world, a state of beauty and happiness.
 - The search for permanence in a world of constant change. It is suggested in stanza 7 that art, as symbolised in the song of the nightingale, might provide that immortality and that permanent beauty.
- Death is seen almost as a desirable fulfilment. Keats momentarily toys with the idea of using death to prolong the moment of ecstasy.







ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER

Background

In October 1816 Keats visited Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of the headmaster of his old school, with whom he had frequently conversed about poetry. Clarke had been lent a rare 1616 folio edition of Chapman's translation of Homer. They had previously read Homer only in Pope's neo-classical translation, where the long hexameters of the Greek line had been tailored into elegant couplets. Chapman's verse was freer and more energetic. Utterly fascinated, they read all night.

At dawn Keats walked the two miles home, wrote the sonnet (which needed only slight amendments later) and sent it off to Clarke, who had received it by ten o'clock! It was published by Leigh Hunt in the *Examiner* on 1 December 1816.

Theme

The poem is really about the aesthetic thrill of reading poetry, about new worlds opened up and horizons revealed to the reader, and about the excitement of discovery in general. This is never stated explicitly, but it is communicated through the use of metaphor. Perhaps the young poet also has some awareness, or at least expectation, of the limitless possibilities of his own future stretching out before him.

Language of metaphor

The metaphorical language of journey is used to describe the narrator's encounter with various poets ('travell'd in the realms of gold', 'states and kingdoms', 'western islands'). Images of actual travel and discovery are used to convey the rapture of aesthetic discovery.

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken*

It is ironic that Chapman's speaking out 'loud and bold' is compared to an experience that induced profound silence. There is also a suggestion in the imagery that the poet too sees his life's journey as a search and exploration. This imagery gives the poet a particular romantic appeal: the dreamy, bookish speaker identifies with men of action, with people who push out the frontiers of knowledge and geography.

Sensuous language

The poem abounds in sound echoes and patterns of repeated letters, which give it a rich, sensuous musical quality. Notice, for example, the internal echoes of 'travell'd – realms' and 'breathe – serene', and also the s sounds in '**states** and kingdoms **seen**'. In the sestet, *n* echoes everywhere: **then**, **when**, **planet**, **ken**, **men**, **silent**, **upon**, **Darien**. The sensuous s sounds also abound: **skies**, **swims**, **stout**, **stored**, **Pacific**, **surmise**, **silent**. Altogether we find a rich pattern of verbal echoes.





What it reveals of the young Keats

Keats may not have had much time for the neo-classical style of poetry, which he was helping to bring to an end. Ironically, his outlook was backwards rather than forward. As the critical commentator Brian Stone points out, the sonnet demonstrates his profound preference for Renaissance language and thought over those of the eighteenth century. It also indicates his growing fascination with the world of classical Greek mythology. However, it also shows him fired with excitement for exploration, innovation, risk-taking and living life to the full.





ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

A reading of the poem

The relationship between art and reality is examined in some detail in this poem. Keats takes up the thought of stanza 7 of 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Aware of the brevity of mortal beauty and of human love, he searches for some kind of permanence and finds it in the beauty of art. The advantages and the shortcomings of this immortality conferred by art are discussed in detail in the ode.

In the first stanza the static artefact is brought to life in a most spectacular way. In a swift and successful transition, the urn, at first associated with quietness and silence, is communicating 'mad pursuit', 'struggle' and 'wild ecstasy' at the end of the stanza. The transition is all the more spectacular because of the slow tempo of the opening lines, with the meandering enjambment in lines 3 and 4 and again in lines 5, 6 and 7. The slow pace gives way to the frantic six questions in the final three lines of the stanza.

The inherent contradiction in the notion of inanimate art having a living energy or life of its own is carried in the many paradoxes of the stanza. The urn, itself an 'unravish'd bride', portrays a typical classical Grecian erotic ceremony, at first featuring 'maidens loth' but quickly turning to 'mad pursuit' and 'wild ecstasy'. The 'foster-child of silence' proceeds to convey the music of 'pipes and timbrels'. This paradox of silent utterance is continued as the silent sylvan historian tells a story that is superior to poetry or rhyme. This ambiguity sometimes extends to individual words (for instance, 'still' in line 1 can mean 'stationary' or 'yet'). This

proliferation of ambiguity and paradox underlines one of the essential conflicts of the poem: that of art versus life, permanence versus impermanence.

In the first quatrain of the second stanza the poet is confident that art is superior to reality, again expressed in a paradox ('Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter'). One can imagine far sweeter music than anything one has heard. The critic Cedric Watts has suggested that behind this section is the Platonic notion of an ideal world of eternal abstract forms of which we find only perishable imitations in this world. Only the noblest side of humankind has access to the ideal world, so it is the spirit, not the sensual ear, that hears the music of art. At any rate, art, the creation of the imagination, is superior to real experience because of its eternity ('nor ever can those trees be bare', 'She cannot fade', 'For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair'). But even here Keats is not without misgivings. Art is not life, nor even a viable alternative. Art can give immortality, certainly, but also immobility and coldness. (Does this prefigure the coldness and death of 'Cold Pastoral'?)

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss ...

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss

And so is conveyed the central flaw of the urn: that the beauty shown and the happiness conveyed are frozen in time and can never achieve fulfilment. This contradiction is also conveyed through the antithesis in the syntax (not-but, never-though, yet-though).





Yet in the third stanza Keats seems to express unreserved enthusiasm as he imaginatively enters the life of the urn ('Ah, happy, happy boughs!'). The urn here has both the warm, panting life of flesh and blood and also the eternity of art, and so is superior to real life ('For ever panting, and for ever young'). The portrayal of passion in art is superior to sexual passion in real life ('All breathing human passion far above') because it is not followed by disappointment and sorrow ('That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd') or by the illness and suffering inevitable in the changing process of time ('A burning forehead, and a parching tongue').

Many commentators feel that Keats protests too much here ('happy' six times, 'for ever' five times). Is he trying to hypnotise himself into belief in the urn, desperately trying to convince himself of the superiority of art? Brian Stone notes that he always celebrates the dream of a harmonious love relationship rather than the reality of love.

Stanza 4 provides a dramatic contrast, both in content and tone. It is as if the poet turned the urn around to examine another panel, a complete contrast, a religious procession and sacrifice. The tone is much more detached, the rhythm stately. There is a formal dignity to the stanza, as befitting a sacrificial process ('To what green altar, O mysterious priest'). There is a sense of emptiness in the scene. The absence of life in the town emphasises the absence of real life in the urn and further prepares us for a return to the coldness and reality of the next stanza.

The fifth stanza retains some slight allusions to the orgiastic excitement of earlier verses ('forest branches and the trodden weed') and perhaps also in the ambiguous 'overwrought', which could refer either to the nature of the design on the urn or to the excited state of the maidens. But much stronger is the return to an awareness of the urn as mere artefact, an inanimate if beautiful object ('marble men and maidens', 'silent form', 'Cold Pastoral'). It is an artefact that 'dost tease us out of thought'. The ambiguity of this phrase and of the last two lines has given rise to a great deal of critical disagreement. 'Tease us out of thought' could refer to the capacity of a work of art to entice us to leave aside logical thought and enter the world of the imagination, progressing to a visionary state of creativity. Or it may merely mean that it puzzles and baffles us. This latter interpretation would fit in with Cedric Watts's reading of the two final lines:

The ending of the ode is a statement in character by the riddling, paradox-loving urn; and one which appropriately concludes this teasing poem ... The urn is a consolatory 'friend to man'; but also a mocking, tantalising one.

Is it the poet's conclusion that the relationship between art and reality is mysterious and baffling?

Most critical discussion has centred on the final two lines of stanza 5. There are two main aspects of this debate:

- i. How should the lines be punctuated and who speaks them? The present version is punctuated as it was in the collection *Poems, 1820*, which Keats saw through the press, though the quotation marks are not present in any surviving transcript of the poem. It is generally agreed now that the urn is the





speaker both of the aphorism and of the recommendation to humankind.

- Does the aphorism 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' make sense? Some critics have described it as an over-simplification, a pseudo-statement. T.S. Eliot felt that it was meaningless. But many of these critics also admitted that it brought together the paradoxes and oppositions of the poem and is therefore dramatically appropriate at least. But what does it really mean? Does it mean that 'aesthetic perfection [i.e. beauty] and conceptual truth are identical' (Watts)? Keats's letters would lend credence to this. He wrote:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth ... The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth ...

But we know from experience that some truths are not beautiful: human cruelty, for example. So what does Keats mean by 'truth'? Examine Graham Hough's interpretation:

In this context, where transience and permanence are the two poles of the argument, truth means that which has lasting value ... Keats is saying that beauty is truer than love, pleasure and other forms of value, because they pass away while beauty can be embodied in a lasting quasi-permanent form.

Perhaps Keats intended this ambiguity. He relished the immortality of beauty found in art, but its cold stasis was unsatisfying. He was too much an advocate of passionate, sensuous living to accept that. So he is left with this somewhat unsatisfactory symbol of immortality. Yet the urn, emblem of beauty, conveys some lasting value or truth to humankind. It is a sign of eternity in the midst of impermanence ('when old age shall this generation waste'), an embodiment of beauty in the midst of human woe. The poet is asserting the importance of art to humankind.

Themes

- An examination of the relationship between art and life. Art, because it is timeless, is superior to life. Art catches the perfection of beauty, love and passion and preserves them out of time. Yet art is cold and lifeless and does not answer humanity's need to feel, to experience, to achieve fulfilment.
- Natural beauty and love are transient, yet art is there as a sign of beauty and loveliness, which is timeless.
- Art is a consolation, a friend to humankind, displaying an ideal and demonstrating the continuity of human affairs.
- Keats seems to champion the visual arts over poetry: 'Sylvan historian, who canst thus express/A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme'.

Some linked thoughts on 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Both the nightingale's song and the urn are manifestations of eternal beauty, and both are found to be unsatisfactory in some way. The imagination fails to allow the poet to escape





permanently into the world of the nightingale, and the immortalisation of beauty in the Grecian urn is not entirely satisfactory because of its frozen immobility.

Yet the creative experiences are very different. The nightingale can only be experienced through the imagination and needs to be sustained by the creative mood. It is less substantial than the solid urn, which stands there available for viewing at any time.

The prevailing atmosphere in 'Ode to a Nightingale' is one of sensuous darkness, a sort of creative twilight zone. The figures on the Grecian urn are always in full view, the atmosphere either of frenzied sensuous excitement or of sombre dignity illuminated by the light of the 'pious morn'.

As a symbol of immortal art, the urn is more satisfying. Consider:

- The duration of its existence: it has already survived down through history.
- It is a record of a much-valued and idealised culture, which it has outlasted.
- It is a circular object, suggesting endlessness.
- It is a three-dimensional, solid, substantial object, readily available for viewing.
- There is a balanced realism about the symbol; while it may be a sign of eternity, it also carries reminders of mortality (as a funeral urn for the ashes of the dead). 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a very personal experience, told in the first person. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is a more objective poem. We are very much aware that it is an object out there, not just a product of

the poet's imagination. There is no first-person voice of the poet. Keats expresses doubts in both poems but seems more confident and assured at the end of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.





WHEN I HAVE FEARS THAT I MAY CEASE TO BE

The poet's concerns

The poem deals with three of Keats's constant concerns: love, death and poetry. The predominant fear is of untimely death. This is expressed in a euphemism ('I may cease to be') that conveys the absolute finality of death, though in a tranquil tone. Death for Keats would mean the end of what he hopes to achieve. His fear is of not fulfilling his poetic destiny, not employing his 'teeming brain', and poetry is about expressing beauty, whether of nature ('the night's starr'd face') or of women. This beauty is a rare and transient visitor ('fair creature of an hour'), like an apparition granted to the poet but outside his control. The poetic process is also somewhat outside the poet's control, a mysterious process, a fortuitous gift ('the magic hand of chance'). There is a typical romantic view of the poet as solitary soul, pensive and operating at the frontiers of experience:

...then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone and think

Love here is more an idealisation of female beauty than a real human encounter. The love object is a transient, unattainable beauty, to be worshipped from a distance, without hope of reciprocation ('fair creature of an hour', 'never look upon thee more', 'the fairy power/Of unreflecting love'). Is this not an adolescent perspective on love as unrequited adoration? His fear, then, is that untimely death may interfere with his poetic destiny and his worship of beauty.

Form

Keats's study of the Shakespearean form evidently influenced this sonnet. Notice:

- The three distinct quatrains
- The rhyming scheme
- The end-stopped lines (for the most part)
- The syntactic structure ('when ... when ... then' was a favourite Shakespearean structure; see Sonnet 12)

The couplet really begins in line 12 ('then on the shore') and so softens the epigrammatical nature of the couplet that Keats faulted.





LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

Love, corruption and death

This is one of three poems by Keats dealing with love between a human male and a superhuman female (see also 'Endymion' and 'Lamia'), and only in 'Endymion' is there a happy outcome. Here, as in 'Lamia', we are dealing with a female enchantress, this time a murderous one. La Belle Dame is the fatal woman-figure often found in romantic literature who seduces the knight and fatally weakens him in the act of love. She is viewed as a 'demon muse' by the critic Katherine Wilson. Whether or not she is inspirational, she is certainly fatal. Love is here associated with death. Some commentators have wondered if this is an expression of Keats's feelings of guilt about love. Robert Graves (in *The White Goddess*) took a more complex view and felt that 'the Belle Dame represented love, death by consumption ... and poetry all at once'.

But the knight here did not succeed in resisting: he has been fatally corrupted and is languishing ('palely loitering'). So we presume that he was to some degree responsible, to some extent a compliant partner in the seduction. Corruption follows seduction in the world of this poem.

This is another of Keats's poems to feature the human being in a strange transitional state. It is as if the knight has been transported beyond the reality of this life and has visited the underworld, where he encountered others seduced like himself. He managed to return, but was fatally weakened.

Background

Establishing a biographical rationale for a poem is risky at the best of times. Here it is doubly so because the evidence is definitely circumstantial, but Aileen Ward makes a number of fascinating comments concerning the background circumstances. Earlier in the month of April 1819, Keats had come across a bundle of love letters to his late brother Tom from Amena, a mysterious French acquaintance of Tom's school friend Charles Wells. There had been a long, sentimental correspondence between the two, with Wells as intermediary. Tom had even gone to France in a vain effort to meet her. Now Keats discovered that it had all been a hoax by Wells and was furious at the strain that had been inflicted on his already dying brother. This may not have been the conscious inspiration for the poem, but it lends a certain poignancy to the figure of the pale knight and the theme of love, delusion and betrayal.

Ward also makes the point that Keats himself exhibited a fear of involvement in his own love affair with Fanny Brawne about this time, writing, 'Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom.' Though he was enormously drawn to her, writing poetry had a superior claim on him, and he seemed to see the two in opposition. Though the experience of love was the life blood of his poetry, he seemed to shy away from the actual. 'Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and trouble, I have been endeavouring to wean myself from you,' he wrote to her in September of that year. Whether this refers to his personal and financial circumstances or to his notion of the life of a poet is not clear, but the point is that





his ambiguity about love and his fear of involvement at that time may be reflected in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

Mediaeval resonances in the poem

Keats had a particular fascination with the mediaeval, and this is one of the last of the poems in which he used the literature and folklore of the Middle Ages.

- Consider the origin of the title. The phrase 'la belle dame sans merci' comes from the terminology of courtly love and refers to the withholding of the lady's favours.
- A characteristic of the mediaeval supernatural ballad was the seduction of a human being by one of the fairies, who took power from men by luring them into making love.
- Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, which was a model for some of Keats's work, also features an enchantress from the mediaeval world.
- The mediaeval ballad sometimes featured a waste land that could be made green again through the intervention of a virtuous knight.

The ballad

The poem exhibits many of the classic characteristics of the ballad form. The most common features of ballads are:

- Themes of love, war or death, often exhibited as a supernatural encounter
- A narrative poem – narration through dialogue
- Archaic language and phrasing

- Simplicity of vocabulary
- Repetition of phrases
- Dramatic qualities of action and conflict
- Ballad metre, usually four-line stanzas of 4, 3, 4, 3 stresses. This moved the story along at a fairly swift pace. Keats has altered this to produce a slower and more haunting rhythm. He lengthened the second line by a foot and shortened the last line by two feet, with a weighty last foot using a spondee (- -):

~ - ~ - ~ - ~ -
O what/can ail/thee knight/at arms

~ - ~ - ~ - ~ -
Alone/and pale/ly loit/ering?

~ - ~ - ~ - ~ -
The sedge/has with/ered from/the Lake

~ - ~ - ~ -
And no/birds sing!

In the last line we are slowed by the concentration of stressed syllables unrelieved by any unstressed ones and also by the placing of the two s sounds in 'birds **s**ing', where we have to pause to enunciate the second s. An atmosphere of doom is created both by the weight of the syllables and by the sibilance.





TO AUTUMN

Theme

The poem celebrates the natural abundance of autumn. Certain aspects of the season are celebrated in each stanza: the rich fruiting of the vegetable world (stanza 1), the varied and thrilling musical sounds of the animals, birds and insects (stanza 3) and the calm, lethargic mood of the season, with which human activities and moods are completely in tune (stanza 2).

Furthermore, Keats celebrates the beauty of the season in the full knowledge that it is transient, part of the changing cycle of life:

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, –
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day*

Structure

Outwardly at least the poem has a very clear, even symmetrical structure. Each stanza examines an element of the season: stanza 1, the vegetable world; stanza 2, human activities; stanza 3, animals, birds and insects. The critic Walter Jackson Bate has explored the complexity and tension beneath the surface. Each stanza concentrates on a dominant aspect of autumn but at the same time preserves an element of its opposite. For example, the theme of the first stanza is ripeness, the maturity of autumn fruit, yet growth is still going on ('to set budding more,/And still more'). 'So process is continuing within a context of attained fulfilment' (Bate).

We find a similar but opposite pattern in the second stanza. The activities of harvesting are mainly represented through images of stillness and inactivity. In the third stanza the birds, animals and insects are portrayed in active, concrete imagery full of energy and life, yet there are hints of transience and death too ('the small gnats mourn' and 'gathering swallows twitter in the skies'). Beneath the simple structure we find something of Keats's paradoxical complexity.

Other critics have noted the logical progress of the poem as it moves slowly through the season: pre-harvest ripeness in the first stanza, followed by the harvesting of the second stanza and the post-harvest 'stubble-plains' of the third stanza.

The day provides a further symmetry for the structure of the ode: morning ('the maturing sun') in the first stanza, through the activities of the day in the second stanza, to evening ('the soft-dying day') in the third stanza.

Personification of autumn

Personified autumn is addressed throughout all three stanzas ('Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun' in stanza 1, 'thou hast thy music too' in stanza 3). The autumn of stanzas 1 and 3 is very real, the images concrete, depicting the actual sights of the season ('the moss'd cottage-trees', 'the stubble-plains with rosy hue', 'The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft').

But the second stanza features an elaborate and varied personification of the season as a person engaged in the various activities of harvesting – or not engaged, because three of the four poses depict postures of casual inactivity, 'a kind of





beautiful lethargy', as Brian Stone describes it: 'sitting careless on a granary floor', sound asleep or drugged on a furrow, or just calmly watching the oozings of the cider press. The only activity is performed in the picture of the gleaner balancing a load on her head as she crosses a brook. Even that activity is stately and unhurried, the balancing tension conveyed by the line bisection of the phrase 'keep/Steady'. Most critics are agreed that these figures show the human at one with the natural world, interacting with calm empathy.

Less readily agreed is whether this is a masculine or a feminine personification. Stone feels that the first figure is feminine, influenced perhaps by the languid delicacy of the 'hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind'. The third figure, of the gleaner, he also takes as feminine, as this work was traditionally performed by women and children. The sleeping reaper he takes as male, while the watcher of the cider press could be of either sex, though he sees him as male. His conception is coloured by social history.

Cedric Watts sees the entire personification as of indeterminate sex, though traditionally it has been regarded as masculine. Helen Vendler views the stanza as a totally feminine personification of autumn:

Keats's goddess of autumn, nearer to us than pagan goddesses because, unlike them, she labours in the fields and is herself thrashed by the winnowing wind, varies in her manifestation from careless girl to burdened gleaner to patient watcher, erotic in her abandon to the fume of poppies, intimate of light in her bosom friendship with the maturing sun, worn by her vigil over the last oozings.

Leon Waldoff agrees, seeing autumn as a goddess of fruition and plenty, taking her place with the imaginative figures of the other odes: a feminine soul (Psyche), a bird whose mournful song was heard by Ruth, a mysterious urn and a goddess of melancholy. How do you see it?

A poem of Keats's mature philosophy

Though the great odes have many elements in common, strictly speaking they are not a sequence. Yet we are justified in finding in this ode a development of thought and tone that indicates a more mature, integrated outlook on life. In this respect 'To Autumn' is a fitting culmination to the odes.

Gone is the restless searching after beauty in nightingale and Grecian urn; gone the quest for permanence (nightingale and Grecian urn); no more headlong flight and attempts to escape the horrors and suffering of life (nightingale). Past too is the conflict between beauty and transience, joy and sorrow, which was partially resolved in 'Ode on Melancholy', with the realisation that melancholy is in everything and is an intrinsic part of the search for beauty and joy. Here the restlessness has eased, replaced by the fulfilled and lethargic spirit of autumn. The human spirit is at ease with the world rather than in flight from it. There is a hint that the eternal search for perfection might still haunt the poet's soul ('Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?'), but it no longer presents itself with the same desperate need as in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' ('Ah, happy, happy, boughs! that cannot shed/Your leaves'). Here thoughts of spring are pushed aside ('Think not of them, thou hast thy music too'). And it is this acceptance of life as





it is, in all its transient beauty, that we find in the third stanza that exemplifies Keats's mature philosophy. He is accepting here that maturity, death and regeneration are interconnected. The faint hints of death in the 'soft-dying day', 'the small gnats mourn' and the 'light wind' that 'dies' are an integral part of the season that includes 'the stubble-plains with rosy hue', the 'full-grown lambs' and the 'gathering swallows'. He is accepting the transient nature of existence, but this no longer takes from his enjoyment. As Leon Waldoff says, 'Keats gives expression to a keen sense of transience and loss, but it is integrated into an acceptance of a natural process that includes growth as well as decay.'

This is not to suggest that Keats has suddenly become harshly realistic. This ode paints an idealised picture of the English countryside, a green land of plenty, with the pace of life unhurried and humankind in tranquil empathy with nature. The poem exhibits a mixture of realism and what Cedric Watts calls 'consolatory fantasy'. It is as if all this richness just appeared spontaneously. He has chosen to hide the toil, the sweaty labour, the peasant squalor. Would a Marxist critic say this was a dishonest poem? At any rate, in choosing the representative features of autumn Keats has exercised an 'optimistic selectivity' (Watts).

Tone

Readers are generally agreed on the calm tone of this poem. There are no introspective passages, no dramatic debates and hardly any qualifications such as we find in the other odes. Instead we find a calm assurance, both in the fruitfulness of the season (stanza 1) and in its value (stanza 3: 'thou hast thy music too').

The tranquillity and serenity of stanza 2 are obvious. But it is a valediction, a farewell to the season, and the awareness of coming winter is felt particularly in the third stanza, as we have seen. Yet it is not sentimental, saved perhaps by the wealth of apt detail and precise description, which give a balanced context for the hints of mourning and the sense of impending loss ('in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn/Among the river shallows').

Imagery

As usual, the images assail the whole range of our senses, often simultaneously, in the synaesthetic imagery characteristic of Keats (synaesthesia is the fusion of two or more senses in the one image, as in the tactile-visual 'touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue'). This allows us to experience what is being described in a real, three-dimensional way. Keats also makes a dominant appeal to one particular sense in each of the three stanzas: tactile in stanza 1, visual in stanza 2 and auditory in stanza 3. For example, in stanza 1 the abundance, the sumptuousness, the ripe plenty of autumn is communicated in tactile imagery, in particular through the full weighty verbs ('load', 'bend', 'fill', 'swell the gourd', 'plump the hazel shells', 'set budding'). The images of the second stanza are visual in the main, personifying autumn in human poses that are relaxed yet alert (in three of the four), communicating, according to Bate, 'energy caught in repose' ('sitting careless on a granary floor,/Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind', 'by a cyder-press, with patient look'). The critic Ian Jack suggested that the pictorial details are probably inspired by paintings, but Keats concentrates on realistic detail of actual harvest operations (the granary, winnowing, a gleaner, a cyder-press). This weight of





concrete detailed imagery, combined with apt observation, gives this poem a sense of actuality. This saves it from becoming mere bucolic fancy, even though the details are selective and avoid unpleasant reality, as we saw earlier.

The densely packed nature of the imagery also fosters the sense of actuality. This density often results from the poet's habit of packing a number of elements, often hyphenated, into a single image ('close bosom-friend', 'moss'd cottage-trees', 'a half-reap'd furrow', 'the soft-dying day').

The music of the language

Qualities of the season are carried not just by the imagery, but also by the very sounds of the words in dense patterns of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and musical echoes that reverberate throughout the poem. For example, in the first stanza the sensuousness of the season is conveyed through the soft alliterative *m* sounds of 'mists', 'mellow', 'maturing' and the tacky 'clammy cells'. The sense of calm fullness comes through the long vowels of 'trees', 'bees', 'cease', while 'swell', 'hazel', 'shells' and 'kernel' might suggest bells echoing across the autumn stillness. The onomatopoeic 'winnowing wind' gives a lift to the otherwise lethargic second stanza, a calmness perfectly rendered by the sibilant *s* sounds and the lazy long vowels of 'watchest the last oozings hours by hours'. The third stanza plays the music of autumn in its auditory imagery but also through the actual sounds of the words. For example, the inherent tinge of sadness is carried in the long vowels of 'mourn', 'borne', 'bourn'.





BRIGHT STAR, WOULD I WERE STEADFAST AS THOU ART

Background

For many years this was considered to be Keats's last poem, as he wrote this version of it aboard ship on his final journey to Italy in the autumn of 1820. But earlier and somewhat different versions have turned up and biographers and scholars can now, with some confidence, trace the composition to late July 1819. The sonnet is a love poem to Fanny Brawne. Aileen Ward links its composition to this letter of 25 July 1819 from the poet to his beloved:

Sunday Night

My sweet Girl,

I hope you did not blame me much for not obeying your request of a Letter on Saturday: we have had four in our small room playing at cards night and morning leaving me no undisturb'd opportunity to write. Now Rice and Martin are gone, I am at liberty. Brown to my sorrow confirms the account you give of your ill health. You cannot conceive how I ache to be with you: how I would die for one hour – for what is in the world? I say you cannot conceive; it is impossible you should look with such eyes upon me as I have upon you: it cannot be. Forgive me if I wander a little this evening, for I have been all day employ'd in a very abstract Poem and I am in deep love with you – two things which must excuse me. I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me; the very first week I

knew you I wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter as the very next time I saw you I thought you manifested some dislike to me. If you should ever feel for Man at the first sight what I did for you, I am lost. Yet I should not quarrel with you, but hate myself if such a thing were to happen – only I should burst if the thing were not as fine as a Man as you are as a Woman. Perhaps I am too vehement, then fancy me on my knees, especially when I mention a part of your Letter which hurt me; you say speaking of Mr. Severn 'but you must be satisfied in knowing that I admired you much more than your friend.' My dear love, I cannot believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes – I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired. You are, I love you; all I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your Beauty. I hold that place among Men which snubnos'd brunettes with meeting eyebrows do among women – they are trash to me – unless I should find one among them with a fire in her heart like the one that burns in mine. You absorb me in spite of myself – you alone: for I look not forward with any pleasure to what is call'd being settled in the world; I tremble at domestic cares – yet for you I would meet them, though if it would leave you the happier I would rather die than do so. I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. From no other would I take it. I am indeed astonish'd to find myself





so careless of all charms but yours – remembering as I do the time when even a bit of ribband was a matter of interest with me. What softer words can I find for you after this – what it is I will not read. Nor will I say more here, but in a Postscript answer any thing else you may have mentioned in your Letter in so many words – for I am distracted with a thousand thoughts. I will imagine you Venus to night and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Hethen. Your’s ever, fair Star, John Keats

My seal is mark’d like a family table cloth with my mother’s initial F for Fanny: put between my Father’s initials. You will soon hear from me again. My respectful Compts to your Mother. Tell Margaret I’ll send her a reef of best rocks and tell Sam I will give him my light bay hunter if he will tie the Bishop hand and foot and pack him in a hamper and send him down for me to bathe him for his health with a Necklace of good snubby stones about his Neck.

Ward feels that all the conflicts expressed in this letter – the passion that absorbs him in spite of himself, his fear of ‘domestic cares’ and ‘being settled in the world’ yet his willingness to face them for her – are resolved temporarily in the imagery of the sonnet. The image of the ever-wakeful North Star unblinkingly contemplating the world can be traced back further to a letter Keats wrote to his brother Tom, describing a visit to Lake Windermere in June 1818:

... the two views we have had of it are of the most noble tenderness – they can never fade away – they make one

forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches; and refine one’s sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast over the wonders of the great Power ...

He seems to see the attitude of the North Star as the appropriate one for poetry: one of calm, detached contemplation.

A reading of the poem

If we take an autobiographical approach to the sonnet we see it to be about the conflicting claims of poetry and love in the life of the poet.

The octave deals primarily with his poetic preoccupations – the nature of the ideal attitude for a poet. The star symbolises a perfect state of awareness – a calm, contemplating consciousness gazing on the changes wrought by nature (‘the moving waters’) and on the quiet, unheralded beauties of nature that had always fascinated him (‘the new soft-fallen mask/Of snow upon the mountains and the moors’). But the ‘creative loneliness’, which is a characteristic mode of all Romantic poets, he rejects categorically (‘Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night’). Human company is preferred above this poetic isolation, and the beauty he prefers to contemplate is not that of nature, but the physical body of his love.

And it is to the sensuous aspect of love that the sestet is devoted, painting a picture of romantic intimacy that involves sensuous physical closeness (‘Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast’) and an awareness of his beloved so intense that he seems almost to share her life breath (‘still to hear her tender-taken breath’). Just





as the star stands for permanence, Keats wishes to permanently preserve this experience of love ('To feel for ever its soft swell and fall'). This paradoxical attempt to hold the moment, to preserve unchanged real, breathing, sensuous love, is illogical and vain but emotionally defensible. It ends in the already invalidated endeavour to preserve the moment by dying at the pinnacle of happiness ('Ode on a Grecian Urn'). The star also symbolises the steadfastness he longed for in his relationship with Fanny Brawne. He too wishes to be 'still stedfast, still unchangeable'. So once again we have the timeless but ultimately unsatisfying perfection of art contrasted with the transient but sensuous enjoyment of real experience. Keats is attempting to have the best of both sides, the permanence and the experience. The excited tone of the sestet, with its enthusiastic verbal repetitions ('Still, still', 'for ever'), suggests that human love is preferable to poetry or art.

Keats always admired the purity of nature, and here we find the tides performing a cleansing religious ritual for the world ('priestlike task/Of pure ablution round earth's human shores'). The 'religious' aspect of nature is emphasised ('sleepless eremite', 'priestlike task', 'pure ablution'). The benevolent relationship of nature to humankind is stressed. Nature purifies. In previous poems the skies were searched for signs of value, of truth ('huge cloudy symbols of a high romance'). Now the perspective has changed. The stars are no longer watched; they have become the watchers. Is this a more benevolent guardianship role for nature? But nature too is found to be less important than love.

Ideas explored

- The importance of the sensuous experience of love, even above poetry or the contemplation of nature
- A great need to make this experience permanent
- Steadfastness and unchangeability as the marks of true love
- The purity and permanence of nature and its beneficial relationship with humankind
- An understanding of the poet as disinterested viewer and lonely creator





OVERVIEW OF JOHN KEATS

Romantic poetry in context

The revolution of 1688, which put the Protestant William of Orange and Mary on the throne of England, put an end to the religious and political conflict of the seventeenth century and ushered in a century of relative peace and order that became known as the Augustan Age (because of a perceived parallel with the golden age of Augustus Caesar). It was also referred to as the Age of Enlightenment (roughly 1690–1790).

While it is always false to generalise, we can say that the following notions were characteristic of the period.

- Order – in life, in society and in literature – was considered of vital importance. The human being was seen as part of the great chain of life, an established hierarchy that stretched from primitive vegetable life all the way up to God. It was an era of deep social conservatism.
- Reason rather than passion was the supreme virtue. The emotions were suspect. John Dryden wrote: ‘A man is to be cheated into Passion, but to be reasoned into Truth.’
- It was an era of profound scepticism: doubt about people’s ability to reform, change or develop and scepticism about the possibility of human progress. This was reflected in the satires of Dryden and Pope and in the satirical fables of Jonathan Swift, all emphasising human failings and corruption and attempting to show humankind the error of its ways.

The foremost poets of this period were:

- John Dryden (1631–1700)
- Alexander Pope (1688–1744)
- Jonathan Swift (1667–1745)

New trends in the Romantic period

Cult of feeling

If Augustan poetry was known for its reason (the poet using his rational and argumentative faculties to guide humankind by the light of reason) and its intellectual style of composition (the use of wit, paradox, irony, bathos and classical and other learned allusions), then Romantic poetry was distinguished by the cult of feeling. For Wordsworth, poetry was ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’, yet it was not uncontrolled – it was ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’. Wordsworth also felt that the feelings were restrained, of necessity, by the observation of the outer world. For the most part, the English Romantics were more objective than the French. But Shelley said, ‘Poetry is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and its birth and recurrence have no necessary connection with consciousness or will’ (*Defence of Poetry*). Keats wished for ‘a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts’. For Keats, the necessary frame of mind for writing was the acceptance of things as they are without trying to rationalise them. This is behind his notion of ‘negative capability’ (‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’). There was a definite downgrading of reason. Sincerity, sensitivity and self-expression were the key qualities.





New subject matter

The poets of the eighteenth century generally turned to the social environment and to the nature of human beings for their subjects and themes. 'The proper study of mankind is man,' wrote Alexander Pope. The poets of the rationalist age found their inspiration in the world of matter (Dryden and Pope in politics, for example). The Romantic poets looked for inspiration to the more mysterious aspects of human experience and to the world of dreams (see 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'). The poet looked inside his own mind rather than to society as a subject of study. The imaginative and the spiritual were fostered instead of the rational.

New understanding of the imagination

Dryden feared the ungoverned imagination, 'for imagination in a poet is a faculty so wild and lawless, that, like a high ranking spaniel it must have dogs tied to it, lest it outrun the judgment'. He felt that the imagination should be restrained by the need for rhyme and by the regular discipline of the heroic couplet.

But the Romantics transformed the concept of the imagination, seeing it as a creative force central to the process of poetry. Shelley went so far as to define poetry as 'the expression of the imagination'. Wordsworth spoke of poetry as 'works of imagination and sentiment'. Keats said, 'I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth.'

Whereas the Augustan poets were content to convey in poetry the outer manifestation of their subjects, the Romantics were trying to convey the inner essence of things. The sheer power of

imagination allows the poet to share in the life of the subject, as in 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'To Autumn' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Keats was constantly experiencing the tension between these visionary moments and the real world.

New poetics

Because the Romantics were dealing with abstract themes and trying to express the inward essence in concrete terms, the significance of imagery changed. The image was no longer merely decorative, as in Augustan poetry, but became a more complex carrier of meaning, often having symbolic weight, such as the Grecian urn and the nightingale.

The regularity and self-control of the rhyming couplet was regarded by the new poets as a straitjacket, producing facile and insincere poetry. Keats belittled the rhyming couplet:

*With a puling infant's force
They swayed upon a rocking horse
and thought it Pegasus.*

Reacting against the stylised dictum of the Augustans, Wordsworth in particular felt that the language of poetry should be ordinary and simple: poetry should be written 'as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men'. He also felt that the poet should write about 'incidents and situations from common life', thus we get the conversational blank verse of 'Tintern Abbey'. Keats's views on poetic diction were different, often favouring the archaic, even the mediaeval expression, such as that used in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.





For the Romantics the role of the poet in society was different too. Poets were no longer sarcastic social commentators but were often withdrawn completely from society, more concerned with their own inner vision. But because of their belief in the power of the imagination to discover truth, the poet was a very powerful creative force in society. Paradoxically, although the poet was less concerned with social issues, a great claim was made for the importance of poetry in society. While Keats hardly ever dealt with social themes, he made substantial claims for art as a mediator of eternal truth for society:

*'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, –' that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

The importance of nature

For many of the Romantics the varied and overpowering moods of nature provided the occasion for moments of personal revelation or of intense private experience, which replaced the experience of orthodox religion. For example, Wordsworth felt nature to be a moral guide, a teacher, a comforter to humankind. Keats did not dwell very much on the significance and power of nature, but he enjoyed its sensuous aspects, which is particularly evident in 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'To Autumn'.

The foremost poets of the Romantic period were:

- William Blake (1757–1827)
- William Wordsworth (1770–1850)
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)
- Lord Byron (1788–1824)

- Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)
- John Keats (1795–1821)

Though elements of Romanticism are found both before and after, the high point of the period is generally dated between 1789 (the year Blake's *Songs of Innocence* was published) and 1824, when Byron died.

The sensuous verse of Keats

Keats's basic apprehension of the world is through the senses. Joy and sorrow are to be tasted ('strenuous tongue can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine', 'glut thy sorrow', 'feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes'). Misery is audible ('here, where men sit and hear each other groan'). Death is visible ('youth grows pale'); despair and beauty are visible ('leaden-eyed despairs', 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes'). Seduction is through taste ('she found me roots of relish sweet/And honey wild and manna dew'). Literature is to be breathed in ('yet did I never breathe its pure serene'). Poetry is born of touch ('the magic hand of chance'). The spiritual is accessed through sound ('pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone'). Passion is apprehended in all its wild sensuousness ('for ever warm ... for ever panting').

Keats delighted particularly in nature, not for its mystical power or moral influence, as with Wordsworth, but for the sheer enjoyment of its luxurious life and growth. A sensuous appreciation of nature and of all life is one of his main themes. He recreates for us the seductive fascination of the nightingale's song; the sensuous world of the trees inhabited by the bird; the visual beauty of the Grecian urn; and the tactile awareness as well as the sounds of autumn.





Keats is not entirely naive about the negative side of sensual delight. He is aware that excess physical delight can satiate, glut the feeling, and so lessen the sensitivity.

*That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.*

He is aware that all delight is transitory. Even the physical appetite wanes. He is aware, too, of the inherent decay in all things:

*aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.*

Keats's sensuous imagery, which he uses liberally, is his way of communicating half-glimpsed truths, making the eternal present, trying to express the abstract in terms of the concrete, the intangible in terms of the very tangible. Thus, beauty is encapsulated in the visible urn or in the tangible fruits of autumn ('thou shalt remain ... a friend to man', 'swell the gourd'). Hints of immortality float to us on the notes of the nightingale ('The voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient days by emperor and clown'). The awareness of transience is mediated in the music of autumn ('and gathering swallows twitter').

Sometimes the senses fuse and mingle in an image. Keats uses this synaesthetic imagery to create the most complete and rounded sensuous effect possible. We get some fine examples of the working of this technique in 'Ode to a Nightingale', where the bird sings in 'some melodious plot/Of beechen green'. The fusion of the senses of sound and sight emphasises that the bird is at one with the location, as the song merges with the undergrowth. Synaesthetic imagery allows the location to be presented with a

realism that might rival 3-D in modern cinematic terms. Consider:

*But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown.*

Light is blown, aptly describing the flickering light intermittently penetrating through the wind-blown leaves. The use of such imagery to evoke the natural habitat of the nightingale in stanza 5 is much commented on (see page 47). Stanza 2 is also worth examining to see how the images link, providing a chain of sensual effects that achieve a forward momentum, spiriting the poet 'away into the forest dim'. The 'draught of vintage' leads to 'tasting of Flora'. Taste calls up a series of pictures: goddess of flowers, fertility ('country green'); country green refers perhaps to country dance, to song, to outdoor celebration. 'Provençal song' recalls the warm south, and so back to the taste of wine and the possibilities for escape into oblivion. The synaesthetic imagery aptly evokes the full richness of the pleasures of wine but also the poet's confused reeling between sensuous pleasure and the need to escape. It is as if he is quite overcome by the variety of the world.

In general, the synaesthetic use of imagery allows the poet to evoke a richness and an immediacy of experience that might not otherwise be possible. Other critics have felt that it indicates a 'unified' vision of the world on the part of the poet. 'His synaesthetic imagery is an outward manifestation of his intuitive sense of the oneness of things, of the relationship between widely separate and dissimilar phenomena, of the intimate kinship of man and nature' (Richard Fogle, in *Keats: Twentieth-Century Views*, edited by Walter Jackson Bate). Keats also uses





the sensuous aspects of language: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and repeated and echoing sound effects; for a detailed study of this examine 'To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent', 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' and 'To Autumn', together with their critical commentaries.

The critic Brian Stone feels that there is evidence that Keats began to control his exuberance as he developed, refining his vocabulary by reducing the number of adjectives and adverbs, strengthening the verse by a greater use of verbs and reducing the reliance on melodic words of Latin origin. Would you agree with this assessment?

Keats and variety of forms

Keats was amazingly versatile and constantly experimental in his approach to poetry. We have seen something of the range of poetic genres he used: long narratives, lyric poems and ballads. During his short career he experimented with all the chief forms of English poetry, such as heroic couplets, octosyllabic couplets, ottava rima, the Spenserian stanza, blank verse and both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms.

As we have seen, he was not greatly enamoured of the eighteenth century use of the heroic couplet, finding it too constricting in thought and rhyme. So he altered it – sometimes using run-on lines instead of end-stopped ones, using irregular stresses and sometimes 'feminine rhymes' (with an additional unstressed final syllable). The desired effect was to allow the verse to flow more easily and so carry more complex and deeper ideas without the necessity of boxing them securely in couplets. He used this form

of verse in 'Endymion'. The sonnet form was little used in the eighteenth century, but Keats was greatly drawn to it. Over a third of his completed poems are sonnets. Most of the early sonnets are autobiographical in theme and almost exclusively Petrarchan in form, with an octave, *abba abba*, and a sestet, *cdcdcd* or *cdecde*. Keats observed the formal thought structure: main thought or problem stated in the octave, with a volta, or turn, to a new thought or a resolution of the problem in the sestet. 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' is structured in this form.

But he also used the Shakespearean form, as in 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be'. This follows the Shakespearean rhyming scheme (*abab cdcd efef gg*), is structured into three separate but linked quatrains and a rhyming couplet and uses end-stopped couplet lines for the most part. But even here Keats is straining at the regularity of the form and he has the final couplet actually beginning in the middle of the twelfth line, 'deliberately frustrating the epigrammatic tendency inherent in the regular form', as Brian Stone says. He returned to the sonnet form again in 1819, prepared to experiment even further. 'Bright Star' follows the normal Shakespearean rhyming scheme but has the Petrarchan division of octave and sestet, albeit with a distinct rhyming couplet to finish. He wrote to his brother George and George's wife, Georgiana, in May 1819:

I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate [i.e. Petrarchan] does not suit the language overwell from the pouncing rhyme – the other kind [i.e. Shakespearean] appears too elegiac – the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect – I do not pretend to have succeeded.





Experiment was not confined to sonnets. He adapted the mediaeval ballad for 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. He used three four-stress iambic lines and a shorter final three-stress or two-stress line in each stanza. The last line is rendered particularly slow and heavy because of the lack of unstressed syllables. The effect is to build up the unreal, forlorn atmosphere of the poem: 'And no birds sing'.

The ode is a very formal, dignified and heavyweight form of lyric poetry, usually of some length. It is derived from an ancient Greek form that was often sung or accompanied by music. Odes were relatively new on the scene in English poetry, Wordsworth's ode 'Intimations of Immortality', written in 1815, being one of the more well-known contemporary ones. Keats maintains the lofty tradition of the ode in the serious tone he employs and in the serious subject matter: the nature of the immortality of art, the transience of beauty, the pain and suffering of life and the ideal of love.

In the odes, to carry his deep and abstract themes he turned to the sonnet form as the basis for his experimental stanzas. 'Ode to a Nightingale' has a Shakespearean quatrain, *abab*, followed by a Petrarchan sestet, *cdecde*, for each stanza. The lines are predominantly iambic pentameter, except for the typical experimental gesture – a trimeter for every eighth line. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' had regular 10-line stanzas of iambic pentameters. The large, weighty stanzas of these odes function like paragraphs, with a main idea that is developed and rounded off at the end of each. Yet, as in good prose composition, the end of each also points forward and is linked to the next. For example, in 'Ode to a

Nightingale' the 'full-throated ease' at the end of the first stanza prefigures the 'draught of vintage' at the start of the second.

There is an even more obvious linkage between stanzas 2 and 3:

*And with thee fade away into the forest dim:
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget*

This weighty stanza form is increased even further in 'To Autumn', with its 11-line stanzas, where a couplet has been inserted at lines 9 and 10. They are regular lines of iambic pentameters, rhyming *abab cdedcde*. When taken together with the simplicity of diction, these full, heavy stanzas are perfect for conveying the richness, melody and serenity of the season.

Examples of the Spenserian stanza – ottava rima, octosyllabic couplets and blank verse – are to be found in Keats's other verse. His achievement is summed up by Brian Stone: 'He had decisively broken with the style of the eighteenth century, both metrically and in vocabulary, to achieve a new sort of fresh sensuousness and perception.'

Exploration of threshold states in the poetry of Keats

In reading Keats we are aware of a certain restlessness, a continuing search for the ideal, a perpetual attempt to reconcile opposites, such as the eternal and transient, ideal love and human passion, the perfection of art and the misery of real life. This tension results in the poet occupying an in-between, transitional or threshold state for many of the key moments in his poems.





These threshold states have been described by Cedric Watts as ‘moments or phrases of transition from one mode of being to another’. Watts also notices ‘the ambiguous status of the modes of being on each side of this threshold’. There are numerous examples of threshold states in this selection. We find the knight of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in this limbo state between dream and waking, between fantasy and reality. We find the poet experiencing a similar state in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. Having inhabited, however briefly, the world of the song, the fantasy world of magic casements and ‘faery lands forlorn’, he is tolled ‘back from there to my sole self’. In this poem Keats finds himself straddling both the ideal world of beauty (symbolised in the song) and the real world of pain and suffering (‘with thee fade away into the forest dim ... and quite forget ... The weariness, the fever, and the fret’).

In ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ he inhabits the world of ideal, timeless, perfect love but simultaneously holds the opposing concept of real live passion (‘She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss’).

In this poem we find the focus shifting between animate and inanimate, mortal and eternal, warmth and coldness, as Keats makes constant transitions in and out of the urn. Perhaps the most perfect embodiment of a transitional state is to be found in ‘To Autumn’. The whole season is in transition: matured and yet continuing to grow (stanza 1); harvest activities personified as static and immobile (stanza 2); the end of a process already prefiguring another move (‘the gathering swallows’ of stanza 3).

But the most significant threshold state, and one often fancied

by Keats, is that between life and death. Death as the doorway to eternity, to a flawless world of perfect beauty and ideal love, is an ever-present allure to the poet, particularly in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Bright Star’. It is present too in ‘When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be’, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’.

We notice that Keats often uses the rhetorical question as a bridge between fantasy and reality (‘O what can ail thee knight at arms?’, ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream? ... Do I wake or sleep?’, ‘Who are these coming to the sacrifice?’). These unanswered questions further blur the boundaries between states, smoothing the transition.

This ability to have a foot in contrasting worlds, to experience different states, to hold opposites in the mind simultaneously – also implicit in the notion of ‘negative capability’ – is a key feature of the poetry of Keats. It might be interpreted as confusion or indecisiveness by some, but by many it is seen as a mark of greatness: ‘His house was, most of the time, divided against itself, but his consciousness of the fissure, his unceasing endeavour to solve the problem of sense and knowledge, art and humanity, are in themselves an index of his stature’ (Douglas Bush, in *Keats: Twentieth-Century Views*).

A psychoanalytical look at Keats

Literary critics of the Freudian school have examined the poetry to demonstrate how Keats’s works are affected by unconscious fears, desires and conflicts. We certainly find some conscious fears, such as fear of mortality. But then, Keats was surrounded by death in





his own family. We notice conscious desires, such as the quest for beauty and permanence, and the numerous conflicts the poet consciously presented have been well discussed.

But what of unconscious desires and fears? 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' has been interpreted as exhibiting a fear of sex, which is linked to death in that poem, a poem that also presents woman as fatal temptress. Is this reading substantiated by the relationship between Keats and Fanny Brawne, in which he yearned for her yet often kept her at a distance?

Freudian critics find a pervasive melancholia at the centre of Keats's work, which they say was influenced by the early death of his father and separation from his mother. In Freudian terms, 'melancholia' is a kind of mourning, except that in mourning the loss is known, whereas with melancholia the loss is unknown. We do find a sense of loss in many of his poems: mourning for the day in 'To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent'; for lost time and lost love in 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be'; for lost virtue in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'; mourning for loss of the poetic vision that leaves him forlorn in 'Ode to a Nightingale'; and loss of timeless, perfect love in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Leon Waldoff (in *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, edited by W. Duncan) feels that the tone of melancholy in the odes arises from this sense of loss, which is really a longing for a fading immortal and vanished pastoral world. Ironically, the quest for permanence through a union with a symbolic presence (nightingale, urn, etc.) actually led to a deeper awareness of transience.

Freudian critics draw attention to the female presence that features in all Keats's major works, arousing powerful but ambiguous feelings in the poet, and it is suggested that Keats wants to reclaim her but has doubts about her fidelity ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci'). Waldoff identifies the symbols at the centre of each ode as feminine: the personification of autumn has many female qualities, as we have seen; the urn is an 'unravish'd bride'; even the nightingale is a 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' (a female spirit of the woods). Each symbol is immortal in some way, and a sympathetic relationship exists between poet and symbol. Waldoff says the odes represent an ancient longing for restoration and reunion as Keats tries to restore the symbolic female presence. The strategy fails with the nightingale and the urn, but at least the nightingale is preserved in the historical and literary imagination ('emperor and clown', 'the sad heart of Ruth', 'charm'd magic casements'), while the urn survives as part of the wisdom of humankind.

The many scenes of embracing lovers in Keats's poems are seen by Freudian critics to represent 'a persistent longing for merger with a feminine figure or symbol of beauty' (Waldoff) and this longing is heightened by an internal awareness of separation that the poet has carried with him since childhood. They feel that this was the motivation for the romantic quest on which much of his poetry is based.





OVERVIEW OF POETIC PREOCCUPATIONS AND THEMES

Consider the statements, then return to the individual poems for corroborative references and quotations.

The quest for perfection

- The quest for beauty in art ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn') and in nature ('To Autumn')
- The quest for permanence and immortality ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Bright Star')
- The ideal of love, timeless and unchanging ('Ode on a Grecian Urn'); rejected as cold, lifeless; still striving for it ('Bright Star')
- The quest for joy and happiness, the need to escape the misery of the world ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- The quest for perfection in literature ('On First Looking into Chapman's Homer')
- The quest for the perfect poetic attitude, disinterested contemplation (octave of 'Bright Star')
- All these quests are found to be in vain
- Transience (of beauty, happiness, etc.)
- The battle with mutability, one of the poet's chief preoccupations
- Awareness of personal mutability and impermanence ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The transience of the beauty of nature is mourned ('To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent') but develops into an

acceptance of transience in the scheme of things: he can still enjoy the beauty of nature in spite of its short life ('To Autumn')

- The transience of beauty and love:
 - Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow*
(*'Ode to a Nightingale'*)
- Also the transience of love: 'fair creature of an hour' ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The fading of artistic beauty (song of 'Ode to a Nightingale')
- Art stops this mutability, but at a price ('Ode on a Grecian Urn'); coldness of artistic immortality
- Attempts to resolve this dilemma of having to choose either transient passion or cold immortality ('Bright Star')

Nature

- Nature is ever-present in Keats's poetry: as a backdrop ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', etc.); in visions ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci'); as metaphor ('On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'); as an image for his own poetry ('granaries' in 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be'); and once as the central theme ('To Autumn')
- The therapeutic power of nature refreshes the city dweller ('To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent')
- The sensuous qualities of nature are to be enjoyed ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'To Autumn')





- Awareness of the essence of the season, the moods of nature ('To Autumn')
- Nature as inspiration, carrying signs of truth: 'Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance' ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- Nature also provides inspiration for the proper approach to poetry ('Bright Star')
- Nature is the proper subject of poetry ('Bright Star')
- The poet is seen as a contemplator of nature ('Bright Star')
- Keats idealises the countryside ('To Autumn', 'To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent')

Literature, art, creativity

- The healing power of literature ('To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent')
- The excitement of poetry (as discovery, as exploration); poetry opens out the world; the effect on the reader ('On First Looking into Chapman's Homer')
- The mysterious process of creativity, writing, inspiration: 'the magic hand of chance' ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The exciting, frantic pace of writing ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The power of imagination to achieve union with the eternity of art, to preserve the moment, to arrest beauty in time – but only temporarily ('Ode to a Nightingale')

- All the odes are concerned with poetry as art – its materials, images, moods of the poet, claims to immortality, etc. ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'To Autumn')
- The permanence and immortality conferred by art ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The permanence of art versus the transient but fulfilled experience of life ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The contrast between the imaginary world of poetic joy and the real world of pain and misery ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- How art communicates the ideal, the perfect, Platonic: 'pipe to the spirit' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The portrayal of sexual passion in art is superior to real passion ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The shortcomings of art: it lacks the fulfilment of experience, immortal but cold ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The visual arts as superior to poetry ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- Beauty and truth: art as a sign of eternity, an embodiment of beauty; art conveys truth ('Ode on a Grecian Urn').

Death

- Death as the end of creativity ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The allure of death – soft, rich, a luxury, a pleasant sensation, an old longing: 'call'd him soft names' ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- Death as a means of preserving the moment of ecstasy, capturing forever moments of supreme happiness; rejected





as an unsatisfactory solution ('Ode to a Nightingale'), but tried again ('Bright Star')

- The linking of love and death ('Bright Star'); as fatal seduction ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci')

Love

- The aspect of love generally presented is the sensuous, the passionate ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Bright Star'); the emotional aspect also ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The overwhelming desire or need is to immortalise the moment ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Bright Star')
- What important aspects of love are not dealt with?
- Is the view of love in the poems somewhat immature?

View of the human being, view of life

- As exhausted city-dweller ('To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent')
- Yearning for love ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Bright Star')
- A tragic dupe of love ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci')
- Life is sickness and misery ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- The need of the human being to escape from this grim reality: he tries wine, poetry (the imagination), death – all are inadequate in some way ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- The essential condition of humankind is to be in conflict – yearning for perfection, eternity, etc. – but the reality is different ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn')

Importance of feelings

- Joy, sorrow, depression, etc. ('Ode to a Nightingale', 'Bright Star', etc.)
- The importance of real experience rather than poetic observation ('Bright Star')
- The importance of sensuous fulfilment, of living life to the full ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale')

Perception of the poet

- As solitary soul, lonely thinker ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- This creative loneliness is rejected ('Bright Star')
- The poet's dilemma: disinterested vision or closer view and experience of real life ('Bright Star')
- The poet as pursuer of beauty ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- The artist-poet as philosopher, mediator of truth for humankind ('Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- The poet as escapist ('Ode to a Nightingale')
- Melancholic mode of the poet: unavoidable, since melancholy results inevitably from the pursuit of beauty
- Keats's own excitement at encountering poetry ('On First Looking into Chapman's Homer')
- The excitement and frenzy of writing, the sense of a personal race against time ('When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be')
- The power of the poet's imagination.





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

1. What has reading this poet meant for you? What did it add to your understanding of life, of love, of poetry, of the human mind, of human needs, of human limits?
2. Consider the ideas and attitudes found in the poetry. What ideas made you reflect hardest? What attitudes provoked you into thinking?
3. Consider his expression and use of language. What did you find exciting, unusual, pleasing or beautiful? Refer to individual poems, lines or phrases.
4. What did you find unappealing about his poetry? What did you dislike and why?
5. Which form of poetry practised by Keats do you like best? Explain.
6. If you could choose only two poems of his to include in an anthology, which ones would you select? Justify your choice.
7. Do you think Keats should be studied in schools today? Make a case for or against.
8. From reading his poems, what kind of person do you think Keats was? Consider such things as his preoccupations, his attitudes to significant matters such as love and death, and his prevailing moods.
9. What questions relating to his poetry and life would you like to ask him?





QUESTIONS

1. 'The relation of art to human life was one of the main questions that consistently preoccupied Keats.' Discuss.
2. 'The odes taken together can be seen as an investigation of the imagination's ability to cope with time and change.' Discuss.
3. 'The quintessentially Keatsian world is one in which the flawed imaginary world of dream and the hard truth of waking reality interact.' Discuss.
4. 'Keats's poetry could be summed up as merely sensuous subject matter in sensuous diction.' Discuss.
5. 'Sheer versatility with poetic form is an impressive characteristic of Keats's poetry.' Discuss.
6. 'There is a sadness at the heart of all Keats's poetry.' Discuss this statement with reference to three or four of the poems you have read.
7. 'Tranquillity and serenity lie at the heart of the most profound artistic response to life' (Brian Stone). Do you find any sense of tranquillity or serenity in the poetry of Keats?
8. 'Keats's imagery shows a quality of delicate and particular observation.' Discuss.
9. Gerard Manley Hopkins said of Keats, 'It is impossible not to feel with weariness how his verse is at every turn abandoning itself to unmanly and enervating luxury.' Would you agree?

10. W. B. Yeats said of Keats:

*I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied.*

How do you think the first two lines might apply to Keats? From the evidence of the poems you have read, do you think the remark of the last line is justified? Explain your reasoning.

- ii. 'His sensuous nature, his concern to define the individuating essence of things (the haecceitas, "thisness", or what Hopkins was to call "inscape"), his preoccupation with the kinds of immortality attainable through art, his Platonic yearnings and his down-to-earth scepticism, his death-wish and his sense of humour: all these coalesced in three of the supreme poems of the language – "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn" (Cedric Watts). Examine the three poems mentioned to discover the truth of any two of the qualities listed.





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EMILY DICKINSON

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2020

OL 2020

HL 2022

OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

'Hope' is a thing with feathers

There's a certain Slant of light

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

A Bird came down the Walk

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died

The Soul has Bandaged moments

I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

I taste a liquor never brewed

After great pain, a formal feeling comes

Overview of Emily Dickinson's poetry

Key features of Dickinson's poetry

Technical elements of Dickinson's style

Developing a personal response to the poetry of Emily Dickinson

Questions

Bibliography





INTRODUCTION

An enigmatic life

The Dickinsons were prominent public figures. Emily's father, Edward Dickinson, was a well-known lawyer with a great interest in education. For a time he was treasurer of Amherst College, which had been founded by Emily's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson. He served as state senator for Massachusetts, was elected to the US House of Representatives and was instrumental in bringing the railway to Amherst. He is described by Emily's biographers as a somewhat severe and remote father, an interpretation based on her own letters, though she appears to have loved him and she was devastated when he died.

The relationship between Emily and her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, does not appear to have been a very warm one either, as Emily mentioned in a letter to her literary guide and friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: 'I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled.' In later life, however, she did become closer to her mother. It is worth remembering that the remoteness of parents was a feature of nineteenth-century childrearing among the middle and upper classes and Emily's childhood experiences may not have been that much out of the ordinary.

The family lived in half of the Homestead, an imposing brick house in Main Street, Amherst, built by Edward's father, who occupied the other half. In 1840 the grandfather sold out and moved away. Edward moved with his family to another part of Amherst until

1855, when he managed to buy back the entire house, and Emily lived there for the rest of her life.

In 1840 Emily was sent to Amherst Academy, a co-educational school offering a wide range of subjects, from classics to modern sciences. The principal of the school, Rev. Edward Hitchcock, was a well-known scientist. Emily developed a particular interest in biology and botany, which may account for the precision of her observations and the prevalence of natural imagery in many of her poems.

In 1847 Emily went to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for further education, but was withdrawn after two terms because of poor health and possibly because of the overpowering religious ethos of the school. She had been expressing religious doubts even before she went there. Though she was a believer in God, she remained aloof from the religious fervour, in the form of religious revival meetings, sweeping through Amherst about this time.

Life in Amherst

When her formal education finished in 1847, Emily Dickinson seems to have lived a fairly normal life in Amherst, with some excursions to the cities (Boston in 1851, Washington and Philadelphia in 1855). In 1855 her mother, who had been in declining health, became seriously disabled. Emily and her sister Lavinia, with the support of domestic help, took over the running of the household, and Emily began to develop that missing relationship with her mother – though with roles reversed, as she explained: 'We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother – but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunnelling and when she became our Child, the Affection came.'





In those days Emily's life was ordinary, her behaviour unremarkable. She went to church, walked her dog, wrote letters, did housework and supported community events. In October 1856 she won a prize for her bread at the local cattle show and served as a member of the produce committee during the following year. In her garden she had the reputation of having 'green fingers'. Perhaps it was here that she first saw 'a Bird' come 'down the Walk' or encountered 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' – though that was more likely to have occurred in the Dickinson meadow across the street.

In 1856 Emily's older brother, Austin, joined the First Church of Christ, and also that year he married Emily's closest friend, Susan Gilbert. They built a house, the Evergreens, next door to the Homestead. This was, at least at first, a place of much gaiety and entertainment, in contrast to the sombre austerity of Emily's own home. The happiness experienced by the young people was referred to by Kate Scott Anthon, a mutual friend, writing to Susan: 'Those happy visits to your house! Those celestial evenings in the library – The blazing wood fire – Emily – Austin – The music – The rampant fun – The inextinguishable laughter, The uproarious spirits of our chosen – our most congenial circle.'

Emily Dickinson was not short of friends and advisers at this time, though the relationships, particularly with her women friends, did not always remain untrammelled. The friendship with Susan Gilbert became somewhat strained after a number of years. In 1859 Emily met Kate Scott Anthon, a friend of Susan's, and considered her a close friend until 1866. Nor was she devoid of male company. Ben Newton, a law student of her father's,

encouraged her reading and was considered by her 'a gentle, yet grave Preceptor'. Rev. Charles Wadsworth was her spiritual adviser for many years. Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Daily Republican*, was a close friend. The names of one or two other young men have been mentioned by scholars as possible recipients of her affections. After 1862 Thomas Wentworth Higginson became her literary guide and critic. Judge Otis Lord, a widower, wanted to marry her, and she seems to have cared deeply for him in the early 1880s until his death in 1884. And there was the unidentified man addressed as 'Master' in her letters and poems, whom she loved and who may or may not have been one of the acquaintances known to us.

As to her appearance, it is interesting to note how she described herself when asked by Higginson for a portrait: 'I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves.'

Crisis and withdrawal

There seems to have been some kind of emotional crisis in her personal life around 1861–63, the nature of which we can only guess at. The speculation is that she may have been rejected by, or may herself have rejected, the man she loved, perhaps the 'Master' of the letters and poems. The scholar Rebecca Patterson has put forward the thesis that Emily's friendships with Susan Gilbert and Kate Scott Anthon were lesbian in nature. The psychologist and critic John Cody came to the conclusion that her lover was fictional rather than factual and went on to discuss





the question of whether she suffered a nervous breakdown. He pointed out that certain poems give us a documented description of the inner processes experienced in a mental collapse (see 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain', 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes' and 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'). In this regard Emily Dickinson is seen as the forerunner of modern women writers such as Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing, who have dealt specifically with the experience of insanity.

Though the exact nature and cause of the experience are open to speculation and argument, Emily Dickinson seems to have undergone a psychological crisis in her early thirties, which resulted in a great outpouring of poetry (an estimated four to five hundred poems in 1862 and 1863) and led to her withdrawal from normal social life. Her biographer Richard Sewall goes to some lengths to demonstrate that this withdrawal was gradual, that she continued to see her family and close friends and that she sent letters and presents and sometimes copies of her poems to friends and acquaintances. He argues that she withdrew to dedicate herself to her poetry.

This is an interpretation also strongly urged by Jerusha McCormack, who points to the withdrawal from society of other American writers of the time, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau. McCormack argues that Dickinson withdrew in order to master life, a process akin to Christian asceticism, except that she was not doing it for religious reasons. Her poems reflect this inner struggle to understand, to master and control circumstances, and she finally achieved mastery over life by rejecting it.

Her behaviour became noticeably more odd and eccentric. She became 'the myth' of Amherst, a lone woman dressed all in white who didn't meet strangers or even visitors, who spoke to friends from behind a half-closed door or shrouded in shadow at the head of the stairs, though she sent them in wine or fruit on a tray. She refused to go out. 'I do not Cross my Father's ground to any House or town,' she replied to Higginson's invitation to attend a lecture in Boston in 1869. But he made a trip to Amherst to see her in August 1870 and has left us (in a letter to his wife) an interesting impression of the poet.

I shan't sit up tonight to write you all about E. D. dearest but if you had read Mrs. Stoddard's novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves. Yet only saw her. A large county lawyer's house, brown brick, with great trees & a garden – I sent up my card. A parlor dark & cool & stiffish, a few books & engravings & an open piano – Malbone [Higginson's novel] & OD [Out-Door] Papers among other books.

A step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer – with no good feature – in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said 'These are my introduction' in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice – & added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know what I say – but she talked soon & thenceforward continuously





– & deferentially – sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her – but readily recommencing. Manner between Angie Tilton & Mr. Alcott – but thoroughly ingenuous & simple which they are not & saying many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise – & some things you wd. hv. liked.

In 1883 she visited her dying nephew, Gilbert, next door at the Evergreens and was ill for months afterwards. When she died, on 15 May 1886, on her own instructions her white coffin was carried across the fields to the churchyard rather than by the usual route of funeral processions. She was found to have left almost two thousand poems and fragments.

Modern writers on Dickinson tend to play down her oddness and in general paint a more rounded portrait of her personality. Margaret Freeman has written (in the introduction to *Emily Dickinson's Imagery* by Rebecca Patterson):

Scholarly research over the years has dispelled, once and for all, the popular myth of the reclusive nun, replacing it with a picture of a gifted, if eccentric, woman, witty but not pretty, fond of her family, her friends, her books, her plants, and her dog, a woman who in her adolescent years had all the nineteenth-century desires and expectancies of a healthy girl but who, for whatever reason, never married, who matured emotionally and intellectually through some crisis in her late twenties, and who had, above all else, a passion for poetry.

Background influences

Religion

Puritanism, with its strict religious outlook, was one of the most important formative influences on early white American culture. Its doctrines included belief in a severe and righteous God, belief that humankind was essentially evil and that only a tiny minority (the 'elect') were destined to be saved, and that individuals could do little about their fate, which was predetermined by God. This stern philosophy was given expression in a rigid, everyday way of life. Strict sobriety, honesty and moral uprightness were required in public dealings and a scrupulous examination of conscience was practised in private. All of life was seen as a preparation for the awful Day of Judgment (see 'I heard a Fly buzz').

Revivalist meetings provided some variation and were a feature of life in Amherst in the middle of the nineteenth century. At these, Baptist evangelists preached fiery emotional sermons on repentance and salvation. They taught that the individual, by repenting, could be saved.

Emily Dickinson was educated in the strict Puritan tradition of her time, but even as a young girl she seemed reluctant to commit herself completely. She wrote in 1846: 'I have perfect confidence in God and his promises and yet, I know not why, I feel the world holds a prominent place in my affections.' Some scholars argue that she could not bring herself to believe in the harsh doctrine that all those who were not of the 'elect' were to be damned. Others argue that she had a deep crisis of faith: that her empirical mind, focusing on the world as she experienced it, did not find





much evidence of the divine in nature or other areas of life, that she found God remote if not deliberately perverse in not revealing himself (see 'There's a certain Slant of light'). Denis Donoghue argues that her rebellious spirit resisted having to believe in certain truths and refused to accept the discipline of doctrine.

At any rate, she seems to have withdrawn from the practice of orthodox Puritanism. Nor was she tempted by the more emotional Revivalists, though most of her family experienced a renewal of faith in the late 1840s and early 1850s. She retained a belief in God and wrote many poems about faith, God, Heaven and immortality. Yet her views were hardly orthodox. 'Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray,' she wrote to a relation. Still, many find her songs or poems to be eloquent religious meditations. In general, it is difficult to decipher exactly what her religious beliefs were, but she certainly borrowed from her religious culture: themes and metaphors from the Bible and phrases and rhythms from the hymn books of Rev. Isaac Watts. She wrote many of her poems in the 'common metre' of the Psalms.

Political agitation

The 1830s and 1840s saw the beginning of the campaign for women's rights. In 1839 Margaret Fuller organised intellectual discussion groups for women in Boston and this continued for some years; in 1845 Fuller's influential feminist pamphlet, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, was published.

The mid-century saw a flurry of political campaigns: for educational reform, for prison reform, for temperance reform.

There was also the very divisive campaign for the abolition of slavery, one of the factors that led to the American Civil War (1861–65). Altogether it was a time of social ferment and political upheaval.

Philosophical and literary milieu

Rationalism was a philosophy imported from Europe, from the eighteenth-century era of the Enlightenment. It put great faith in rational thought, the belief that humankind could be improved through rational thinking and scientific learning. All problems – social, religious and moral – could be solved and society perfected through rational thought. This philosophy of human self-sufficiency fitted in well with the emerging American state.

In Europe, Rationalism was succeeded by Romanticism. The Romantics rejected reason, arguing that the way to truth was through the imagination and through intuition and feelings. There was great emphasis on the power of nature. For some Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, nature revealed the divine. Romanticism also emphasised individuality. The rebellious individual was an icon. The American version of Romanticism was known as Transcendentalism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82)

Philosopher, poet and founder of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson was the foremost literary figure of the era. Transcendentalism was a quasi-religious concept owing much to the Romantics and in particular to Wordsworth's reverence for nature. Each person's intuition and imagination led them to truth and to God, without the need for any particular religious practice





or set of beliefs. The power of God existed in nature, and the intuitive soul sensed this and so came into contact with the divine. Emerson developed this concept in his essay 'Nature' in 1836. His 1841 volume of essays contains 'Self Reliance', with its now well-known provocative statements: 'Who so would be a man must be a non conformist' and 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds'. His 1844 collection of essays contains 'The Poet', in which he urges poets to write about America, 'our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians'.

Walt Whitman (1819–92)

Whitman did just that in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a volume of poetry rooted in the life and characters of America. 'I have never read his book – but was told that he was disgraceful,' Dickinson said of his homoerotic verses, which shocked many at the time.

Henry David Thoreau (1817–62)

Thoreau described himself as 'a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot'. He has become famous for *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), describing a two-year experiment in self-sufficiency (1845–47), when he built himself a wooden hut on the edge of Walden Pond, Concord. In the book he describes his agricultural experiments, the wildlife, the visitors he had and his neighbours. Thoreau developed an appreciation for the simplicity of the Native American way of life, as opposed to the materialism of white America at the time.

Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau represent the optimistic, positive face of American letters and exhibit an independence of mind and a self-sufficient outlook.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64), Herman Melville (1819–91) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49)

Hawthorne, Melville and Poe might be taken to represent the pessimistic, negative outlook in American writing. All of them are preoccupied with evil, sin and the dark side of human nature.

Hawthorne was fascinated by sin, and his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is an examination of the nature of American Puritanism and the New England conscience. Dickinson certainly seems to have read his 1851 novel *The House of the Seven Gables*. Poe, about whom Dickinson confessed not to have read enough, was fascinated by the macabre.

Dickinson's reading

We know from Rebecca Patterson that Emily Dickinson read widely, but particularly incessantly among the nineteenth-century English writers. The Brontës affected her deeply. She read *Middlemarch* and became fascinated by any biographical information that came to light on George Eliot. She read Dickens, valuing in particular *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield*. The poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning were also important to her. To a lesser extent she read the Romantics, particularly Byron.

She also read the contemporary American writers, notably Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau. She read Emerson as a young woman and was attracted by the mystical quality of his poetry. In 1850 she mentions 'the gift of Ralph Emerson's poems – a beautiful copy' received from her friend Ben Newton. Yet in 1857, when Emerson lectured in Amherst and stayed at the Evergreens





with Austin and Sue, Emily did not attend. She read the local poet Helen Hunt Jackson, who urged her to publish her own poems.

Dickinson was steeped in the Bible, Shakespeare and Milton, but she also read less 'elevated' fare, for example *Kavanagh*, a popular romantic novel by Longfellow, which was secretly given to her by her brother, Austin, and created a family rumpus. She also read travel books, popular history and journals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly* and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. Hers was a wide reading, but it was often indiscriminate.

Was this wide reading a recluse's substitute for life experience and so a vital element in the development of Dickinson's thought and poetry? Her life experience was not as limited as popular myth would have us suppose, but what she imbibed from her books and from her work in the garden was obviously important to her. But she didn't read to borrow or to compare. Reading was a stimulus for her own thoughts. It wasn't necessarily the great themes or the scope or the technique of a work that inspired her, but as Denis Donoghue points out, often just a line or a phrase. Little gems set her thinking.

Her motive in reading other writers, great and small, was not to discover the variety and potential of the art she shared with them, but rather to find there a provocation for her own imagination. Sometimes a phrase was enough. She was deeply engaged by the Brontës, but on the other hand the abiding interest of Emily Brontë largely resolved itself in a magical line, 'Every existence would exist in Thee', from 'No Coward Soul Is Mine'. The line is quoted three times in letters.

Two thousand poems

Because of Dickinson's method of arrangement and storage, among other factors, it is difficult to be certain about the dating of the poems or to suggest patterns or to talk about development in her poetry. But we can identify phases of writing.

The early phase (up to 1858)

It is probable that Dickinson had been writing poems since her youth. What survives of her early work is relatively conventional poetry. Thomas Johnson, editor of the *Complete Poems*, thought it probable that in about 1858 she culled many of her earlier poems and transcribed those she decided to save.

The middle phase (1858–65)

By 1858 she was writing poetry seriously. During this period she investigated themes of love, pain, absence and loss, doubt, despair, mental anguish and other universal themes, and all in sparse poems of passionate intensity. Practically all the poems in the present selection are from this phase.

Thomas Johnson has described how the poems were handwritten in ink and stored in packets, each packet consisting of four to six sheets of folded paper held together with thread through the fold. These versions were fair copies or almost final drafts. 'Of the forty-nine packets, forty-six appear to include all the verses written between 1858 and 1865, the years of great creativeness.' The year 1862 seems to have been her most productive, with over 350 poems. The packets constitute about two-thirds of the total body of her poetry.





From her entire output of about two thousand poems, only seven were printed during her lifetime. In 1861 the *Springfield Daily Republican*, edited by her friend Samuel Bowles, printed 'I taste a liquor never brewed' under the title 'The May-Wine'. In 1862 the *Republican* printed 'Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers'. Two more of her poems were published in 1864. On 15 April 1862 Dickinson replied to an article advising young writers in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a literary magazine. The article was by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an essayist, lecturer and former preacher, who was particularly interested in the status of women writers. She included four of her poems, asking his professional opinion, 'to say if my Verse is alive'. Higginson was a very traditional nineteenth-century critic and took issue with the odd and unorthodox qualities of her poetry and for this reason seems to have advised against publication. But he was not insensitive to this remarkable new talent. He recalled much later, in an article of 1891:

The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after thirty years of further knowledge; and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism.

The correspondence continued and grew into friendship, but Higginson printed none of her poems during her lifetime.

The late phase (late 1870s and early 1880s)

This period contained a good many harsh and ironic verses.

Editions of the poems

After Dickinson's death her sister Lavinia found this great number of poems and set about having them published. She persuaded Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of a professor at Amherst College, to prepare a selection. Todd, with the help of Higginson, selected 115 poems for publication, but the editors were concerned about Dickinson's odd style, so they 'standardised' it, changing rhymes, regularising metre, even altering metaphors and sometimes the arrangement of lines. *Poems by Emily Dickinson* was published by Roberts Brothers of Boston in 1890, to a slightly baffled critical reception but good sales. Further selections were published in 1891 and 1896.

Todd published a selection of Dickinson's letters in 1894, but a dispute between Lavinia Dickinson and Todd resulted in a division of Emily Dickinson's unpublished works. The material in Lavinia's possession went to Susan and eventually to her daughter, Emily's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who issued another volume, *The Single Hound*, in 1914. This one had relatively few alterations from the originals. The material in Todd's possession did not see publication until 1945.

In 1955 an authoritative collection of Dickinson's work was prepared by Thomas Johnson. He issued a three-volume variorum edition (i.e. containing all known versions of each poem), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published by Harvard University Press. The poems are dated, but as Johnson himself admitted, this is the result of educated guesswork. It is very difficult to be definite, since Dickinson never prepared the poems for publication, did not title them and had the habit of binding poems from different years





into the same packet. (There are different handwriting styles in some packets.)

In 1970 the Faber & Faber edition was published, in which Johnson selected one version of each poem as the probable original.





'HOPE' IS A THING WITH FEATHERS

A reading of the poem

This is one of Dickinson's 'definition' poems. She is exploring a psychological condition using a concrete analogy or metaphor. She has explored hope in other poems, variously describing it as 'a strange invention', 'a subtle glutton' and now 'the thing with feathers'. Through this bird metaphor she examines the various qualities and characteristics of hope, in so far as they can be described at all.

The association of hope with a bird is common enough in religious symbolism: the Spirit or divine inspiration is often represented as a dove. Dickinson maintains this spiritual aspect of hope ('perches in the soul'), but she is also at pains to establish its difference, its strangeness, its absolute otherness in case we accept the bird analogy too literally. It is 'the thing' with feathers, a not quite definable quality of spirit. It is undemonstrative, unshowy, a silent presence ('sings the tune without the words'). It is permanent, perpetual, always there – a quality emphasised by Dickinson's unusual punctuation ('never stops – at all – '). That final dash might be taken to suggest that the process is continuing.

Characteristics of sweetness and warmth, very tangible qualities, are emphasised in the second stanza. Hope's indomitable nature and particular value in times of crisis are also stressed ('And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard').

The third stanza introduces something of a more personal experience of hope, with the introduction of the first person

by the poet ('I've heard'). Again, the value of hope in extreme circumstances is featured ('in the chilliest land', 'on the strangest Sea'). Its absolute strength, its independence and the lack of demands it makes on its host body are emphasised:

*Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me.*

For Dickinson, hope is an independent gift, a spiritual gift perhaps. It is delicate and fragile yet strong and indomitable, and this paradoxical quality is reflected in the image:

*And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird*

The tiny creature is not disconcerted or abashed by anything but the most dreadful of storms. There is also the suggestion that hope is a presence not easily defined ('the thing with feathers').

Mood

Dickinson's poems are sometimes bleak affairs, examining such painful conditions as despair, alienation, mental anguish and unhappy love. But this is an exceptionally optimistic poem that radiates a mood of buoyant self-confidence: 'I've heard it in the chilliest land'. The optimistic tone is reflected too in the reference to music ('And sings the tune ... sweetest – in the Gale – is heard') and warmth ('That kept so many warm'). The forward motion of the lines, with Dickinson's strange punctuation, also helps to suggest that this is a continuing state of mind, not just a temporary high point:

And never stops – at all –





Imagery

The poem is structured around the central metaphor of the bird as hope, and this is extended to feathers, singing, etc. Many of Dickinson's most startling metaphors and images consist of abstract and concrete elements mixed together, and we see this here in "Hope" is the thing with feathers'. It is as if by putting the two unlikely opposites together she is suggesting how extraordinary the virtue of hope is.





THERE'S A CERTAIN SLANT OF LIGHT

A nature poem

At a surface level this is a nature poem attempting to capture some of the essential features of winter: the lifelessness of winter afternoons, the slanting sunlight, etc. While the poet dwells on these outer manifestations, she is also aware that the essence of the season is experienced internally, in 'internal difference,/Where the Meanings, are'.

The poem has a particularly narrow focus: a study of the light. The poet's view of it is startlingly different. She catches the commonly experienced painful discomfort of wintry sunlight that 'oppresses' but deepens it to 'Heavenly Hurt' and 'imperial affliction'. It becomes a visitation we must passively suffer ('it gives us' and is 'Sent us of the Air'). It is not open to any influence or human control ('None may teach it – Any'), but rather is seen as a teacher who makes the landscape listen. Its power and influence are reflected not only in that initial presence ('Shadows – hold their breath') but also in the after-effect: the landscape is changed ('like the Distance/On the look of Death'). With startling originality, the light is compared to a 'Seal', conveying all that artefact's paradoxical properties of being uncommunicative yet itself a token of communication. Even more unusually, she sees it as the 'Seal Despair', reversing the conventional interpretation of light as a sign of hope.

Altogether it is a most unconventional and unexpected view of light, and a particularly negative one. It is also worth noting that

Dickinson seems more interested in the powerful effects of light – on the landscape and the speaker – and in its indefinable qualities ('None may teach it – Any –/'Tis the Seal Despair') than in any description of the subject itself.

Poem as landscape

The critic Judith Farr views this poem as a subtle word painting and explores it as a piece of visual art. She finds that it follows in the American landscape tradition, linking the sky with the earth. She also finds it in harmony with the artistic ideals of the famous nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin, who advocated the creation of 'the mystery of distance' in landscapes and who also praised 'the unfatigued veracity of eternal light'. Do you find a sense of distance in the poem and an eternal significance? Would it be true to say that Dickinson is studying what Ruskin called 'the spirituality of atmospheric phenomena', in other words, viewing nature as a reflection of the divine?

Perhaps, but her conclusions are far from the expected and the orthodox. To many 'nineteenth-century' artists, such as the painter John Constable, for example, the sky was an affirmation of faith, but to Dickinson it is a sign of despair. The God behind nature in this poem smacks of cruel tyranny. The light is 'an imperial affliction', a vehicle of 'Heavenly Hurt', not a joyous divine revelation but 'the Seal Despair'. The simile of 'Cathedral Tunes' suggests the solemn weight of religion, particularly when coupled with 'Heft', with its connotations of heavy lifting. It suggests the 'difficulty of lifting up the heart', as Farr puts it; that is, the difficulty of belief, particularly at this death-time of the year. It is a bleak





landscape, devoid of any signs of a benign deity. The critic Barton St Armand called it 'the most lone of Dickinson's lone landscapes'.

A poem of despair

In searching for the central core of this poem, some critics focus on the poet's feeling rather than the natural details and observations. In this reading, despair is seen as the central theme. This despair is brought about as the natural phenomenon, light, loses its orthodox meanings of illumination, insight and hope and becomes completely alien to the speaker. Denis Donoghue points out how Dickinson employs one of her common poetic techniques to effect this change. She begins with a neutral first line ('There's a certain Slant of light'), which is then exposed to alien associations 'until it, too, is tainted and there is nothing left but the alien'. These are associations of oppression, the impossible weight of faith, etc. They are not visible but felt within. 'Heavenly Hurt' makes only an internal difference ('Where the Meanings, are'). The feeling experienced by the poet is absolute, all-powerful, unshakable ('None may teach it – Any'). She groups the feelings and associations together under the seal or the sign of despair, which is likened to a divine pestilence, a punishment plague:

*An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –*

This affliction petrifies the landscape, making it appear a dead world in which the speaker, now alienated from God and nature, is marooned ('Shadows – hold their breath'). Even when the despair lifts, it leaves no relief but 'a memory of itself, looking now like the face of Death' (Donoghue). Donoghue points out that distance

and death are frequently linked by Dickinson, especially in the love poems, where the distance of the absent lover is like death. Thus, despair is experienced here as a sort of death and it leaves its impression even when it lifts.

The speaker feels victimised, hurt, oppressed and afflicted by God. The poem is read as an accusation of divine betrayal, that God should allow such despair to happen. Certainly the image of God here is far from the conventional one of a caring and just being and seems more akin to the wanton, vengeful pagan gods of classical times. This despair is occasioned by the poet's failure to find any comfort in the divine or the natural world.

The poet's method

Clearly this is not a conventional landscape representation, such as we might find in realistic visual art. Not only would we have great difficulty in isolating background, foreground, etc., but there is hardly a single concrete image, apart from 'Cathedral Tunes', which may have some resonance of real bells, and perhaps the 'Seal' image. But any attempt to give the latter a concrete form is quickly dissipated by the accompanying abstract noun, 'Despair'.

We are conscious, of course, that light is the poet's chief preoccupation, but the poem lacks a focus or centre of meaning, either in word or image. Even the subject, light, is not dealt with directly. It is contrasted or compared with more readily apprehended experience ('like the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes' and 'like the Distance/On the look of Death'). We are told what it is not ('None may teach it – Any') and its effects are listed ('Landscape listens –/Shadows – hold their breath'). This circuitous approach





to the subject means that all the discussion of meaning is on the periphery or borders of the subject, a technique described as 'negative definition' by the literary critic Crisanne Miller. Perhaps it was this lack of definition in Dickinson's imagery and her circuitous approach to the subject that led Mabel Loomis Todd to consider this poem 'impressionistic' when she included it in the first edition of Dickinson's poems in 1890.

Passivity of the speaker

The passivity of the speaker is another feature worth noting. We are aware of the powerlessness of the speaker passively experiencing the oppression of the light:

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar*

The effect is to further enhance the power of the light. Its unreachable independence, its complete otherness is signalled in 'None may teach it – Any'.





I FELT A FUNERAL, IN MY BRAIN

A reading of the poem

This poem describes a psychological state. It depicts a condition of extreme anguish and mental disorder, a situation of psychological torment where the speaker feels all the oppression and powerlessness of a helpless victim and ultimately collapses.

Mental breakdown is seen by the poet as akin to losing consciousness. The critic Judith Farr views this poem as a 'mindscape', which takes as its subject the death of consciousness. Indeed, the narrative is so structured, describing the sensations experienced at different stages on the way to the loss of perception.

It begins with 'I felt' and finishes with the loss of all sensation, noting on the way the failure of the various senses and organs of perception. Farr notes how physiologically accurate this is, corresponding to the stages of an approaching faint. The dizzy spell is prefaced by a mental numbness (the 'treading – treading' of the 'Boots of Lead'). The ringing in the ears that precedes fainting is conveyed through the synaesthetic imagery of 'Then Space – began to toll'. The fainting spell ('I dropped down, and down') and the sinking out of consciousness ('hit a World, at every plunge') concludes in the total loss of perception ('and Finished knowing – then –'). Yet the concluding dash might suggest survival of some kind, perhaps the continuity of intellect, as Farr suggests, somehow surviving to record the event.

It is worth noting that 'Brain', 'Mind' and 'Soul' were interchangeable terms for the nineteenth-century artist. Indeed, an examination of the manuscript shows that Dickinson's first choice for 'Soul' in line 10 was 'Brain'. This experience of traumatic collapse has both psychological and religious connotations.

Dickinson uses the structure of a funeral service and funeral imagery to convey her theme: the box, the mourners, the plank, the burial – all the paraphernalia of a funeral. But this is a most unreal funeral service. Normally the funeral is sombre, respectful and caring and the ritual is designed to be comforting. But here the 'Box' is crudely impersonal and the ritual becomes a nightmare of unstoppable activity, as reflected in the grammatical structure of the poem ('till', 'when', 'till', 'then', 'again', 'then', 'then') and in the imagery of ceaseless activity ('to and fro', 'treading – treading', 'kept beating – beating'). Even the sounds of the funeral service are experienced as activity as well as sound ('Mourners ... treading', 'A Service, like a Drum –/Kept beating', 'lift a Box/And creak across my Soul/With those same Boots of Lead', 'Then Space – began to toll'). There isn't a single still moment in the poem except for the marvellous image of cosmic alienation in lines 15 and 16.

This unrelenting activity is experienced as oppression by the speaker, who is powerless to react and must suffer what is being done to her. As John Robinson says, she is using the funeral service to define herself as helpless victim. The sense of victimisation is further enhanced by the fact that what she suffers is only partially understood by her, though keenly felt and heard. The unreal strangeness of the imagery reflects the inscrutable





nature of her sufferings ('a Service, like a Drum', 'all the Heavens were a Bell'). The unique vantage point of the speaker here, as she is being buried, graphically reinforces this notion of helpless victim. There is an element of gothic horror to this – a conscious victim being buried alive and the sensationalism of 'creak across my Soul' and 'Boots of Lead'. All this adds to the quality of the mental trauma that is the poem's main theme.

Some readers feel that the main focus of this poem is the actual experience of death, rather than any metaphorical exploration of psychological death: that the poem enacts approaching death, loss of the senses, etc. and that the experience is given an extra frisson of horror through the speaker's unique vantage point from the coffin. Do you favour this literal interpretation? Perhaps it smacks too much of gothic sensationalism? Perhaps we can read the poem as addressing the issue of death in both the physical and psychological senses? What insights into death does the poem convey?

Themes

- An enactment of mental breakdown, a depiction of the intense suffering of psychological disintegration.
- The loss of order and meaning, intrinsic to breakdown: the sensation of tumbling through space, events have no properly understood cause, senses are confused, space tolls, a plank breaks, etc.
- A charting of the stages of death, the loss of sensation and perception.

- The nature of the solitary soul, adrift in the universe:

*And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –*

This is a vision of lonely suffering, interpreted by some as the effort of the soul to understand its place in the universe.

- Oppression: the poet as helpless victim, impotent sufferer.
- Human alienation: the lack of control over the world or one's fate. The image of the living treated as if they were dead emphasises this extreme disunion between self and circumstances.





A BIRD CAME DOWN THE WALK

A reading of the poem

This is a nature poem but one with a difference, as Dickinson urges us to look closely at the detail, to explore beneath the surface and apprehend something of the essence of this creature – its natural elegance but also its essential oddity and difference.

The bird's crude predatory nature ('He bit an Angeworm in halves/And ate the fellow, raw') is combined with a sort of diffidence or politeness ('And then hopped sidewise to the Wall/To let a Beetle pass'). The more obvious creaturely qualities are present: the natural beauty of the 'Velvet Head' and the unrolled feathers, the prim, erratic bird-like movements ('He glanced with rapid eyes/That hurried all around') and the natural caution of a wild creature ('like frightened Beads', 'like one in danger, Cautious'). But above all, what is celebrated is the miraculousness of flight as the bird blends into the elements, unifying air, water and light, displaying its mastery. The first striking metaphor sees the bird compared to a confident, relaxed rower, with the suggestion that the bird's natural element is the air ('home'). Naturalness is the paramount quality, as the comparisons emphasise the grace, elegance, lack of disturbance and perfect blend of creature and medium:

And rowed him softer home –

*Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam –*

The playful summer gentleness of butterflies adds a romantic element. The synaesthetic fusion of water, air and light ('Banks of Noon') underlines the perfection of the movement and the lack of disturbance ('plashless as they swim'). This image has connotations too of youthful exuberance and joy, of summers spent swimming in the river.

Altogether, the poem celebrates the beauty of creatures and their mastery of the elements, but also their essential wildness.

Poetic technique

Defamiliarising the familiar

In an effort to get us to look again, to see beneath the accepted, Dickinson gently shocks us into rethinking by 'defamiliarising' the familiar. For example, the bird, romantic instrument of song, symbol of poetic flight, is shown in all its awful naturalness as a greedy killer ('ate the fellow, raw'). Even the sound of the word 'raw' helps to reinforce the crudeness of the situation. But at a deeper level Dickinson alters the whole construction of reality, as in the final stanza, where the elements fuse together and time and space shift dimensions as the bird 'like a butterfly, swims, sails, leaps, flies, soars' (Juhasz, Miller and Smith). These critics use the term 'transformations' to describe this technique.

Identifying with the subject

It is clear that at first Dickinson describes what she sees, though with her own particular slant. But then the speaker enters the picture and becomes more closely identified with the subject. Cristanne Miller explains how this identification is achieved





through grammar and syntax, in a process she terms 'syntactic doubling'. Dickinson's compressed epigrammatical style of writing causes ambiguity, especially when 'using a single phrase to cover two non-parallel syntactic contexts' (Miller). For example, the middle line below could refer to either the first or third line:

He stirred his Velvet Head

*Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb*

The feelings of danger and caution are shared by both speaker and bird. This weakening of the distinction between the self and the other (or speaker and subject) is developed further in the climax of the poem, where the speaker half-creates what she sees and herself shares in the experience.

Humour and wit

Juhasz, Miller and Smith examine the comic elements in this poem. The incongruities in the bird's behaviour are the most obvious expressions of humour: the natural carnivore's killer instinct exists side by side with a sense of civility and good manners ('an awareness of social etiquette from the raw worm eater'). Notice the irony of his guilt – the furtive shifting around in case his courteous behaviour is noticed! Juhasz, Miller and Smith also link the deeper transformations already mentioned to the anarchic transformations of cosmic vision, where reality is reconstructed in unaccustomed combinations, thereby producing laughter.





I HEARD A FLY BUZZ – WHEN I DIED

A reading of the poem

This poem recreates the drama of the deathbed scene from the point of view of the dying or dead person, whose consciousness seems to have survived death and can therefore comment on the experience ('I heard a Fly buzz – when I died'). Dickinson focuses on the moment of death. She is fascinated by that moment of passage, the transition from life into eternity. She is probing the nature of death. 'What does it feel like to die? she is asking' (Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*).

The moment is focused and dramatically prepared for. In the first stanza it is described as an isolated moment of calm 'Between the Heaves of Storm', between the storm of living and 'the storm of dissolution', as Judith Farr puts it.

In the second stanza the family or watchers have got themselves under control and are almost holding their breaths for the final moment ('And Breaths were gathering firm/For that last Onset'). This is a bare, Calvinistic view of death, recreating the awesome moment when the soul encounters the power and the majesty of God. 'That last Onset' suggests that out of the smoke of the last violent battle of death, the king emerges, to whom the soul gives witness ('when the King/Be witnessed – in the Room'). The encounter with God is a formal moment of recognition and judgment, reinforced by the legal and religious terminology ('witnessed'). There are no angels here, no welcoming choirs, no rejoicing, no emotion even, just an intimidating encounter to give

witness to one's life and deeds and to acknowledge the awful power of God.

So far the death scene is very much a managed ritual, ordered, controlled, orchestrated. She has tidied up all her legal affairs, given away little gifts and mementoes to friends ('willed my Keepsakes'). The legal language conveys an impersonal atmosphere ('witnessed', 'willed', 'Signed away', 'portion'). This is to be a controlled event.

The irony, of course, is that a mere fly, a household pest, can disturb this most significant moment. The fly is a grotesque intrusion, with its loudness, its aimlessness ('uncertain stumbling Buzz'), its associations with corruption and rot and its confusing appearance, which is a fusion of sight and sound ('Blue ... Buzz'). The fly has been interpreted in various ways, for example as a reminder of the disorder and confusion of life. Judith Farr sees in 'the stupid aimlessness ... a suggestion of the puzzlement that is life'. Denis Donoghue suggests that it conveys alienation, that it represents 'all the remaining things ... which detach themselves from the dying' ('There interposed a Fly ... Between the light – and me ... I could not see to see'). Perhaps we should consider it in the context of the tightly controlled and planned ritual. It disrupts the order, the ritual of the awesome moment. Here, this grotesque fly might represent the dying person's loss of control, a final alienation from the puzzling, random, disordered world and a step that leads to the detachment that is death.

What is its significance at this juncture, as the soul is waiting for God? It certainly disrupts the solemnity of the moment. Does it go





further and suggest that all that is real is the random disordered world and physical corruption and that God and eternity are less certain? Beyond the presumption on Dickinson's part that some kind of consciousness survives the storm of death, there is no explicit reference to an afterlife here, no comforting glimpse of eternity. We are invited, certainly, to explore the contrast between the mundane and the divine. In fact, the entire poem is structured on contrasts: the controlled scene versus the uncertainty of the fly; the dignified silence versus the incessant buzzing; human grieving versus religious expectation; the corporeal versus the spiritual; and the tiny fly versus the majesty of God and the vastness of eternity. Yet this fly comes to dominate the poem and changes its focus. It steals the limelight from the 'King', leaves a question mark over the afterlife and shows us the reality of death: as a loss of control, a failure of light and a final alienation from the world.

Sources

Emelie Fitzgibbon feels that Dickinson took the idea of the fly and the dying person from Hawthorne's novel *The House of the Seven Gables*. There, the villainous governor dies alone sitting in a chair. The point of view of the narration alternates between that of the dying and dead governor and the outside narrator, until the fly is discovered:

And there we see a fly – one of your common houseflies, such as are always buzzing on the windowpane – which has smelt out Governor Pyncheon, and alights, now on his forehead, now on his chin, and now, Heaven help us, is

creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be chief magistrate's wide-open eyes!

In what ways do you think Dickinson's treatment of the scene is different from Hawthorne's?

Elements of the theme

The poem, as we have seen, is an exploration of the moment of death. Consider the following aspects of that theme and re-examine the text for any further suggestions it might provide on each.

- An exploration of the fading of consciousness and the senses
- The ritual of final leave-taking
- Death as a dramatic event
- The family or community aspect of death
- The awesome confrontation with God
- The loss of control
- The final alienation: the loss of understanding of the world, the failure to see any meaning in it
- The religious questions raised about the relative significance of the world and the divine

Imagery

Dickinson relies on nature for much of her imagery (the storm, the light, the fly). It is her style not to elaborate on images, so the reader must explore for possible connotations.

The storm simile in the first stanza seems to link the room with the wider natural world, which has the effect of giving this single





death scene a more universal significance. It may also suggest the inherent violence of death – death as a great storm of individual disintegration.

The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

Dickinson identifies light with life and associates the moment of death with the failure of light. The possible significance of the fly has already been discussed. Dickinson's images are pared down even to single words, reduced to their essentials ('The Eyes around', 'And Breaths were gathering').





THE SOUL HAS BANDAGED MOMENTS

Some readings of the poem

This is one of the poems that can be read in a variety of ways: as a psychological insight into moods and mind (a 'mindscape' as it were), as a sexual statement or as a reflection about creativity.

At the level of psychological exploration, it deals with the different moods of the spirit, or 'Soul'. In this case, great mood changes are evident, swinging between the mental paralysis and deep, shackled depression of stanzas 1 and 5 and the sheer elation of stanzas 3 and 4. To modern psychology, the violence and extreme nature of the change in moods might suggest manic depression.

In the first stanza the 'Soul', or spirit, is portrayed as wounded, damaged, needing to be wrapped in self-protective and restraining bandages. In this shattered state the spirit is prey to all sorts of fantasies and nightmares, this time erotic in nature ('ghastly Fright ... Salute her – with long fingers –/Caress her freezing hair'). Why 'freezing'? Perhaps with fright, suggesting her attitude, frigid with fright? This is a grotesque parody of love.

*Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover – hovered – o'er –*

There is something decadent about the image of the Goblin replacing her lover, the spectre kissing the lips her lover worshipped so much that he merely hovered over them, feeling unworthy to kiss. The grotesqueness of the scene is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the delicate action ('Sip') with the hideous

Goblin. Perhaps there is also a hint of guilt as she recollects the delicacy and sensitivity of her lover at the very moment that she accepts the Goblin's advances. These images provide a frightening glimpse into the mind's darkness. They are images of truly gothic horror, demons from beyond the grave or, in this case, beneath the consciousness.

Stanzas 3 and 4 portray the opposite mood ('Escape –/When bursting all the doors'): unrestrained joy, the captive freed from depression, as the bee 'Long Dungeoned from his Rose' enjoys his sensuous liberty. The mood is equated with the joy of Paradise.

But even this elevation is fragile and dangerous ('She dances like a Bomb') and it is short lived. The spirit is again weighed down with shackles and staples, like a felon. The cycle of sinking and lifting moods begins again, and the knowledge that it is cyclical makes the weight of pain all the more poignant ('the Horror welcomes her, again'). Once again, the inappropriate juxtaposition of 'Horror' and 'welcomes' gives us some indication of her confusion and despair.

The final line of the poem emphasises the essential loneliness of the condition, the social stigma attached to mental illness. It is not talked about in public ('not brayed of Tongue'). The connotations of brash, loud vulgarity in 'bray' suggest the discomfort any such talk would bring.

It has been suggested that this depression may be caused by failure in love and that a main theme of this poem is emotional loss, interrupted by brief glimpses of fulfilment in stanzas 3 and 4. There are cogent reasons to justify such a reading. The Soul of





the first line is wounded with disappointment in love. We have already explored the erotic and sensual nature of her nightmares. The elation too is of a sensual nature, as the bee sucks nectar from the rose and becomes delirious with pleasure. Noon probably symbolises the paradise of earthly love. Altogether, stanzas 3 and 4 paint a picture of sensual fulfilment. And when she is disappointed in love she feels guilty, like a criminal, a 'Felon led along', and she can no longer sing. Love's song no longer soars: there are 'staples, in the Song'.

Cristanne Miller classified the poem as one of Dickinson's 'rape poems'. The caressing figure enjoys complete control over its apparently helpless victim. Sometimes she responds ('Sip, Goblin'), but she eventually escapes from her tormentors. But there is a suggestion that this is a repeated sequence of events: capture, escape, recapture. This reading views the speaker as sexual victim.

The poem has also been read as a reflection on creativity, the failure of poetic inspiration and the great elation when it is rediscovered. The imprisonment is verbal; the loss is one of words rather than of physical liberty. The 'plumed feet' (perhaps of Mercury, messenger of the gods) are shackled, poetic inspiration is imprisoned ('staples, in the Song'). However, this reading does not take account of the sensual and erotic element of the first two stanzas. If we are to incorporate the issue of creativity in a reading of the poem, then perhaps we should consider 'communication and the loss of it' as a suitable umbrella term. We could see the poem as dealing with communication at many levels: at

the human sensuous level, at the level of creativity and also at the level of mind where imagined horror is one of the mind's possibilities.





I COULD BRING YOU JEWELS – HAD I A MIND TO

See the notes and glossary in the book for commentary on this poem.





A NARROW FELLOW IN THE GRASS

Dickinson and nature

Basically, this poem is concerned with Dickinson's attitude to nature, in particular her sense that the natural world was distinctly different. In this she differed from Emerson, who thought the entire world, human and non-human, was in harmony and could be known and understood by humankind. Dickinson is much more wary. She professes to have an amicable relationship with nature:

*Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me –
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality –*

This suggests a polite acquaintance more than any emotional attachment or real closeness. It displays a somewhat reserved sense of neighbourly tolerance for the earth's creatures. But even that does not hold for this particular creature – the 'narrow Fellow'. Though there is some effort to personalise him – perhaps as a gentleman rider ('Occasionally rides –/You may have met Him') – and to refer to his likings ('a Boggy Acre'), the poet's basic reaction is one of unease. This shock on meeting is registered in the disjointed, awkward syntax, the faltering words of 'His notice sudden is'. We notice her feeling of threat coming through in the descriptions. Consider, for example, 'Whip lash': it captures the speed, agility and wild unpredictability of the creature, but it also has connotations of sudden threat, injury, pain, lethal strike. At the end of the poem she explicitly records her fear. She feels threatened to the marrow of her bones:

*Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone –*

For Dickinson, nature is to be treated warily. There are times when it is prudent to keep out of the way.

The method of her portrayal of the snake conveys how peculiar, mysterious and elusive nature is. In format, this is a sort of riddle poem. The snake is not named, indeed never fully seen, apart from the glimpse of 'A spotted shaft'. We just get clues to its passage – 'The Grass divides as with a Comb ... And opens further on'. Its purpose or place in the scheme of things is beyond the speaker's comprehension. It just moves through the poem as a series of images. We never learn enough to understand its nature or even identify it. It makes occasional appearances that surprise or frighten. It is altogether outside everyday experience – totally other.

Her poetic method here reveals her attitude to nature. As Jerusha McCormack put it, 'her method, then, is not deliberately elusive, but an imitation of the bafflement she herself finds in the obscurity of natural things and their refusal to confess to significance. They might be mastered but they cannot be understood.'

Imagery

There is an element of creative unexpectedness about Dickinson's imagery, for example in the depiction of the snake as an occasional rider or the bog as 'a Floor too cool for Corn'. This is a feature of her poetry in general.





The purpose of some of the imagery here seems to be an attempt to humanise nature (the narrow fellow ‘Occasionally rides’; ‘Nature’s People’) or it is an attempt to domesticate it (‘the Grass divides as with a Comb’). The domestic and the strange are brought together. Again, the natural is viewed in domestic terms, where the bog is seen as ‘a Floor’. Ultimately this attempt to domesticate nature through the imagery fails, and the essential wildness of the snake reasserts itself in the image of ‘Whip lash’, conveying, as we saw, grace and agility but also threat.

Dickinson’s imagery is pared down to its simple essence in an image such as ‘Zero at the Bone’. In a strange configuration of the abstract and the concrete, she succeeds in finding expression for a primal inner terror.





I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED

Background

A version of this poem was first printed in 1861 in the *Springfield Republican*, edited by Dickinson's friend Samuel Bowles. But it was entitled 'The May-Wine', some line endings were altered to get a more exact rhyme and one line was completely changed. It is doubtful that this was done with the poet's consent.

A reading of the poem

This has been interpreted by some as primarily a nature poem, celebrating the simple home-grown joy of nature, a celebration of endless summer. The exuberance of nature is linked with the excitement of poetic inspiration.

But nature is more the stimulus than the subject of this poem. Nature provides the spur for excitement, good spirits, unrestrained joy. The poem is fundamentally a celebration of happiness and unqualified delight.

This has some of the elements of a Romantic poem, with its sensitivity to nature and the strong sense of individualism shown by the rebellious speaker.

The element of fantasy

The high spirits of this poem nudge it into the realm of fantasy. Susan Juhasz examines this pronounced element of fantasy in the poem. She comments on the childish air and the quality of make-believe it possesses. The riddle form of the first stanza enhances this atmosphere (what is the 'liquor never brewed?').

Real and imaginative experiences are compared in this fantasy world: real liquor to 'Inebriate of Air'. It is a fantasy world where reality is stood on its head: lack of self-control is celebrated as virtue ('Seraphs swing their snowy Hats ... To see the little Tippler'); the drunken speaker seems to have a kind of superiority over the saints (is there a suggestion that their snowy hats would melt, while he can lean against the sun?); the saints are confined, perhaps imprisoned, while the drunkard is free; and time seems somehow to have been vanquished while the 'little Tippler' drinks on into eternity.

The humorous voice of Emily Dickinson

Comic effects

As well as the imaginative elements of fantasy, the poem features many of the more usual comic effects, such as exaggerated imagery – for example, the metaphor of the flower as tavern and the bee as drunkard:

When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee

Out of the Foxglove's door –

or

... the little Tippler

leaning against the – Sun –

The notion of the bee as tippler is maintained throughout the poem – reeling, leaning, etc. The ridiculous costumes ('the snowy Hats') add to the comic effect. The odd juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane is also comic (seraphs, saints and the tippler). The alliteration ('Debauchee of Dew', 'Seraphs swing their snowy Hats') also contributes.





Irony

A deeper humour is achieved through a pervasive sense of irony in the poem. Given the poet's Calvinist background, the central metaphor of the drunkard is amusingly ironic. Her father was a strong advocate of the Temperance League. Perhaps Dickinson is exercising a delightful rebelliousness! To celebrate the riotous, even scandalous activities of the speaker in the common metre of church hymns is amusingly ironic. And there are ironies embedded in both imagery and language: the imprisoned saints contrast with the tipsy speaker at large, and also the fact that she uses the vocabulary of nature to deal with its opposite, timelessness.

Wit

We have already noted the paradoxical riddle of the opening.

Poem as parody

Juhasz, Miller and Smith (in *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*) argue that this poem is a witty parody of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem 'Bacchus'.

- Both poems compare poetic vision to the state of intoxication.
- The poems have a similar structure, beginning with a mystical reference to wine, going on to deal with concrete aspects of the world and finishing with cosmic imagery.
- But Emerson's is a sombre, serious poem, where he forged links with Greek mythology and seems to have some affinity with eternal figures.
- Dickinson smirks at the sacred and deflates the notion of the serious poet.

- Dickinson's stance is outside the poem, smiling from a distance.
- The comic and fantasy elements of Dickinson's poem render a different tone.

There's a good case to be made that this is a conscious literary take-off by Emily Dickinson and as such is both effective and highly amusing.

Here are some fragments of the Emerson poem for comparison.

*Bring me wine, but wine which never grew
In the belly of the grape,
Or grew on vine whose tap-roots, reaching through
Under the Andes to the Cape,
Suffer no savor of the earth to scape.
Let its grapes the morn salute
From a nocturnal root,
Which feels the acrid juice
Of Styx and Erebus;
And turns the woe of Night,
By its own craft, to a more rich delight.
Wine which Music is, –
Music and wine are one, –
That I, drinking this,
Shall hear far Chaos talk with me;
Kings unborn shall walk with me;
And the poor grass shall plot and plan
What it will do when it is man.
Quickened so, will I unlock*





*Every crypt of every rock.
I thank the joyful juice
For all I know; –
Winds of remembering
Of the ancient being blow,
And seeming–solid walls of use
Open and flow.*





AFTER GREAT PAIN, A FORMAL FEELING COMES

A reading of the poem

In the familiar Dickinson mode, this poem is a dramatisation of a feeling. The poet explores the effects of pain and grief on mind and body. The resulting state, that of 'formal feeling', is the focus of study here, and inertia, numbness, disorientation, mechanical activity and finally loss of all feeling are its main manifestations.

The 'formal feeling' is described through a series of analogies: the internal feeling is communicated through concrete images – of the body, of nature and of society. First the body's manifestations of this feeling are transmitted: those of nerves, heart and feet. These all display a stiff formality, a shocked lifelessness. The personified 'Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs' are associated with the formal ceremony of death. For one critic (Susan Juhasz) this image conjured up a picture of polite but essentially inert old women at afternoon tea! The 'stiff Heart' has lost all trace of feeling, has become disoriented under the strain of suffering ('questions was it He, that bore,/And Yesterday, or Centuries before?'). 'The Feet, mechanical, go round': this is automatic behaviour, insensitive to surroundings ('of Ground, or Air, or Ought'). All these physical manifestations display a mindless formality, an absence of real feeling, an inert indifference brought on by suffering.

The 'formal feeling' is also communicated through analogies with nature ('A Quartz contentment'), crystallised like the mineral

and sharing some of its properties, such as weight and brittleness. The dead weight of the depression is focused in space and time through the image 'Hour of Lead'. The feeling finally finds release in the more gentle but lethal analogy of snow, which initiates that final drift towards the death of the senses. For Dickinson, lack of feeling is symbolic of death, and here death is easeful, a gentle 'letting go'.

In essence, the poem deals with the after-effects of human pain: inertia, loss of feeling and a numbness that is like the numbness of death. But in common with some other Dickinson poems, the ending is ambiguous. Because the poem is written in the present tense, we don't know if the experience is over and the speaker has survived it, or if it is continuing, or if it will be terminal. The final dash might suggest continuity. Either way, we are left with an awareness of a disembodied voice.

Poetic technique

- This is a fine example of the 'analogical method' sometimes used by Dickinson. She often makes analogies between literal and metaphorical death, but here the internal feeling is called up through a range of external situations, as explained.
- Nouns are used as the focus for the effective metaphorical work ('Tombs', 'stone', 'Lead', 'Snow'). As David Porter points out, they 'provide visual and tactile immediacy to the condition of paralysis brought on by grief'.
- We notice the technical language used to mechanise life and feelings ('the Feet, mechanical, go round', 'a Quartz contentment').





- A variety of sound effects contribute to the atmosphere of the poem: alliteration draws attention to the 'formal feeling'; the echoes of 'go round -/Of Ground' in stanza 2 underline the meaningless emptiness of the activity; and the sound of 'stone' evokes a painful moan – indeed, the proliferation of long o vowel sounds evokes the numbness and static fatalism of the feeling ('Tombs', 'bore', 'before', 'stone', 'Snow', 'go', 'round', 'Ground', 'Hour').
- This is a dramatic enactment of feeling, using personification of the nerves and heart and a vivid creation of concrete props to move it towards that inevitable climax.

Points of comparison with 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'

Consider these points and decide which ones you think are particularly valid and can be substantiated easily from the texts.

- Both poems deal with extremes of feeling (anguish, pain, suffering).
- In both poems, the poet's projected self-image is one of helpless victim and oppressed, numb being.
- The speaker seems disconnected from order and meaning. The world of the speaker does not make sense.
- The speaker suffers mechanised repetition, an endless ritual of activity.
- The two poems follow the same narrative line: the mechanical activity, the weight of lead, the sense of numbness and the final collapse.

- The human being exists at an intersection of time and space, but in these poems the connection is somehow missed and the speaker wanders off, lost in the universe.





OVERVIEW OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

Themes and topics

Consider the following themes and issues in Emily Dickinson's poetry, then re-examine the poems mentioned for evidence to substantiate or contradict these interpretations.

Mindscapes

Just as some poets are drawn to landscapes for their inspiration, 'mindscapes' are Dickinson's forte. Her most striking pictures are of inside the mind; she is primarily a poet of inner states. Consider the following aspects of her psychological explorations.

Range of moods

She explores the full emotive range, from elation to deep despair. For example, consider the mood of giggling abandonment, the juvenile rebelliousness in 'I taste a liquor never brewed'. Notice the dangerous elation of 'she dances like a Bomb' ('The Soul has Bandaged moments'); the balanced, self-confident optimism of 'I've heard it in the chilliest land' ("Hope" is the thing with feathers); and the deep, unrelieved religious despair in 'There's a certain Slant of light'.

Depression

Dickinson deals frequently with the numbness and the weight of depression. In 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes', she explores the numbness, the lack of any emotion, occurring in the

aftermath of suffering and pain. It is 'an analysis of the absence of feeling in those who have felt too much' (McCormack). It explores the 'Hour of Lead'.

The paralysis of depression is also touched on in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. She is very much aware of the social isolation and loneliness of the depressed person: 'These, are not brayed of Tongue'.

She deals with extreme mental pressure, with the breaking down of the mind into the emptiness of insanity.

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
(‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’)*

She explores terror and dread and the obscene horrors the mind is capable of conjuring up: the 'ghastly Fright', the 'Goblin', the 'Horror' of 'The soul'. There is also a hint of guilt in stanza 2 of 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. She has an intimate awareness of the wounded, damaged spirit.

A dramatic rendering of mental states and processes

We are given an immediate, step-by-step view of the development of these traumatic mental states. It is as if we are watching a psychological drama, but inside the head. Consider the dramatic stages of 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' or 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. The use of first person narrative, simple, dramatic verbs and staccato phrasing all contribute to the orchestration of this drama.





The nature of consciousness

At the broadest level, Dickinson was fascinated by the nature of consciousness itself. Two aspects of it, feeling and knowing, are referred to in the exploration of psychic disintegration in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'. She dwells in particular on the loss of consciousness in that poem ('and Finished knowing – then') and also in 'I heard a Fly buzz'. In 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes', consciousness is seen in terms of sensation and its loss:

First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

The fragile nature of the mind, the psyche under siege, the individual as victim

These are other aspects of the mindscape theme, hinted at throughout Dickinson's poems. Which poems do you think best explore these issues?

Nature

Admiration for nature

Dickinson's attitude to nature is quite complex. On the one hand she is full of admiration for the agility, the deftness and the beauty of nature's creatures. For example, the flight of the bird is awe-inspiring as he 'unrolled his feathers/And rowed him softer home' in 'A Bird came down the Walk'. The poet is moved by his beauty: 'he stirred his Velvet Head'. There is an appreciation of the essential wildness and speed of the snake – 'Whip lash' – in 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass'. As she says explicitly in that poem, she feels a certain 'cordiality' for 'Nature's People'.

Yet she is also aware of how different, how completely other, nature is. We notice this in a small way in 'A Bird came down

the Walk', when she is shocked by the sudden realisation of his carnivorous nature, his essential bird quality:

*He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.*

Likewise, the mysteriousness of the 'narrow Fellow', his essentially unknowable nature and the ever-present sense of threat he exudes, provokes in her 'a tighter breathing'. The sunlight in 'There's a certain Slant of light' loses its conventional associations and quickly becomes totally alien and oppressive.

Thus, the human is sometimes cut off from nature, as the poet is from the bird:

*I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
(‘A Bird came down the Walk’)*

In spite of that, nature can be exotic, exciting and full of romantic symbolism, as in 'I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to'.

Nature as metaphor

Dickinson uses nature motifs as metaphorical vehicles for her mood: The mood of playful drunkenness in 'I taste a liquor never brewed' is portrayed in natural terms: 'Inebriate of Air – am I'. And in a startling departure from the expected, she uses light, stripped of its normal associations and invested with negative ones, as a medium for conveying her despair in 'There's a certain Slant of light'. She also uses natural phenomena in her definition poems as one leg of the comparison. The concrete image from nature in '“Hope” is the thing with feathers' is used as a metaphorical correlative for the abstract virtue.





Love

Hopeless longing

For the most part, this selection of poems deals with the negative aspects and outcomes of love. Lost love, or the absent lover, features in such poems as 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. The yearning for love is strong in her poems and this sometimes features as hopeless longing.

Is there a suggestion that love is always out of reach, that it is an illusion, that we have a great capacity for self-delusion in this respect?

The effect of lost love

Consider the destructive effects of possible lost love in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments': depression, nightmares, sick erotic fantasies, guilt and so on. Is she saying that the loss of love unbalances? Unbalanced, too, is the elation as she 'swings upon the Hours'.

Romantic love

'I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to' features something of the exotic and exciting feeling involved in romantic love: the gifts, the courtship, the exaggerated claims of 'Dower itself – for Bobadilo'. Love changes the perception, enriches the outlook, as in this colourful world of sights and smells. Simple, everyday things, such as the meadow flower, are viewed in a new light:

*Never a fellow matched this Topaz –
And his Emerald Swing –
(I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to')*

Death

Re-enactment of actual death

Dickinson is fascinated by the deathbed scene, the moment of transition from life into death. Consider 'I heard a Fly buzz' and study the steps in the process: the fading of the light, the alienation or separation of the dying person from the things of life, the negation of order, the growing lack of comprehension of the world.

Death as alienation from the world

Death is not merely a physical or biological process, but an alienation of the consciousness from the world; see 'I heard a Fly buzz'.

A Calvinist picture

The Calvinist austerity of death is shown in 'I heard a Fly buzz', where the emphasis is on the awesomeness of God as the king and on the last battle ('that last Onset'). It is a comfortless encounter, without a hint of angels or heavenly choirs or any of the trappings of a Catholic cosmology. Nor is there any view at all of the afterlife here. Does this suggest a failure of belief on the part of Dickinson?

Other aspects of death

Other aspects not featured in this selection are the ease, the civility, the gentleness of it. See also the personification of death as a gentleman in a carriage in her poem 'Because I could not stop for Death'.





Technique of the surviving consciousness

Often the process of death is described by the speaker as if the consciousness somehow survived it and could relate the event. This gives us a dual perspective on death: that of the person undergoing it and a more distant, objective view.

Metaphorical death

Dickinson does not always make a distinction between actual death and spiritual or mental death. Metaphorically, death is associated with despair, separation and depression. These states of mind are likened to the experience of death, as in 'the Distance/ On the look of Death' ('There's a certain Slant of light'). Burial is equated with mental breakdown in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' and the loss of feeling is described in terms of dying: 'First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go' ('After great pain, a formal feeling comes'). Indeed, this 'letting go' seems a welcome relief.

Loss

Dickinson has been described as a poet of loss – lost love, lost sensation, lost sanity. Denis Donoghue said of her: 'in Emily Dickinson generally, experiences are more intensely apprehended just after their loss'. Which poems would you explore to examine this view of Dickinson?

The religious ethos of her poems

A view of Heaven

As we saw, Dickinson does not have an orthodox religious view. Heaven is painted as an unrealistic pantomime where 'Seraphs swing their snowy Hats/And Saints – to windows run' ('I taste a

liquor never brewed'). The afterlife here has been naturalised, but to the point of caricature. In a display of shocking originality, she manages to 'send up' Heaven!

Religious despair

Dickinson also feels the oppression of religion: 'the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes' ('There's a certain Slant of light'). She suffers intensely from the internal scarring ('Heavenly Hurt', 'imperial affliction'). She relates these in a tone of bitter complaint and condemnation that God does not reveal himself through the world.

The awesome Calvinist God

The final terrifying encounter with God, the king, at 'that last Onset' is one of the most poignant religious moments in this selection of poems. It highlights Dickinson's view of humankind's insignificance before the divine, the awesome omnipotence of God and the formal feudal nature of the relationship between God and humanity.

The human being as victim

The helplessness of the human being is a motif running through many of the poems. We are unable to fulfil desire. Love is out of reach: frustration is the lot of the person ('There's a certain Slant of light', 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes', 'The Soul has Bandaged moments').

Religious oppression

The complete inability of the speaker to affect or influence the light in any way, even to understand it in the orthodox way, leaves





one with a feeling of total impotence against heavenly oppression in 'There's a certain Slant of light': 'None may teach it – Any.' It is 'Sent us', 'Heavenly Hurt', 'it gives us' – all these suggest the powerlessness of the victim.

The speaker as victim

A victim of mental frailty

Examine the breakdown of 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'. Notice the robotic actions, the loss of human sensitivity and of motivation in 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes', where 'The Feet, mechanical, go round.' The fragile mind is all too evident in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments', where the speaker is a mental victim, perhaps also a sexual victim ('too appalled to stir' or a 'Felon led along'). In 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' she is captive to her fear of nature, which induces in her 'a tighter breathing'.

A victim of death

She is a victim of death despite her attempts to control it in 'I heard a Fly buzz': 'there interposed a Fly ... Between the light – and me'.

Perhaps we can see her as dumb, a prisoner of language, unable to be creative, 'With shackles on the plumed feet,/And staples, in the Song' ('The Soul has Bandaged moments').

Some critics feel that Dickinson deliberately sought out situations of oppression, that 'she cultivates the apprehension made possible by pain' (Denis Donoghue).

Suffering and pain

Suffering and pain, whether mental or physical, are ever-present in Dickinson's poetry. Which poems do you think best exemplify this?

Alienation

Alienation, from God and nature, is part of the suffering at the heart of Dickinson's poetry ('There's a certain Slant of light', 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass').





SOME KEY FEATURES OF DICKINSON'S POETRY

Searching for meaning

Many of Dickinson's poems are struggling to find meaning in the experience being investigated, experiences such as the nature of hope, the feeling of despair, the experience of breakdown, what it might be like to die or the essential nature of bird or reptile. Even the structure of some of the poems makes it clear that what is happening is an investigation, a struggle to name or master the experience. She uses analogies, similes, etc. in an attempt to understand. She attempts to define abstracts in terms of concrete things ('"Hope" is the thing with feathers' or 'the Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs'). The bird's flight ('A Bird came down the Walk') is explored through the analogy with rowing. Mental breakdown is examined through the extended metaphor of a funeral ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'). She is struggling to understand, using analogical terms.

Some of the poems are structured as riddles ('A narrow Fellow in the Grass', 'I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to'). Each of these is a circuitous exploration of a phenomenon that is gradually made clearer but is never fully named. Sometimes things resist being named. Sometimes what at first appeared simple takes on an alien nature and it becomes impossible for the poet to pin down its meaning accurately. Consider 'I heard a Fly buzz' and 'There's a certain Slant of light'. In the latter, the feeling of loneliness and hurt is brought out by the analogy with wintry sunlight, the coldness of winter afternoons, etc. However, the feeling is never

fully comprehended but understood only in terms of its effects ('when it comes' and 'when it goes'). Yet she goes on, questioning and prodding at the meaning of things in an attempt to master their significance.

Some critics refer to the rhetorical quality of Dickinson's poems. Not only is she debating with herself, but she is using devices to argue and convince us of her position. We might consider the appeal to the reader (in 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass'): 'You may have met Him – did you not'. Helen McNeil speaks of Dickinson's 'passionate investigation' and notices how in a typical poem, she takes the reader through a sequence of rapidly changing images, exploring definitions that quickly break down, or veers off into unexpected surmises or more rhetorical investigation before ending, frequently, in an open closure. McNeil interprets that final dash as a graphic indication that the debate has not finished with the poem.

Exploring transient states

Dickinson is fascinated by moments of change, the in-between condition: the point of breakdown ('And Finished knowing – then'); the moment of death ('I could not see to see'); the 'letting go' ('After great pain, a formal feeling comes'). She explores the swiftly changing moods in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. Examining despair, she focuses on its arrival and departure.

*When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –
(There's a certain Slant of light')*





There is a certain air of indeterminacy about her own attitude in some of the poems. She is unable to define her experience in 'There's a certain Slant of light', humorously vacillating in 'I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to'. Despite her 'transport/Of cordiality' for nature, she is terrified by the 'narrow Fellow' ('Zero at the Bone'). John Robinson comments:

She is a poet of passing away (death is one great form of this), of the elusive and the transient, and the fugitive, of what she called 'a quality of loss.' Her great brilliance is with this, and with the ominous, the vague, the threatening, the non-arrival, the not-quite-grasped, the not-quite-realised, the missing.

Which of these qualities do you think applies to the Dickinson poems you have read? Re-examine the poems for supporting evidence.

Telling dramatic stories

For all the elusiveness of her subject matter and the circuitous nature of her poetic method, there is a strong narrative structure in many of Dickinson's poems. Most are told in the first person and constructed as reminiscent narratives ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain', 'A Bird came down the Walk', 'I heard a Fly buzz', 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'). The poet takes us through a sequence of images, inside or outside the head, exposing us to a series of problems or confused feelings, which mostly lead on to a dramatic if sometimes inconclusive ending. This is the basic structure of story.

And they are dramatic. They deal with dramatic moments of discovery and insight ('A Bird came down the Walk', 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass') or they cover a personal crisis ('There's a certain Slant of light', 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain', 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'). Even death provides the ingredients for dramatic conflict, with 'that last Onset', 'the Heaves of Storm' and the dying person's struggle for control. Dickinson's technique of the 'divided voice' provides dramatic conflict in the narrative (i.e. the voice actually experiencing, which is separate from the voice outside the experience, the persona that has survived death or other event). This is true in particular of 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' and 'I heard a Fly buzz'.

Offering a transformed view of the world

Dickinson disrupts and transforms our accepted view of things. 'She takes the normalising frames of our world and unhinges them, forcing them askew to make space for a joke, for a different take' (Juhasz, Miller and Smith). We can see this in 'A Bird came down the Walk', where Dickinson disturbs our ordinary, somewhat clichéd view of nature. This is no sweet songbird, but a wild, carnivorous creature:

*He bit an Anglemorm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw*

Yet at the same time we are expected to think of him as polite and gentlemanly, as he 'then hopped sidewise to the Wall/To let a Beetle pass'. But it is when she begins to describe his flight that we can no longer hold to our orthodox conception of bird or air:





*And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home –*

*Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam –
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, splashless as they swim.*

The elements mingle and the bird rows, leaps, flies, swims. What do the lines actually mean ('to row him softer home', 'Banks of Noon')? Juhasz, Miller and Smith say: 'You can see it, you can feel it, you get a shiver of delight every time you read it – but those lines of poetry do not make literal sense.' What Dickinson has done is to evoke something outside our experience, creating a new reality, a new construct. As readers, we believe in it and enjoy it and in a certain sense we understand it, but it is not real. Yet we are willing to inhabit her transformed world.

She frequently manages to disorient the reader in little ways through her word usage and stylistic devices. She confounds our normal expectations, for example by substituting an abstract word for the expected concrete one. In 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' she uses 'Space' instead of the expected 'bells' in the line 'Then Space – began to toll'. But it carries the sense of emptiness brought on by depression and breakdown. This sensation is likened to the tolling of the death bell and it resounds through the speaker's entire being. So instead of the profound silence one might expect of emptiness, we find a vibrating universe of sound in which the speaker is equally isolated and, if anything, more oppressed:

*As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear.*

Except that here, instead of the expected unfeeling state of numbness usually associated with depression, it is a state of hypersensitivity to the entire universe that isolates the speaker. This sense of isolation from humanity is conveyed in that extraordinary image of herself and personified silence as a new race of beings in the galaxy:

*And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –*

Once again we have entered Dickinson's new cosmic construct, unreal but rendered so convincingly that we have no difficulty inhabiting her transformed world. Where else in the poetry do you find these radical transformations and how are they achieved?

Tones of seriousness and humour

The serious tones of Dickinson's poetry are patently obvious: the strong, confident tone of "Hope" is the thing with feathers'; the bleak and painful despair of 'There's a certain Slant of light'; the sense of oppression in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' and 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'; and the sheer terror of 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. Because of the peculiarities of her writing style – the punctuation, the truncated episodic imagery, the pared-down phrases, etc. – we are always conscious that these poems are crafted, and there is also an awareness of control and of some distance between the speaker and the feelings portrayed. The tone is mostly one of controlled emotion, however powerful and painful.





There is a good deal of humour too, some of it bleak, some of it sheer slapstick. There is the dark, ironic humour of the fly – a mere house pest interrupting, and completely ruining, the solemnity and altering the focus of this most significant ritual. There is the grotesque humour in the figures of 'ghastly Fright' and the Goblin in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'. Perhaps it is more gothic horror than grotesque humour. But as well as the bleak humour we find a strain of literary humour in 'I taste a liquor never brewed', which is a parody of Emerson's 'Bacchus'. The fun in that poem is driven by sheer exuberance and can be seen in the extremity of metaphor she employs:

*When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door –*

There is a sense of comic rebelliousness in her caricature of Heaven, where 'Seraphs swing their snowy Hats,' etc. And there is a certain humour to be found in all her quirky, peculiar observations, such as the somewhat contradictory characteristics of the bird, as discussed earlier.

Conciseness

Sparseness and economy of word and image are key features of Dickinson's poetry. For example, consider the preciseness of her descriptions in 'A Bird came down the Walk'. There is hardly a superfluous word until she attempts to understand the nature of flight at the end. Consider also the precise details of the deathbed scene in 'I heard a Fly buzz'.





TECHNICAL ELEMENTS OF DICKINSON'S STYLE

Punctuation

The most idiosyncratic feature of Dickinson's punctuation is undoubtedly her use of the dash. At first this was viewed as sloppy punctuation, indiscriminate, and just another example of her unpreparedness for publication. Then it was argued that the dashes had a rhetorical rather than a grammatical function. Because some of them were sloping in the original manuscripts it was felt that they might be hints for the pitch of a reading voice.

Nowadays readers accept them as a conscious feature of her punctuation and they are seen as fulfilling a function somewhere between a full stop and a comma. It can be argued that a dash represents a long pause, linking what has gone before and what is to follow. It facilitates continuity and gives the impression of immediacy, i.e. that these ideas, fears, terrors or images are only just being processed by the mind. Reader and speaker are just now making these explorations and discoveries.

The dash fulfils a number of functions. The dash at the end of a poem might suggest continuity, that the debate is not finished or that the consciousness somehow survives. We see this latter suggestion in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' ('and Finished knowing – then –'). There is a similar end to 'I heard a Fly buzz'. The dash affects the pace and rhythm of the line. It is used for very dramatic pausing, deliberately slowing the pace to correlate with the idea, as in 'First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –' ('After

great pain, a formal feeling comes'), though a combination of commas and consonants can slow a line equally well, as in 'Wrecked, solitary, here –' ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain').

Strategically placed dashes increase the sense of drama in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments' ('look at her –/Salute her – with long fingers –/Caress her'). The tension of the awful moment is prolonged. The dash is used to isolate and emphasise when the fly interposes 'Between the light – and me –/And then the Windows failed'. The speaker ('and me') is being graphically isolated and separated out for death. Altogether, the dash functions as a very versatile form of punctuation.

Capitalisation

Dickinson's capitalisation has been a source of much discussion and questioning. The eighteenth-century fashion of using capitals for the initial letter of all nouns had died out. Besides, she did not use a capital for every noun. So was her practice just a personal style or did it have a purpose? Present-day scholars feel that she used capitals for emphasis, drawing attention to words that carry the weight of the central imagery and meaning and so provide a line of emphasis through the poem. As such, we can view the capitalised words as stepping-stones through the meaning.

David Porter illustrates how this works by examining the first stanza of 'There's a certain Slant of light':

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –*





'Slant of light', 'Winter Afternoons', 'Heft' and 'Cathedral Tunes' carry the ideas in this stanza. The argument is then refined by the word 'certain', which denotes something special about the light, while 'oppresses' makes the emotional reaction specific.

'Slant of light' and 'Winter Afternoons' give us the visual picture, the setting. 'Winter Afternoons' also carries an emotive significance: emotionally cold, the dead season, emptiness and isolation, lifelessness leading to despair. 'Heft' and 'Cathedral Tunes' form the other part of the simile, linking the wintry emotion with a religious weight. In this way, the capitalised words carry the visual, emotional and logical burden of the stanza.

Porter also suggests that the visual distinction of words by capital letters indicates that the meanings of these words has been enriched – that 'Winter Afternoons' denotes not only the scene, but a range of sensuous suggestions (coldness, inactivity, whiteness) and also emotional responses (apprehension, meditation, isolation). We know that Dickinson relied greatly on the connotations of individual words and images; perhaps capitalisation was her way of signposting depth and richness, which readers must mine for themselves.

Diction: Dickinson's use of words

- She uses words in a fairly straightforward way, for the most part without allusions or references.
- Most noticeable is her tendency to mix the simple and the abstract: for example, in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' we get 'Funeral', 'Mourners', 'Service', 'Drum', 'Box', 'Bell' and then 'Being'.

- Probably the most important feature of her use of words is her reliance on the connotations, associations or suggestions of individual words to create layers of meaning. We have already considered the connotations of space and toll; another example worth considering is 'Seal' in 'There's a certain Slant of light'. A seal is a sign, usually of authenticity or authority. Ironically, the divine sign here is not uplifting ('the Seal Despair'). It might also suggest a sealing off, that this state is unalterable, etc. Consider also 'Quartz contentment': this carries associations of coldness, the weight of despair, the immobility of rock, the glittering brittleness of quartz, etc.
- Some critics feel that the capitalisation encourages the reader to scrutinise these words for layers of meaning.
- She sometimes uses groups of words from a particular professional usage to create an effect. Consider, for example, the legal words in 'I heard a Fly buzz': 'willed', 'Keepsakes', 'Signed', 'portion', 'Assignable'. They suggest 'last will and testament' and accord precisely with the controlled, ordered atmosphere she wishes at her deathbed. She uses technical language to mechanise life in 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes': 'mechanical', 'go round', 'a Wooden way'.
- One of the most fascinating and original but also exasperating facets of her diction is the development of a personal vocabulary. Some of these words, such as 'Circumference' and 'Experiment', originate from her interest in science at school, but she has endowed them with new, personal meanings. They have taken on some of the significance of a symbol, but unfortunately they do not always have the constancy





of a symbol. Take, for example, her use of the word 'Noon', whose meaning varies throughout the poems. At times 'noon' and 'night' are interchangeable for 'life' and 'death', but 'noon' has been used to suggest both immortal life and the timelessness of death. In this selection, 'noon' is used to suggest playfulness and happy, excited activity in the phrase 'Banks of Noon' ('A Bird came down the Walk'), but it is also used to suggest passionate love and sensual fulfilment in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments', as the escaped bee is free to

*Touch Liberty – then know no more,
But Noon, and Paradise –*

- There is a similar ambiguity and inconstancy in her use of colour. Red mostly suggests life and blood. Green is the colour of the grave. But there is ambivalence in her usage of blue. It is used for the beloved and is the colour of the sky ('inns of Molten Blue'), but it is also used negatively in the context of the fly, with the stumbling and failing of mind and consciousness for a theme.

Imagery

- Emily Dickinson's poetry is primarily visual. Image follows image in a technique that might be seen as cinematic nowadays. Consider the sequence of images in 'A Bird came down the Walk', 'I heard a Fly buzz', 'The Soul has Bandaged moments' and 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass'.
- Dickinson thinks in images. They are not ornamental: their function is to carry the thought of the poem. Examine the imagery in 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain': the treading mourners

and the service 'like a Drum' carry the notion of being weighed down, oppressed, deprived of the ability to act, as does the image of 'Boots of Lead'. The 'Box', or coffin, suggests the confinement, the claustrophobia of the condition, and also suggests that depression is a sort of mental death. The imagery of the fourth stanza conveys the isolation of the speaker in cosmic terms. Again, a funeral image (uniting world and mind, concrete and abstract) provides the impetus for the mind's final plunge into chaos: 'a Plank in Reason, broke,/And I dropped down, and down'.

- She uses similes and metaphors in an attempt to understand by analogy ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'; '“Hope” is the thing with feathers'). The investigation of the feeling of despair through an analysis of its symbolic correlative, the 'Slant of light', was examined in the commentary on 'There's a certain Slant of light'.
- Many of her most startling metaphors and images consist of abstract and concrete elements yoked together, such as 'a Plank in Reason', 'Zero at the Bone', '“Hope” is the thing with feathers', etc.
- The metaphor poem '“Hope” is the thing with feathers' resembles a particular kind of didactic metaphor central to the tradition of Protestant preaching, indeed to all religious preaching. This was known as an emblem and might be a picture or other religious object, from which meaning and a moral were elaborately constructed. Perhaps this is one of the bases for Dickinson's metaphorical style.





- Many of her images are pared down to a mere phrase, to their barest essential. This economy of imagery leads to a certain cryptic quality and often lends itself to ambiguity. But ambiguity was a conscious feature of her style. The reader is expected to work at these cryptic images, such as 'Zero at the Bone', 'Being, but an Ear', 'Banks of Noon', etc.
- We find a great range and variety of imagery in Dickinson, from the natural to the legal ('the Nerves sit ceremonious', 'the stiff Heart questions'), the military ('that last Onset'), the everyday (tankards, boxes, robbers) and the macabre ('ghastly Fright'). Much of her imagery comes from the natural world, some comes from her own studies (references to geology, geography and biology) and some of it is obtained from her reading: the fly from *The House of the Seven Gables* and jewels, spices and colours from her reading on explorations and scientific discoveries.

Form and metre

The majority of Dickinson's verses are based on the hymn format and the ballad quatrain. They consist of quatrains with alternate lines of eight and six syllables. This was known as common metre in the hymn books. For good examples of this, examine '“Hope” is the thing with feathers' and 'There's a certain Slant of light', but note that the metre is not always completely regular.

The ballad or hymn format suited her, as it satisfied her instinct for economy and it facilitated the tight constructions she was led to by her liking for definition, antithesis and paradox.

*'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

There is a slight reminiscence of the hymn in her work, particularly in the tendency towards epigram and aphorism ('and sweetest – in the Gale – is heard'). The strong narrative line in her poems shows a similarity with the ballad. But she does not feel bound by a regular metre and displays the confidence and originality to vary it. Neither is she completely bound by the quatrain format. We find a six-line and an eight-line stanza in 'The Soul has Bandaged moments' and 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass', respectively.

Altogether we find a flexible approach to metre and stanza, with a strong inclination towards the ballad or hymn format that suited her.

Rhymes and sounds of words

Again, we find much flexibility and, some would say, originality in her use of rhymes and sounds of words. Though there is a deliberate intention to rhyme, a good deal of it comes out as off-rhyme or half-rhyme, such as soul – all, storm – warm ('“Hope” is the thing with feathers'), Afternoons – Tunes ('There's a certain Slant of light') and fro – through ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain').

But she is interested in the music of words and manages to alliterate frequently, sometimes with comic results ('Debauchee of Dew'), The poems resound with internal musical echoes: 'Mourners to and fro', 'Being, but an Ear' ('I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'). She is also conscious of the onomatopoeic value of words in creating atmosphere: 'creak across my Soul', 'Space – began to toll'.





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

1. What issues did Dickinson write about? What insights did she give you into these issues?
2. Which themes, issues or topics did she make you think more deeply about?
3. After reading her poetry, what understanding do you have of her as a person – her preoccupations, interests, longings, fears, etc.?
4. What interested you most about her life and her writing?
5. Choose one poem that affected you deeply or said something important to you and explain what you discovered.
6. What aspects of her particular style of writing appeal to you? Why?
7. In what ways is she different from other poets you have read?
8. What do you think Emily Dickinson's poetry has to offer to a young person today? Make a case for and also a case against reading her.
9. If you want to read more about her, try *The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Richard Sewall (Harvard University Press, 1974).





QUESTIONS

1. List the main themes that preoccupy Dickinson in this selection of her poetry. Explore, in some detail, her views on any two of these themes.
2. How important is imagery in the poetry of Emily Dickinson? Explore:
 - The function of imagery in her poetry
 - The patterns you notice
 - The sources of the imagery
 - The range of the imagery
3. Examine the depth of meanings provided by the imagery in any particular poem.
4. List the particular features of style you consider important in her poetry and explain the effects of any two features. Refer to the text to substantiate your views.
5. 'Emily Dickinson wrote about landscapes and mindscapes, and both terrains held pain and terror for her.' Consider Dickinson's poetry in light of this statement.
6. 'Dickinson's poetry offers us a profound scrutiny of death and loss.' Would you agree? Substantiate your views with reference to at least two of the poems.
7. 'Desolation, hopelessness and a fierce and frustrated longing arise from nearly every page' (John Cody). Would you agree with this reading of Dickinson's poetry?
8. Dickinson had a well-developed comic vision. Outline what you discovered about this often neglected aspect of her poetry.
9. 'Dickinson's chief fascination is with passing moments and transition states.' Examine this aspect of her work in light of the poems you have studied.
10. Do you think there is a disturbing tendency towards the macabre in Dickinson's poetry?
11. 'Emily Dickinson is a moody poet' (Denis Donoghue). Would you agree? Substantiate your views with reference to the text.
12. 'Her main reaction to life experience is one of bafflement.' Comment on this in light of the poetry you have read.
13. Emily Dickinson has 'a tendency to play up problems as if they were mysteries' (Denis Donoghue). Examine any two poems in light of this view.
14. Do you find a dramatic quality in Dickinson's work? Support your views by reference to at least three poems.
15. There are two voices in many of Dickinson's poems: the suffering 'I' and a detached, observing persona who is outside the experience. What is the effect of this on the tone of the poems? Support your views with references to at least two poems.
16. How do you account for the elusive quality of her poetry? Examine both the abstract nature of the themes she investigated and the conciseness of her style.
17. 'The difficulty in Emily Dickinson's poetry has to do with the layers of meaning she constructs through the multiple connotations of words and images.' Investigate this aspect of her technique in any two poems you have studied.
18. Would you consider Emily Dickinson to be a religious poet? Explain your reasons with reference to texts.





19. Write about the 'snapshot brevity' of any three of her poems you have studied.
20. Examine 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' as a typical Dickinson poem. Consider the experience investigated, the tone of the poem, the use of imagery and metaphor, the concentration of meaning, the dual perspective of the speaking voice and any two features of the poetic format.





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GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Notes and Explorations: Martin Wallace

HL 2019

OL 2019

HL 2021

OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

God's Grandeur

Spring

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame

The Windhover

Pied Beauty

Felix Randal

Inversnaid

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend

Concepts and rhythm in Hopkins's poetry

An overview of Gerard Manley Hopkins

Developing a personal response to the poetry of
Gerard Manley Hopkins

Questions

Bibliography





INTRODUCTION

Haslemere, Surrey: December 1918. Into the hands of a bedridden lady of nearly ninety-eight, twenty years a widow, was placed one of the first copies of a small edition of poems written by her eldest son, who had been dead for twenty-nine years. (Norman White, Hopkins: A Literary Biography)

Norman White's dramatic opening to his excellent biography of Hopkins draws attention to some of the ironies of the poet's life and work. Hopkins's devotion to poetry came second only to his devotion to God, yet he died an unpublished poet. The closest friends who had access to his poetry while he was alive were dubious about the value of his work. His experimentation with language and prosody were considered too outrageous for nineteenth-century readers, yet his centenary was marked by a multitude of publications acknowledging him as the most important poet of his time. He had a deep faith in God and his mysterious ways, but he could never have imagined that his verse would be familiar to the majority of students who now attend the university where he taught and was sometimes the victim of ridicule. How amazed he would have been to read Sunday columnists referring to his works with the familiarity that comes from being on the course for the Leaving Certificate! Perhaps the eccentric little priest would have been horrified to find himself ranked with the great writers of English poetry, but then again, he held a great conviction that his poetry was a service to the greater glory of God and that it would eventually find its place.

Hopkins can be a difficult poet. His arrangement of words is sometimes complex and concentrated and his diction and imagery can be demanding, yet if we just listen to the poems often enough, many of the difficulties disappear. If the primary purpose of poetry is to communicate meaning, a poet would be better employed writing in prose. The way in which a poem communicates meaning is what makes it beautiful and worthwhile. Part of the meaning, or truth, of a poem is in the beauty, and part of the beauty is in the meaning, just as a song pleases because of its combination of words and music.

Some background information about his life can provide guidance through the difficulties of Hopkins's poetry and offer some perspectives on the poems that will help in developing a personal response to his poetry.

Family

Gerard Manley Hopkins was the first of nine children. He was born on 28 July 1844 into a prosperous middle-class family near London. His father, Manley Hopkins, was a marine insurance broker who wrote two books on marine insurance, a history of Hawaii (of which he was Consul-General in England), a book on cardinal numbers, an unpublished novel, literary criticism, newsletters and three volumes of poetry. He also had a great interest in architecture, which he passed on to his son; when Gerard was thirteen his father presented him with a copy of Parker's *Introduction to the Study of Gothic Architecture*. Manley Hopkins had an intense dislike of priests because of their attempts to convert the people of Hawaii to Catholicism.





Hopkins's mother was an affectionate person who loved music and poetry. Her father had studied medicine with John Keats. Hopkins's aunt, Annie, lived with them; she taught Gerard how to draw and paint. The family used to take holidays in Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight, where Gerard and his brother would spend much of their time sketching the surrounding landscapes.

Education

When the family moved to Hampstead in 1854, Gerard's father decided that he should attend Highgate School as a boarder. It was important to belong to the right church and attend the right school if one wished to climb the social ladder. At the age of ten Gerard was quite small and delicate; he preferred cricket and swimming to more physical activities such as football. He was an excellent student with a lively sense of humour; 'he was full of fun, rippling over with jokes, and chaff, facile with pencil and pen, with rhyming jibe or cartoon'. However, the headmaster, Dr Dyne, was a whip-loving authoritarian whom Hopkins disliked intensely.

On one occasion Hopkins made a bet of 10 shillings against sixpence (63c to 2.5c – a lot of pocket money in those days) that he would abstain from liquids for three weeks. His real aim was to show his powers of endurance. When he collapsed in the classroom the truth came out, but not before Hopkins had won his bet. When Dyne found out about the bet he swooped immediately and decided to punish both gamblers, compelling Hopkins to return the money.

In vain [Hopkins] pointed out that such a decision really rewarded the other boy, and only punished him, who had

endured the suffering and exhaustion of the effort. Dyne was obdurate and Gerard ... only heaped up to himself further punishment.

This anecdote gives a good insight into Hopkins's stubborn nature, but he strongly disapproved of this rebelliousness in his own personality and felt that it should be kept under control.

One of the junior masters in the school, a clergyman by the name of R.W. Dixon, later became a poet and a friend of Hopkins. At the age of fifteen Gerard won the school poetry prize. Two years later one of his poems was published in a periodical, one of the very few poems published in his lifetime.

Oxford

In 1863 Hopkins was awarded an exhibition (scholarship) to study Classics at Balliol College, Oxford. From the moment he arrived there, he loved Oxford. His quick wit, openness and spontaneity made him many friends, one of whom was to be the man who would save his poetry from oblivion and would make the presentation of his poems to Hopkins's mother fifty-five years later: Robert Bridges. In a letter home, Hopkins wrote: 'Everything is delightful ... I have met with much attention and am perfectly comfortable. Balliol is the friendliest and snuggest of colleges.'





The artist

At this time Hopkins was more interested in painting than in writing. He kept journals containing extremely detailed descriptions of observed phenomena:

Round holes are scooped in the rocks smooth and true like turning: they look like the hollow of a vault or bowl. I saw and sketched ... One of them was in the making: a blade of water played on it and shaping to it spun off making a bold big white bow coiling its edge over and splaying into ribs.

He was fascinated by the teachings of John Ruskin, whose books *Modern Painters* and *The Elements of Drawing* advocated an intense concentration on the individuality of natural objects. Drawing was of secondary importance to seeing and appreciating the subtlety of nature. 'If leaves are intricate, so is moss, so is foam, so is rock cleavage, so are fur and hair, and texture of drapery, and of clouds.'

Pattern and contrast were important features, according to Ruskin. Hopkins loved 'dappled' things – contrasting colours or variations between light and shade. In his later writing he formulated the 'law of contrasts': 'every form and line may be made more striking to the eye by an opponent form or line near them'. The aesthetic principles that would govern his poetry later on were already beginning to take shape in his mind.

The Oxford Movement

During his time in Oxford, Hopkins's personality seemed to change. He became bad-tempered in his relationship with his family. Perhaps he was asserting his independence from them, especially from his overwhelming father. He seemed to lose a

good deal of his humour and he began to become preoccupied with some very serious issues.

The Oxford Movement was a debate taking place within the Church of England between the liberal 'Broad Church' and the Anglo-Catholic 'High Church'. Hopkins was attracted at first towards the liberal wing, which was identified very much with Balliol College, but after a difficult period of internal conflict he decided to follow the path of the man who was to become a kind of spiritual father, John Henry Newman. Newman had converted to Catholicism and then become a priest (later a cardinal). Hopkins's decision to follow the same path was the most momentous decision in his short life. Whether this decision was based on theology and doctrine or, as Robert Bernard Martin seems to imply, an act of rebellion against his father and the 'upwardly mobile' life that he had planned for his son it is difficult to say. Certainly Hopkins's writings at this time are preoccupied with matters of doctrine. In a letter to a friend he declared his conviction in 'the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Religion without that is sombre, dangerous, illogical.' He came to doubt the historical right of the Church of England to consecrate the Blessed Sacrament.

He also showed a remarkable interest in the life of Savonarola, the fifteenth-century Italian ascetic martyr.

I must tell you he is the only person in history ... about whom I have a real feeling, and I felt such an enthusiasm about Savonarola that I can conceive what it must have been to have been of his followers. I feel this the more because he was followed by the painters, architects and other artists of





his day, and he is the prophet of Christian art, and it is easy to imagine oneself a painter of his following.

Even at this stage Hopkins was concerned about the dichotomy, as he saw it, between the role of the artist and the role of the priest.

By the time he was in his second year he had become self-denying and ascetic. He sometimes wore a flannel girdle and walked for a while with downcast eyes – quite a torture for one who delighted in the observation of natural beauty. He became obsessive about sin and personal purity, keeping detailed accounts of his indiscretions, such as time-wasting and inattention at chapel. Sins of the flesh, involving ‘temptations’ and stolen glances at fellow students, were a great concern to him. We might laugh at his scrupulousness today from our liberal perspective, but such puritanical obsession was commonplace in the nineteenth century. Purity was associated with sensual deprivation and self-inflicted punishment, which would yield the reward of spiritual ecstasy.

Hopkins decided to give up the idea of being a painter because it provoked ‘evil thoughts’. Clearly he feared his own passionate and sensuous nature, which manifested itself later in his poetry; ‘he was in love with the phenomenal world and aflame with fear of it’ (R.B. Martin).

His obsession with sexual temptation and the despondency caused by it may have been a contributory factor in his decision to become a Catholic and a priest: he wished to leave behind that person who had begun to disgust him. That Christmas, he wrote:

*To the sight of Him who freed me
From the self that I have been.*

Conversion

‘A man was shaken loose from his position in the rigid English social structure if he became a Catholic’ (R.B. Martin). Hopkins informed his family of his intentions by letter on 13 October 1865 and on 21 October he was received into the Catholic Church by his mentor, John Henry Newman. His mother wrote back, ‘O, Gerard, my darling boy, are you indeed gone from me?’ Although it was a devastating blow for the family, they did not ostracise him. He, however, distanced himself from them. The first they saw of their converted son was the following Christmas, when he adopted a somewhat aloof manner with them.

With the trauma of his decision behind him, Hopkins got on with the business of preparing for his degree. His double first (first-class honours) meant that, were he still an Anglican, he would probably have received a fellowship at one of the Oxford colleges. But he had given up that and other avenues of success when he made his decision to become a Catholic.

The soldiers of Christ

When his brother heard that Gerard was to become a Jesuit he wondered why he could not become an ‘ordinary Catholic’. The Jesuits were regarded as the men of action within the Catholic Church. When a candidate entered the novitiate he faced nine years of rigorous preparation before ordination – provided he had already completed his primary degree. The perception of Jesuits in England was of devious villains with ‘bland smile, insinuating voice, diplomatic skills, noiseless velvet step’.





Unquestioning obedience, self-denial and the 'suppression of aesthetic pleasure' were demanded, especially within the nineteenth-century English Jesuit regime. There was an obsessive preoccupation with sexual temptation. Novices, allowed one bath per month, were given 'modesty powder' to make the bath water opaque. Wearing a chain of barbed wire around the legs was an optional extra. It was typical of Hopkins that he chose the most arduous route to his desired goal.

In 1869 he decided to destroy the poems he had written; it was a decision made without much conviction. In his journal he wrote, 'This day, I think, I resolved.' Some time later he simply noted, 'Slaughter of the innocents.' Three months later, in a letter to Bridges, he explained, 'They would interfere with my state and vocation.'

Stonyhurst

On 8 September 1870 Hopkins took his first vows and was sent to Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, an exclusive Jesuit boarding school. It was the first time he lived away from the city and he was immediately entranced by the 'sublimity' of the moors and fells. About this time he began to record detailed descriptions of the natural world. His preoccupation with the observation of detail drew some attention from a local workman: 'Ay, a strange yoong man, crouching down that gate to stare at some wet sand. A fair natural [simpleton] 'e seemed to us, that Mr 'Opkins.' His disregard for conventional behaviour would become more evident later on in his approach to the writing of poetry.

He began to develop some important theories during his time at Stonyhurst: 'What you look hard at seems to look hard at you.' This remark hints at one of the crucial ideas behind Hopkins's world view, namely that humans and nature are united by the fact that they are both aspects of the one divine creation.

During the seven years when Hopkins refrained from writing poetry, his ideas about the composition of poetry and the language he later used were being developed in his mind, so that when they were finally written they had a surprisingly finished quality to them.

Inscapè and Duns Scotus

One of the ideas that is central to the work of Hopkins features regularly in his journals around this time. It concerns the notion that everything in creation is unique and has its own individuality. Scrupulous observation of an object, idea or person would reveal its 'inscape' – its meaning, its essence: 'It is the expression of the inner core of individuality, perceived in moments of insight by an onlooker who is in full harmony with the being he is observing' (Norman MacKenzie).

The part of Hopkins's personality that had caused him to burn his early poems was suspicious of the part that adored the material world so much. Surely the spirit is more important than matter, he thought. Hopkins was unable to reconcile the poet with the priest until he read the work of Johannes Duns Scotus, a medieval Franciscan theologian. Duns Scotus argued that the material world is an incarnation of God, a revelation of God to humanity through





the senses. Hopkins now felt justified in his preoccupation with the beauty of the world because it had a sacramental value – in other words, the beauty of the world brings us closer to God. Therefore, the senses, which could be the stimulus for sin, could also be the stimulus for religious experience.

Hopkins's appreciation of nature was so intense that he felt its wounds. When an ash tree was cut down in the college he

*heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed
there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to
die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any
more.*

About this time Hopkins suffered frequently from ill-health and had a morbid fascination with death. He was also lonely, as he had ceased corresponding with his father and with his good friend Robert Bridges.

In 1873 Hopkins was sent to the Jesuit college at Roehampton, near London, to teach Greek and Latin to those who had finished their novitiate. It had become almost a pattern for Hopkins to lose energy as the academic year drew to a close; even though his work was not taxing, as his energy declined, depression took hold. He expected to spend a second year at Roehampton, but his superior decided to send him to St Beuno's College in Wales, where he would study theology. This was Hopkins's first experience of living in the countryside. St Beuno's overlooked the beautiful Elwy Valley, not far from Llanelwy and Rhyl. He developed an immediate affection for the Welsh people and their language, which he studied for a while. His health and state of mind were

better than they had been for some time. Later in his life he referred to his time in Wales as his 'salad days'.

'The Wreck of the Deutschland'

In December 1875 a ship travelling between Bremen and New York, the *Deutschland*, foundered at the mouth of the Thames. The shipwreck received substantial coverage in the newspapers because there were claims that the crew of an English boat had watched the disaster happen and had made no effort to help. Among the passengers were five Franciscan nuns, exiled from Prussia by Bismarck's anti-Catholic laws. The *Times* provided a vivid account of their fate:

*Five German nuns ... clasped hands and were drowned
together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman 6 ft. high, calling
out loudly and often 'O Christ, come quickly!' till the end
came.*

The fact that the nuns died on the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and that they had been made homeless because of their religion, sparked an immediate empathy in Hopkins. He felt that he too had been 'exiled' as a result of his conversion to Catholicism. He identified particularly with the tall nun. In a conversation with his rector he mentioned how he had been affected by the tragedy. The rector remarked that someone should write a poem to commemorate the nuns.

This was the moment that ended Hopkins's seven-year silence as a poet. By the end of the following May (1876), he had completed an ode of 280 lines, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', a poem 'of tortuous diction and revolutionary rhythm that had become a





glittering and resplendent meditation on the place in the world of suffering' (R.B. Martin). It was really an autobiographical poem about the poet's own tortuous struggle for salvation.

He submitted it to the editor of a Jesuit magazine, the *Month*. The editor could not make sense of the poem, so he consulted another, who deemed it 'unreadable'. The poem remained unpublished.

One of the striking innovations of the poem was its use of 'sprung rhythm'.

*I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm
which I now realised on paper ... To speak shortly, it consists
in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any
account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be
one strong syllable or it may be many light and one strong.*

The common rhythm of traditional English poetry is measured in feet of two or three syllables. Feet of two syllables can be either iambic (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, e.g. 'resign') or trochaic (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, e.g. 'thúnder'). Three-syllable feet can be either anapaestic (unstressed-unstressed-stressed, e.g. 'brigadíer') or dactylic (stressed-unstressed-unstressed, e.g. 'métrical').

Traditionally, English poetry was written in some metrical arrangement involving a fixed number of syllables per line. The sonnet is a good example: each line consists of 10 syllables, which can be divided into five feet, as follows:

That tíme of yéar thou máyst in mé behóld (Shakespeare)

This perfectly regular iambic line provides the basic rhythm of the poem. The poet will not persist with exactly the same rhythm, because to do so would create a monotonous effect; however, when the rhythm is varied the basic rhythm is like a drumbeat or a ghost rhythm in the back of the reader's mind.

A feature of sprung rhythm is the rejection of the traditional metrical pattern. First, the number of syllables in a line is not fixed. Second, feet need not conform to any iambic, trochaic, anapaestic or dactylic pattern. Thirdly, the scansion of a line continues that of the preceding line, so that if one line is a few syllables too long, the next line may be a few syllables shorter.

The purpose of sprung rhythm is more important than a precise technical understanding of its mechanics. Hopkins wanted to make poetry more like natural speech; he wanted to allow for a more 'abrupt' and versatile rhythm:

*For why if it is forcible in prose to say 'lashed: rod', am I
obliged to weaken this in verse, which ought to be stronger,
not weaker, into 'lashed birchrod' or something?*

'The Wreck of the Deutschland' marked the beginning of a remarkable flood of poems. Within two years Hopkins had written approximately a third of his mature poetry. The year 1877 concerns us in particular, for in the space of six months (March to August), despite the fact that he was busy preparing for his exams, Hopkins wrote the first five poems in this selection.





The 'bright sonnets'

With his masterpiece, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', and several other poems already completed, Hopkins took an even keener delight in the beautiful natural landscape of the Clwyd Valley, which was overlooked by St Beuno's College. However, he had much to occupy him at this time. In the spring of 1877 he was deep in preparation for his final examinations in moral theology, which, he said, 'covers the whole of life and to know it it is best to begin by knowing everything, as medicine, law, history, banking'. He found it 'the most wearisome work', but as he told his mother in a birthday letter, he had managed to write two sonnets, which he was sending to her as a present. The second of these was 'God's Grandeur'. It is a poem that resonates richly for a modern audience or readership worried by the dangers of global warming and ecological disaster; it has a particular relevance to an Ireland that is being 'developed' at a frightening pace. One wonders, however, whether modern readers can share the poet's confidence that comes from a deep-seated faith.





GOD'S GRANDEUR

Theme

Since his time at Oxford, Hopkins was convinced that the world of nature was, in a sense, the incarnation of God. It is not just that when we look at nature we admire his creation: nature is 'charged' with the presence of God; his presence pulses through everything in the world. Hopkins would have been familiar with Psalm 71, which states: 'The whole earth shall be filled with his majesty.' The word 'filled' suggests a substance, but 'charged' implies energy: it argues that God is actively present in the world.

Even though humankind seems oblivious to the sacramental value of nature, and even though the Industrial Revolution led to widespread pollution and destruction of the landscape, nature is held lovingly in the hands of the Holy Spirit and will never be diminished. The splendour and freshness of nature are contrasted throughout the octet with the stale and sordid influence of humankind.

Development

The first section of the poem begins with a beautifully direct statement of the theme of the poem. Apart from the obvious meaning of 'charged', meaning 'powered', it can also mean that the people of the world have been given the charge, or responsibility, of looking after this planet.

Taking the main interpretation, Hopkins proceeds to illustrate the different ways in which this grandeur manifests itself. Sometimes it 'will flame out'. This image is in keeping with the imagery in

'charged'. It catches our attention in a flash, like a sudden glittering light emanating from foil that catches the rays of the sun when it is shaken. At other times its presence dawns upon us slowly, like the oil oozing from the fruit that has been gathered and stored. Hopkins may well have had in mind the contrast between St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and St Augustine's gradual conversion as recorded in his *Confessions*. There is a reference to them in stanza 10 of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' that supports this interpretation. Hopkins was fascinated by contrast. Here, he contrasts the sudden and the gradual, the dramatic blinding light and the slowly evolving realisation.

The position of the word 'Crushed' is dramatic; the full stop after it makes it stand out even more. The fact that the syllable is stressed also draws attention to the word; this is because it is an important word in Hopkins's world-picture. Human beings' free will is in conflict with God's intention for them. If they are to fulfil their destiny they must submit their will to the will of God. They must allow their 'self-will' to be crushed so that they may become an agent of God's will. In a later poem, 'The Windhover', we will see the same idea expressed in the word 'buckle' and we will observe the same techniques used to draw attention to the word.

The question ('Why do men then now not reckon his rod?') seems to interrupt the first quatrain, as if the poet were impatient to complain of people's lack of interest in God's plan. The link between 'foil', 'oil' and 'men' is not so difficult to make if 'crushed' is understood as the process whereby everything is subject to the will of God. Humankind neither obeys God's authority ('reck his rod') nor heeds his sacrifice for us (rod = rood = cross). Humankind





is seen as the rebel, 'wild, wilful and wanton' (Peter Milward), who will not 'bend the knee' in humble obedience.

The second quatrain conveys a picture of humankind as bestial creatures, lacking in intelligence and awareness, clumsily obscuring the sparkle of nature with their grubby activities. Life without God is monotonous and dreary. It reminds us of the fate of Adam and Eve when they were evicted from Paradise and had to learn to labour. The repetition of 'trod' conveys the monotony of industrial labour. The dull repetition of the heavy monosyllabic verb makes an impressive thud in the ears. It has inevitable associations with the treadmill, a byword for monotonous activity. It may even be an echo of Keats's line in 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'No hungry generations tread thee down'.

The result of trade has been to 'sear', to scorch nature. It is typical of Hopkins's word-play to move from 'seared' to 'bleared' and 'smeared', all of which convey the idea that humankind's toil, instead of exercising a respectful dominion over the earth, has damaged and sullied God's creation. The beautiful masterpiece has been 'smudged' and has the smell of sweat from it. This line is quite clever in its technique: 'wears' rhymes with 'shares'; 'man's' balances the line by appearing in each of the two clauses to create a pleasant antithesis; and the alliteration and dissonance of 'smudge' and 'smell' complete the effect. The final image of the bare soil suggests that humankind has exhausted the earth – a prophetic image in many ways. Humankind is incapable of noticing the damage that it has done because it is 'shod' – in other words, people wear shoes, which remove them from the soil and desensitise them. This idea – that by removing people from their

natural environment we deprive them of sensitivity – is very much a Romantic one. (Incidentally, Hopkins had a particular dislike of shoes.) 'Thus man is punished for his insensitivity to "God's grandeur" by becoming correspondingly insensitive to the beauty of the natural world' (Peter Milward).

The second quatrain is quite depressing. It is even more depressing for a modern audience, because we know how much more damage has been done to the environment since the poem was written. However, this poem is not an eco-warrior's battle cry, nor is it a cry of despair: it is a religious poem. Far from wishing to depress, Hopkins's intention was to confidently assert that no matter how sinful and stupid humankind may be, the world is safe because the Holy Ghost, like a female bird protecting its fledgling, sits protectively over the world. Why is it that 'nature is never spent'? It is because the spirit of God, the Holy Ghost, is active in renewing the world. It is from him that there comes 'the dearest freshness deep down things', like a spring that brings fresh water to the surface constantly. Therefore, the earth will never be 'spent', or exhausted. On the contrary: when one looks carefully one sees the freshness of new creation 'deep down [in] things'. Even though the sun sets in the west, it rises again in the east – a powerful image of the death and resurrection of Christ. For this reason, God's creation is safe.

The exclamations in the last three lines ('Oh' and 'ah') convey the immediacy of the poet's excitement as he contemplates with confidence the everlastingness of all things in God's creation, God's grandeur.





The poet feels the warmth of the divine breast and glimpses the brightness of the divine wings. This is far from a notional recognition on his part, based on an abstract faith in the presence and providence of God. Rather, it seems to rise, in the climax of this poem, to the level of a mystical experience, as he first feels the warmth of the breast, and then sees – with an 'ah!' of ecstatic wonder – the brightness of the wings, at least in a momentary glimpse which is all that this world can afford. (Peter Milward)

Alternatively

Norman White has a different and interesting view on this poem. Concerning the octet, he says, 'There is a vivid sense of Hopkins's urgency to communicate his state of perceptual excitement and the qualities of the natural things which have excited him', but in the sestet, 'It appears to me as if a different authoritarian voice, representative of tradition, has superimposed an alien framework onto the novel and personal emotions and sights.' The critic is suggesting that the priest is hijacking the poem from the poet and using the poet's perceptions to further his religious doctrine. Perhaps White is disappointed that Hopkins is not a Romantic poet instead of a religious poet. But the tension between the two aspects of the poet's personality is intrinsic to his poetry.





SPRING

Background

Hopkins spent the Whit weekend holiday (mid-May) walking and writing poetry in the beautiful Clwyd Valley. Before this he had had a five-day break in Rhyl and was now quite relaxed. May was the month devoted to Mary, the Queen of Heaven, for whom he had a special devotion. The charming poem 'Spring' was written during this time.

Theme

The opening sentence, beautiful in its simplicity, expresses the key idea in the octet. The sestet suggests that spring is a 'strain' or a taste of what the Garden of Eden must have been like before sin deprived humankind of it. The poem ends with an exhortation to Christ to harvest the innocence and beauty of May before corruption takes hold.

Development

'Spring' starts with a burgeoning sound, a hyperbole, which is followed by an ecstatic scene of movements, shapes, sounds, textures, and colour. (Norman White)

The octet begins with an emphatic statement, which is supported by the evidence that follows. When one gets to know a little of Hopkins's character, it is not surprising that he begins with weeds. For the poet, weeds are wild flowers that are all the more attractive for being so natural and uncontrolled, as it were, by humans. The weeds are 'in wheels' – one of many architectural

terms employed by the poet. A wheel window is a circular window whose mullions divide it in the same way that spokes divide a wheel. The verb 'shoot' adds to the energy of the scene, as does the tripping alliteration of 'long and lovely and lush'.

How did the poet move from weeds to thrush's eggs? The answer lies in the sound of the words: 'lush' leads to 'thrush'. This is a technique often employed by Hopkins, especially in poems where there seems to be a rush of energy, as if one word sprouts from the other. The breathless excitement of the poet is captured in the ellipsis (omission of words): 'Thrush's eggs look little low heavens'. 'The omission of "like" saves the phrase from being merely a pretty simile' (Walford Davies). The eggs are like the heavens, or skies, because they have the same dappled pattern of blue and white. Hopkins loved the dappled design because of the beauty that he found in contrasting colours and shapes.

The song of the thrush echoing through the trees 'does so rinse and wring/The ear' – another one of Hopkins's fascinating and original images. The song in its purity, passing through the ear of the listener, cleanses it as if it were rinsed and wrung dry; 'wring' is also a pun on 'ring'.

When we come to the word 'lightnings' we must recall 'charged', 'flame' and 'fire' from previous poems. All these words relate to the startling beauty of divine nature – God's fire. The song of the bird thrills the poet as if it were an angelic sound.

The bird in the tree leads on to the 'glassy peartree', 'glassy' because it is radiant in the sunlight, which 'leaves and blooms' – the nouns 'leaf' and 'bloom' are used first as verbs and





then become nouns and the subject ('they') of 'brush'. Such experimentation with language contributes to the strangeness of Hopkins's poetry. In the nineteenth century it would have been regarded as even more strange. The word 'blooms' connects to 'brush' by alliteration. The tree brushes against the sky, which descends to meet it ('The descending blue'). Perhaps Hopkins has the painter's brush in mind here; he had ambitions to be an artist before he became a priest. The 'richness' of the blue sky probably refers to the effect created by a smattering of white, unthreatening clouds, enough of them to create a beautiful dappled effect. The poet's eyes descend to ground level to notice the lambs having 'their fling'. Some years earlier, in his journals, Hopkins wrote, 'It is as if it were the earth that flung them [the lambs], not themselves.'

There is very little to be done with the octet other than to enjoy its sound, colour and movement and the sheer pleasure that can be taken in the physical world.

The sestet becomes more reflective as the poet wonders, 'What is it all about?' He has enjoyed the experience of the physical world; now he wishes to meditate on its meaning. Immediately the tone, pace and imagery have changed. Now, at a distance from the wonderful scene in the octet, the poet declares that this is 'A strain', like a fleeting snatch of a melody, of the Garden of Eden, of the perfect world that existed before sin and corruption took over. He urges 'Christ, lord' to 'Have, get, before it cloy,/Before it cloud ... and sour with sinning'. He wants Christ to intervene now, seize the world in its momentary perfect state and preserve

it forevermore. It is as if the poet, overwhelmed by the perfect beauty of the scene he has just witnessed, cannot bear the thought of returning to the real world, with all its imperfections.

'Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy' seems to be the object of the verbs 'cloud' and 'sour'. May, because of its associations with the Blessed Virgin, is identified with purity and innocence. This state of innocence is 'Most ... choice', or most precious, and 'Most ... worthy' of being won. 'O maid's child' is, of course, Christ.

The poem is written in standard sonnet form with elements of sprung rhythm.





AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE, DRAGONFLIES DRAW FLAME

Background

At the end of April 1877 Hopkins was asked to write a poem to commemorate the visit of Father Thomas Burke, a Dominican preacher and well-known advocate of Thomism. Hopkins took his visit as an opportunity to reopen the debate between Thomists and Scotists (followers of the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus). The debate between these two philosophies had been lively before the nineteenth century. There were few supporters of Scotus left; Hopkins was one of them. He expressed his views on this debate most openly in the poem 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', which he wrote at this time. One of the differences between Aquinas and Scotus is that Aquinas strongly advocated reason as the means whereby we come to know something, whereas Scotus believed that we come to know things through intuition, which involves the whole being, especially the senses, in the process of knowing. The poem asserts the value of the senses and that physical beauty has a moral value. 'All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God, and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him' (Hopkins). Indirectly, he is arguing that poetry is a valid occupation for a priest. Hopkins was not happy with the poem and did not send it to Bridges.

Theme

The poet argues that everything in creation has its own individuality and unique place in the world (what Duns Scotus called *haecceitas*, or 'thisness'). Every created object or person has a purpose or mission, that is, to be itself ('Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is – Christ'). Our intuition can perceive Christ in the objects around us and in the actions of humankind ('For Christ plays in ten thousand places ... through the features of men's faces').

Development

The opening line does not engage our thoughts as readily as the opening lines of the other 'bright sonnets', but it may arouse the curiosity of those who enjoy cryptic crosswords. We have seen in the previous poem how the world is 'charged' with God's grandeur, which 'will flame out'. Here again the poet associates the presence of God in the world with fire. The kingfisher and dragonfly reflect the light of the sun and, metaphorically, of God.

The poet goes on to give examples of everyday actions that are characteristic of themselves. If a stone falls over the rim of a circular well it will give off a ringing sound, presumably when it makes contact with the sides of the well. (Note the difference between the bland paraphrase and the vibrant rhythm of Hopkins's line.) Pluck the string of a musical instrument and it will give off a particular sound; swing a bell and it will emit a characteristic bell sound. Hopkins concludes that 'each mortal thing' has its unique presence in the world and displays this unique identity. He invents a most unusual verb to express this idea: he declares that each





individual thing ‘selves’, or engages in the act of being itself. The individual ‘speaks and spells’ and is ‘Crying’ out what he is.

The content of the octet is summed up in the final line, which asserts the individuality of all things and that all things have a mission to fulfil.

The sestet takes the idea further (‘I say more’). In the octet the poet concentrates on human experience from a secular point of view: in other words, there is no explicit religious significance in the ideas he expresses. In the sestet, however, he introduces theology, ‘celebrating the unity of God and the world and affirming the divinization of all creatures in Christ’ (Joseph Feeney). The ‘just man justices’. Hopkins again invents a verb – not a particularly attractive one, but one that is full of emphasis and intensity. The second line has a similarly intense and unattractive feel to it. The third line, which has a modicum of style to it, asserts the same point as the previous two lines – that a man is doing God’s will when he is ‘himself’. That entails being a flawed creature, born with original sin, redeemed through baptism by Christ and sharing in Christ’s being; but as John Henry Newman put it, ‘It is his gift to be the creator of his own sufficiency, and to be emphatically self-made.’ In other words, it is the nature of humankind to undertake a journey that can lead it to God or elsewhere. Joseph Mary Plunkett wrote that he saw Christ’s blood ‘upon the rose’; Hopkins sees Christ in ‘men’s faces’ (not in women’s, however!).

This sonnet is written in sprung rhythm. As an exercise, compare this poem with one of Shakespeare’s sonnets and notice how frequently Hopkins’s poem uses stressed syllables.





THE WINDHOVER

Background

A week after writing 'Spring', at the end of May 1877, Hopkins composed 'The Windhover'. He had already composed four poems that month. It was his day off; the weather was lovely; he had been successful in his examinations and the next one was a long way off. He described this poem as 'the best thing I ever wrote'. It is also one of his more difficult poems.

The kestrel, a kind of falcon, was very common in the Clwyd area and was known locally as the windhover, a name that Hopkins thought exotic. It is remarkable for its habit of remaining suspended in the air while scanning the ground for its prey.

Theme

'The Windhover' is perhaps the most complex of Hopkins's poems in this anthology, but it can be enjoyed on different levels. At one level the poem is about a bird in flight and the poet's response to its beauty. At a deeper level the hawk, with its outstretched wings, represents Jesus Christ and the poem is about the relationship between humankind and God. In essence, the poet believes that the greatest beauty is revealed when we subdue our personal ego and ambitions, submit to the will of God and live our lives in a Christ-like manner.

Development

It is very difficult to subdivide the octet. There is no clear division into quatrains and there are no end-stopped lines; the whole is

fluid, fast moving and graceful, like the bird. For convenience we will take the octet in four segments.

'I caught ... Falcon'

The ellipsis in 'I caught [sight of]' is very effective. It emphasises the dramatic moment of perception. The poet did not just see a bird: his spirit was arrested by a sudden flash of magnificence. This is the moment when he perceives the 'inscape' of the bird. The word 'caught' may also refer to the artist who 'catches' the shape, the movement or the moment of the bird's flight. One of the reasons that Hopkins moved from art to poetry was that he found it impossible to capture movement in a painting or sketch, and it was the energy of movement that fascinated him most.

The phrase 'this morning' adds a tingling freshness to the moment. There follows a procession of titles, 'as in some royal proclamation of medieval pageantry' (Peter Milward). The bird is the 'minion', or favourite, of the morning. The French word already adds a certain grace to this creature; it is the 'dauphin', or heir-apparent, to the kingdom of daylight. The regal imagery invests the bird with a majestic quality. The capitalisation of 'Falcon' adds to its dignity, as if it were a royal person with a title. The Falcon is 'dapple-dawn-drawn', a coined adjective that throws up two possible interpretations: the falcon has been drawn or attracted by the dappled dawn, or it looks as if it has been drawn or sketched against the dappled sky in the background.

'in his riding ... ecstasy!'

The mediaeval chivalric imagery in the first part of the poem seems to inspire the comparison of the bird to a horse in a show





ring. The bird is 'riding' the 'rolling level' – in other words, it is riding the air. Even though the air is 'rolling', the bird remains 'level' and 'steady' because of its control and poise. The word 'striding' suggests the ease and mastery of the bird as it hovers 'High there'. Then it begins to swivel on the tip of its wing. The predicate 'rung upon the rein' is a technical term of a riding school to describe a horse circling at the end of a rein held by its trainer. In falconry, the verb 'to ring' means to rise in spirals. Hopkins would have been familiar with both terms and would have intended the two meanings.

There is a combination of physical power and intellectual skill in his momentary motionlessness, as he hovers in the wind – like an expert trainer pulling on the rein of a fierce, untamed animal in a ring and forcing it to keep within the limits of the rein he holds. (Peter Milward)

Why does the bird make these movements? For the sheer pleasure of it! This bird is being what it is, exulting in its control, power and victory over the air, exulting in its own self. The bird is a majestic, graceful creature totally in harmony with its environment and its self.

'then off ... the big wind'

The dramatic exclamation that concludes with the word 'ecstasy' is followed by the even more dramatic elliptical 'then off'. It is so much more abrupt and startling than 'then the bird flew off'. The repetition of 'off' and the fluidity of 'off forth' add to the energy of the line. The poet uses the simile of a skater taking a corner to describe the dramatic, energetic, yet elegant manner in which the bird suddenly changes direction. The alliteration of s evokes the sound of the skate against the ice.

'The hurl and gliding' conveys two paradoxical qualities of the bird. The verb 'hurl' suggests strength, power and vehement effort, while 'gliding' suggests grace and easeful action. The bird seems to unite these qualities in its victory over 'the big wind'.

'My heart ... mastery of the thing'

From 'I caught' to 'big wind', the focus has been exclusively on the magnificence of the bird. The attention now shifts to the poet and his heart, which is 'in hiding'. It is impossible to say with certainty what the poet intended with this line. Why is his heart 'in hiding'? Why for 'a bird' rather than the bird that he has been describing? We can say with a degree of confidence that the poet feels somewhat humbled by the majesty of the falcon. He is overwhelmed by admiration for this creature. This bird has the qualities that he lacks: power, self-assurance, grace.

The octet concludes with the climactic 'the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!' The word 'achieve' is an abbreviation of 'achievement', the shorter version adding to the sense of breathless awe as the octet draws to a close. The poet spends his time studying and praying, 'obscure, constrained, unsuccessful', as he said himself. Perhaps he envies the bird its sense of purpose and its activity, in contrast to his own lack of it.

Why does he call it a 'thing'? Is it not something of an anti-climax after such a majestic description? Yes, it is. Hopkins may be reminding us that this bird is, after all, merely a bird. How much more wonderful then would a human being be if he or she were to reflect the same sense of activity and purpose!





If we ignore for a moment the dedication of the poem, 'To Christ our Lord', we could say that the octet deals with a secular experience; it is a nature poem.

I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man uses 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk. (Ezra Pound)

We can enjoy the description of the falcon for what it is, independent of the symbolic significance of the bird.

As we have seen so often in Hopkins's poetry, the religious dimension is introduced in the sestet. This is divided into two tercets, which, again for convenience, we will subdivide.

'Brute beauty ... Buckle!'

This continues the thought of the previous line with a list of the bird's qualities. Hopkins had great admiration for 'Brute beauty', especially stallions. For him, beauty and virility were closely connected.

The concepts of 'valour and act' are interdependent: courage manifests itself in action, not in contemplation. The word 'air' perhaps refers to disposition. We speak of someone having an 'air', or of 'airs and graces'. The nouns 'pride, plume' (plumage) suggest majesty but also a certain vanity, which seems at odds with the clearly admirable qualities of the first half of this line. Suddenly the line is not as simple as it appeared to be. The words 'here/

Buckle' provide us with the greatest difficulty. We have reached the heart of the controversy that surrounds this poem.

The word 'here' may refer to (a) his heart 'in hiding' (b) the bird 'In his ecstasy' or (c) the situation as a whole. The verb 'buckle' may mean (a) clasp together (like a belt buckle) (b) come to grips or (c) collapse. Perhaps he wants these qualities to be united in him, like a coat of armour that is buckled on in preparation for doing battle with the forces of evil, just as the bird joins combat with the wind.

A more difficult interpretation – and a more likely one – is to take 'buckle' to mean 'collapse'. Remember the word 'crushed' in 'God's Grandeur' and how it was emphasised by being placed at the beginning of a line, succeeded by a full stop and heavily stressed by its position. Here we have another word with all the same features.

Well may the bird ... take pride in its mastery, and plume itself on its achievement, allowing for its wild and wanton condition. But as for himself he now recognises a far wider possibility of mastery and achievement open to him as man, even as his human nature is far nobler than the animal nature of the bird. There is, after all, no need of envy; his is a far higher vocation. Paradoxically, it is to be achieved not by mastery, but by service: not by the exertion of physical strength, or even of intellectual skill, in the eyes of an admiring multitude, but by the renunciation of merely natural powers in obedience to a higher, supernatural ideal, the service of 'Christ our Lord'. (Peter Milward)





Our earthly glory must be crushed so that our heavenly glory may be released. The paradox at the centre of this interpretation is the paradox of Christ's mission. The crucifixion of Christ, on a physical level, was a kind of failure; on a spiritual level it was a triumph because it was through the crucifixion that Christ rescued humankind from death. The resurrection could not have taken place without the crucifixion. Likewise, for humankind to realise its glorious destiny it must be crushed physically— it must buckle or bend in the service of God's will. The argument in favour of this interpretation is strengthened immeasurably by the three images that conclude the poem.

The copulative 'And' may be (a) simply connecting or (b) consequential, that is, meaning 'and as a result' (the capitalisation suggests that this interpretation is more appropriate). The word 'thee' may refer to (a) his heart (b) the bird or (c) Christ. Taking 'And' to mean 'and as a result' of this collapse, the fire (a word that should trigger some measure of recognition after we have read the previous poems) that is unleashed should be 'a billion/Times told lovelier, more dangerous'. When the self-will is subdued and harnessed in the service of Christ, its power is magnified and more dangerous in effecting change. The phrase 'O my chevalier' is an address to Christ. The mediaeval chivalric imagery of the octet has become more explicit.

The last two images describe how something brilliant and wonderful can come from something ordinary or from an apparent collapse. The dull earth ('sillion'), when ploughed, shines in the sun (or perhaps it is the plough that reflects the sun after it emerges from the earth – a symbolic resurrection). If the poet

'ploughs' in the service of God, the light of grace will shine forth from his work.

The dying embers of a fire, 'blue-bleak' in the sense that they appear to be losing their heat and brightness, collapse onto the hearth, crack open and reveal a beautiful glowing interior. The unglamorous life of the priest, and the suffering endured in the service of God, will reveal the 'gold-vermilion' of divine love. This interpretation is strongly supported by the study of Hopkins's major work, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'.

The poet has in fact seen two aspects of the bird in flight. On one view, its controlling mastery; on another, the bird 'buckled', spreadeagled, crucified on the wind. It is that latter moment that is 'a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous.' Of course, the martial imagery, the zeal of the new Jesuit, gives other meanings to that word 'Buckle': the sense of 'buckling on armour', for example, or 'buckling down' to a deed. But the deepest emphasis of the sestet is that sense of buckling under stress and being broken. The full meaning, therefore, makes Christ present not only in princely aggrandisement but in the paradox of his suffering on the cross. That is the realisation that explodes in the pain ('gall'), the spear-wound ('gash'), and the blood ('vermilion') of the final line. (Walford Davies)

Norman White takes a different view:

In the sestet, the constituents of the falcon's performances are metamorphosed into parts of armour, which the chivalric lord Christ is entreated to buckle on, that he may





appear in his glory, the windhover's qualities being merely one minute, exemplary part of the infinitely greater glory of God ('Ad maiorem Dei gloriam'). The two images of the last three lines form a magnificent ending.

The sestet may be seen as a conversation with his own heart, arising out of the experience described in the octet. He then dedicates this meditation 'To Christ our Lord' as a gesture of submission to his will.





PIED BEAUTY

Background

In July 1877 Hopkins sat an oral examination in dogmatic theology. It did not go well; his passionate advocacy of Scotism did not meet with the favour of the examiners. His low pass marks may have been responsible for the decision not to allow him to complete a fourth year of theology; poor performances in the pulpit may also have been a factor. 'Much against my inclination I shall have to leave Wales.' Before he left he composed the curtal sonnet 'Pied Beauty'. (A curtal sonnet has 6 + 4 lines rather than 8 + 6. It is essentially a shortened sonnet with a very brief coda at the end.)

Beauty in all its variety of appearances is a central part of the poet's vision. In another poem Hopkins argued that mortal beauty, despite its short-lived nature, serves to keep warm 'men's wits to the things that are'; in other words, beauty keeps humankind in touch with the essential goodness of creation. For Hopkins this beauty was to be found in nature, especially in the wild and the wilderness, rather than in art or in the manicured gardens of a stately home. He loved 'brute' or 'barbarous' beauty because of its variety and contrasts: 'Earth's dapple', 'pied' beauty. He believed that contrast helped to bring out the distinctive quality of each object, just as light and dark, day and night, winter and summer accentuate each other. If Hopkins were alive today he would be dismayed by the manner in which the media in particular standardise our notions of beauty.

'Pied Beauty' seems an innocuous poem, but there may be a hint of defiance in Hopkins's determination to admire what is 'counter, original, spare, strange'.

Theme

The opening line expresses the theme of the poem: glory be to God for dappled things – in other words, for contrast, variety, whatever is unusual – for these are God's gifts to us.

Development

The simple opening echoes the Jesuit motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (For the greater glory of God); likewise the ending echoes *Laus Deo semper* (Praise to God always). A student in a Jesuit school would begin and conclude his written work with these two mottos. By framing the poem thus, the poet makes it a prayer of praise and a meditation on the glory of God as seen in his creation.

After the general opening statement the poet gives the reader a list of examples of dappled things. Skies are dappled by the effect of white clouds against blue like a 'brinded cow'. The blue and white of the sky are like the brown and white of the 'brinded cow' in that both are dappled. The phrase 'couple-colour' is one of five compound words used in the poem. It is as if the poet is trying to invent a new language in order to convey his experience of nature in a fresh and exciting way.

The eye, which has moved from the sky to the meadow, now moves on to the river. The time spent fishing in the Elwy afforded Hopkins the opportunity to observe the patterns on the various fish. He notices the dappled appearance of their skin. Beside the





river, lying on the ground beneath the trees, are chestnuts. Hopkins invented the word ‘chestnut-falls’ (from ‘windfalls’, meaning fruit that has fallen from the trees). The chestnuts that have fallen and opened, exposing the gleaming brown nuts, remind him of fresh coal. The dapple exists between the tan colour of the husk and the brown kernel. Hopkins’s descriptive phrase is worth revisiting to appreciate the concentration of meaning he has achieved: ‘Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls’.

Next the eye moves from beneath the tree to the birds on the tree. He may have chosen finches for their song or perhaps because the word creates alliteration with the rest of the line. The wings of finches – chaffinches, bullfinches, goldfinches – have the same contrast in colour.

The poet expands the vista to the landscape around St Beuno’s, which is like a patchwork quilt: ‘fold’ is used for grazing sheep, ‘fallow’ lies unused and ‘plough’ refers to the land that is sown with crops. The three together form ‘the dappled panoramic inscape of the Vale of Clwyd’. As he looked out over the valley he would have seen not only the evidence of agricultural labour, but also some evidence of industrial works from the nearby towns of Denbigh, Llanelwy and Rhyl. Therefore, the last lines refer to the variety of human activities – agricultural and industrial – and the variety of equipment used in these trades (perhaps he is thinking of fishing tackle).

Having provided examples, the poet moves on to a more general view of the subject. He gives a series of descriptive adjectives: all things that stand in contrast with other things are ‘counter’; all

things that have a unique blend or contrast are ‘original’; all things that one rarely sees are ‘spare’; and all things that by their rarity are startling are ‘strange’. He likes what is eccentric, perhaps because he is eccentric himself.

Whatever is ‘fickle’ is changeable. The adjective ‘freckled’ brings us back to humankind, just as ‘trádes’ did in the first part of the poem. Humankind shares in this dappled glory. The next line contains a series of contrasts – ‘swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim’ – referring to time, taste and light, respectively. These contrasts are bound together by alliteration. It is as if language itself demonstrates this dappled pattern.

His conclusion is simple: God, whose beauty is not subject to change, made this wonderful variety, which *is* subject to change. Earthly beauty is therefore a fleeting glimpse of the eternal beauty of God; therefore we must praise God.

The interplay of consonantal sounds, alliteration, rhythm and rhyme contributes to the energy of the lines. It is a very simple poem, but the veiled attack on orthodoxy and convention reveals an interesting shift from the perspective of the other poems written in 1877.

This poem is similar to ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’ in its promotion of the philosophy of Duns Scotus and in its concentration on intense detail.





FELIX RANDAL

Background

Teacher and curate

From Wales, Hopkins went to teach in Chesterfield, then back to Stonyhurst. While there he resumed correspondence with Robert Bridges and began writing to R.W. Dixon, who had been a junior master at Highgate and who proved an invaluable support to Hopkins in his writing. He moved from Stonyhurst to parish work in a fashionable part of London, followed by a short time in Bristol and Oxford. The frequency of transfer must have undermined his self-confidence, since it appeared that he was unfit for the roles he undertook.

Back in Oxford, Hopkins was dismayed to find that the beautiful town was becoming a rail hub and business centre and would soon become a manufacturing city. He found that his parishioners didn't particularly trust converts and the Anglican community didn't trust Catholics, especially Jesuits. He found the people 'stiff, stand-off and depressed'. He himself, of course, was not the most affable of people.

It was probably difficult to warm to the slight, somewhat vehement young priest with an effeminate manner and the disconcerting habit of waving a large red handkerchief to punctuate his conversation. Those who persevered, however, found him loveable. (R.B. Martin)

Hopkins, it seems, was a man who in his shyness felt enormously awkward when he had to perform any public task. (Joseph Feeney)

Bedford Leigh and Liverpool

In October 1879 Hopkins was sent for three months to Bedford Leigh, between Manchester and Liverpool. He expressed great satisfaction with his transfer from Oxford to this grimy, red-brick town:

a darksome place, with pits and mills and foundries ... I am far more at home with the Lancashire people ... The air is charged with smoke as well as damp, but the people are hearty.

However, he complained that the workers were 'too fond of frequenting the public houses'.

His new parishioners were more welcoming and respectful towards him than those in Oxford or London had been. The feeling of being accepted brought the best out of him in the pulpit. At St Beuno's his fellow Jesuits were sometimes reduced to tears of laughter at the awkwardness of his sermons. His comparison of the Church to a cow full of milk with seven udders – the sacraments, through which grace flowed – went down poorly with the refined ladies of London; the same analogy was received more favourably by the simple folk of Bedford Leigh. Even when his sermons became obscure and academic the flock dutifully listened, or slept, but never criticised. Hopkins was now convinced that his calling was to minister to the poor and uneducated. That Christmas he had a short stay at St Beuno's before moving on to St Francis Xavier's Church in the heart of Liverpool.

The population of Liverpool had increased dramatically as a result of the Great Famine in Ireland. Thousands of immigrants had





settled where the ships landed, flooding the stinking slums with even more unemployed and helpless victims. There were nine priests and 10,000 parishioners. Hopkins's romantic aspiration to serve the lowest in society was put to the test. In letters to A.M. Baillie (an old friend from Oxford) and Dixon, he wrote:

My Liverpool work is very harassing and makes it hard to write ... The parish work of Liverpool is very wearying to mind and body and leaves me nothing but odds and ends of time ... I do not think I can be long here; I have been long nowhere yet. I am brought face to face with the deepest poverty and misery in my district.

He felt an intense sympathy for the poor. In one famous letter to Bridges, written eight years before his time in Liverpool, he expressed anger at the manner in which the rulers of England ignored the plight of the poor:

Horrible to say, in a manner, I am a Communist ... It is a dreadful thing for the greatest and most necessary part of a very rich nation to live a hard life without dignity, knowledge, comforts, delight, or hopes in the midst of plenty – which plenty they make ... England has grown hugely wealthy but this wealth has not reached the working classes; I expect it has made their condition worse.

Much later, in another letter, he wrote:

My Liverpool and Glasgow experience laid upon my mind a conviction, a truly crushing conviction, of the misery of town life to the poor and more than to the poor, of the misery of the poor in general, of the degradation even of

our race, of the hollowness of this century's civilisation: it made even life a burden to me to have daily thrust upon me the things I saw.

Despite his romantic admiration for the nobility of the poor, he found the experience of working in such depressing conditions too much of a strain for his physical and mental well-being. As so often happened when he was unhappy, he fell ill. His poetry suffered too:

There is merit in it [his parish work], but little Muse, and indeed 26 lines is the whole I have writ in more than half a year.

'Felix Randal' was one of two poems composed during this time. It was written about one of his parishioners, a 31-year-old farrier, Felix Spencer, who died on 21 April 1880 from tuberculosis, an illness that was common wherever living conditions were bad.

Why did Hopkins change the man's name from Spencer to Randal? Perhaps he wished to maintain the man's anonymity. Since he had no immediate intention of publishing his poetry, this seems an unlikely explanation. It is much easier to believe that the name has a special significance. 'Felix' is the Latin for 'happy' or 'fortunate'. Hopkins believed that all human beings are fortunate because they have been saved from Hell by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. 'Randal' is more problematic. A rand is a strip of leather between the shoe and heel. 'Randal' rhymes with 'sandal', which links with the shoe image in 'rand'. Hopkins was fond of making such clever word associations. But to what purpose? Just for the sake of rhyme? He would never be that casual in his choice of word. A





rand-al is a lowly thing, something trodden on, insignificant and unseen, like a farrier in a slum in Everton. This interpretation is not as fanciful as it seems: in another of his poems, 'That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire', he conveys a similar idea in a similar way:

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, Is immortal diamond.

Once again, the suggestion is that man is an insignificant thing ('Jack ... matchwood') who is given a glorious destiny ('immortal diamond') through the agency of Christ. Thus, the name 'Felix Randal' conveys the paradoxical nature of humankind as insignificant creatures who have been exalted and given everlasting life as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ. The theme of the poem, in a sense, is 'hidden' in the title.

There is another possibility. 'Rand' is the Old English word for the boss of a shield – often used to represent the shield itself. Perhaps Hopkins is suggesting that the farrier's faith acted as a shield when confronted by the terror of dying. As a keen student of etymology, Hopkins would have consciously tried to enrich his poetry by giving words such layered meanings.

Theme

On a superficial level the poem is about the death of a parishioner. On a deeper level it is a celebration of his existence. At the deepest level it is about the relationship between God and humankind, a celebration of God's creation.

Development

Octet

In the first quatrain the physical power of the man is emphasised by the repeated alliteration in the line 'his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome'. The same technique is used to show the rapid decline in his condition: 'Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it'. The personification of his illness fighting over the physical body of the poor man, like ravenous animals, gives an awful vividness to the process that destroyed him.

However, it is the reaction of the priest-poet to the news of Randal's death that intrigues us: 'Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? My duty all ended'. Is the tone one of relief that his role as comforter is no longer needed? Is he disappointed that his services are no longer required? Perhaps the question mark simply conveys surprise on hearing of his death. It is also possible that the blacksmith's death is an anti-climax, in that the real moment of significance was before his death. It is difficult to be sure. Hopkins was a relative newcomer to parish work and his attitude to it was somewhat ambivalent. He was delighted to be active in the service of God, but he had great doubts about his suitability for the role.

The short dramatic statement at the beginning of the second quatrain is worthy of note. The image of being 'broken' is appropriate, since the man worked with horses. Horses are broken when they are trained to serve people's purpose; now this man has been broken by sickness, perhaps part of God's purpose. It is noteworthy that the sentence begins with the farrier being





'broken' and ends with him being 'mended'. The word 'broke' also emphasises the physicality and sensuousness of Hopkins's poetry. Such metaphysical cleverness is typical of him. However, there is something very ordinary about the statement as well. Similarly, the comments 'Being anointed and all' and 'Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended' illustrate the poet's desire to use the everyday speech of the community in his poetry.

The second quatrain traces the changes in the farrier's attitude to his illness. His first reaction, a very human response, is to curse his misfortune. The word 'impatient' must be understood in its Latin sense, 'unable to endure'. This man was in no hurry to experience the kingdom of God; one could well imagine him being happy to continue with his impoverished life, enjoying a few drinks in the local pub and chatting with his neighbours – the simple pleasures that make even the poorest existence tolerable. Between his curse and his mending there is an untold story of how a man faces up to the inevitable. Hopkins's ministry and God's sacraments brought about a change of heart: he became attuned to God's will. While his physical body suffered, his mind 'mended'. He acquired a 'heavenlier heart', in the sense that he began to turn his thoughts towards his inevitable destination and made peace with his fate.

The image of 'sweet reprieve and ransom' probably refers to Confession and Communion. The sinner is reprieved in the confessional and Christ has already paid the ransom for us by suffering on the cross on our behalf. The final line is quaintly colloquial: sure, the man never did much harm to anyone in his life, and may God forgive him if he did.

Sestet (first tercet)

Petrarchan sonnets usually divide into octave and sestet. The sestet provides us with a reflection on the situation presented in the octave. The change of mood is evident in the first line. The central concern of this section is the reciprocity of the relationship between priest and farrier. In other words, not only did the blacksmith benefit from the priest's ministry, but the priest, too, received grace of a kind from his contact with the sick man. The priest comforted him verbally ('tongue') with the word of God; he soothed his troubled soul by anointing him ('touch'). In turn, the tears of the farrier evoked an emotional response from the priest. The childlike simplicity and vulnerability of this 'big-boned and hardy-handsome' man moved the heart of the little priest. Hopkins may have had in mind the biblical advice that 'unless ye are as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven'.

Second tercet

In the last three lines the focus changes again. It seems as if the poet is looking back through time to the days when the farrier was in his prime – 'thy more boisterous years', 'powerful amidst peers' – and how distant the thought of death seemed then: 'How far from then forethought of'. There is also a sense in which the poet is presenting us with a kind of apotheosis or divine glorification: here is the image of the farrier in Heaven enjoying eternal glory. Just as the blacksmith beat the metal into horseshoes, God has fashioned a new Felix, stronger in heart, brighter in spirit. It was a painful process. The man suffered and grew spiritually.





Once again the theme of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' (the role of suffering in our world) echoes, as it does throughout all Hopkins's poetry. The sense of triumph is conveyed by energetic words such as 'boisterous', 'powerful', 'great grey drayhorse', the luminous 'bright and battering sandal' and the rising rhythm of the lines, which convey the tone of triumph. In this way the poet 'inscapes' the blacksmith by capturing the life force of this man as well as his glorious destiny. The conclusion of the poem provides us with an image of the resurrected farrier.

Sprung rhythm

The length of the lines in this poem ranges between 12 and 19 syllables, unlike the typical sonnet line, which has 10. Hopkins doesn't count the unstressed syllables; the inclusion of a large number of these unstressed syllables adds greatly to the energy of the poem. There are six stresses in each line of the poem; this is usually known as an Alexandrine line.

Diction

The poem reflects Hopkins's belief that the language of poetry should stay close to ordinary speech and – equally clearly – his realisation that poetry is not conversation and so can be heightened and rhetorical without falling into artificiality. These two principles working together give the poem its contrapuntal flavour [contrasting melody]: 'all road' is a Northernism for 'in whatever way' and would not come naturally from Hopkins in propria persona [as his natural way of expressing himself]; it seems natural because the poem is saturated with the earthy and demotic

presence of the smith himself; whereas a colloquialism like 'This seeing the sick' would be quite normal in educated speech and does, in fact, occur in one of Hopkins's letters. (John Wain)





INVERSNDAID

Background

In August 1881 Hopkins was sent to St Joseph's Church in Glasgow. From there he wrote to Baillie:

Though Glasgow is repulsive to live in yet there are alleviations: the streets and buildings are fine and the people lively. The poor Irish, among whom my duties lay, are mostly from the North of Ireland ... They are found by all who have to deal with them very attractive; for, though always very drunken and at present very Fenian, they are warm-hearted and give a far heartier welcome than those of Liverpool. I found myself very much at home with them.

Before leaving Scotland he made a trip to Inversnaid on Loch Lomond, probably inspired by Wordsworth's poem 'To a Highland Girl'. There he wrote the poem 'Inversnaid', his only composition in the space of a year.

The Inversnaid Falls feature prominently in Hopkins's poem.

The day was dark and partly hid the lake, yet it did not altogether disfigure it but gave a pensive or solemn beauty which left a deep impression on me.

Hopkins often complained that cities seemed to dry him up, physically and spiritually. Imagine, therefore, the pleasure he must have taken from the energetic waters of Inversnaid Falls. This is a simple poem, consisting of three verses that describe the progress of Arklet Water, with its

peaty-brown waters ... through narrow valleys of heather and ladder-fern to oak forests, with the occasional birch, ash and, hanging over the water, rowan, gradually steepened and quickened. There were smaller falls and side pools, with froth, foam, bubbles, and whirls, in rocky basins, before the final, magnificent, high but broken fall into a larger pool just before it entered Loch Lomond. (Norman White)

The fourth verse expresses a heartfelt plea for the preservation of natural environments.

Hopkins was not happy with the poem and it remained unseen until after his death.

Theme

The poem celebrates the beauty and inscape of the natural world.

Stanza 1

The brown water, high above the lake, rolls over rocks and develops white foamy patches before it falls noisily into the lake. How much more evocative and 'noisy' the poet's words are! The adjectives contribute immensely, not only because of the visual images they create but also because of their sound. This is Hopkins's only Scottish poem. He succeeds in capturing the flavour of the Glaswegian accent by his frequent use of *l* and especially *r* (together with Scots words like 'burn', 'brae' and 'bonny' in later verses).

If you look at particular examples of his choice of adjective you can gain an insight into his attention to detail. The word 'darksome'





attracts and frightens at the same time, emphasising the Romantic credentials of the poet. The adjective 'horseback' is used to qualify 'brown'. When one thinks of 'horseback brown' it conjures up an image of a glossy, textured brown that catches the light. But the real merit in the word is not so much its description of the colour as the association the word has with horses. This is not a static brown, it is imbued with the energy associated with horses. In this way the poet infuses his description of the water with the energy the water displays as it 'roars' down into the lake. In the second line his use of alliteration and harsh consonants achieves the same energetic effect. He has coined another word, 'rollrock', to add to this energy. Imagine how a Scot would deliver this line! In lines 3 and 4 alliteration combines very well with the four stresses of the iambic tetrameter to create a melodic effect:

coop – comb – fleece – foam

Flutes – low – lake – home

Stanza 2

The froth is described as fawn-coloured. Once again Hopkins has chosen a word that (a) creates alliteration with 'froth' (b) describes a yellow-brown colour and (c) describes a young deer. This froth is like a bonnet that has been puffed up by the wind. Hopkins is very sensitive to the contrast between the light-coloured froth and the pitch-black pool. There is also a contrast in sound between the light beat of the first two lines and the heavy, sombre rhythm of the last two lines of the stanza. The words 'broth', 'pitchblack' and 'féll-frówning' and the phrase 'Despair to drowning' create a somewhat sinister atmosphere. The image is of an eddy or

whirlpool that is very dark, which the poet seems to associate with the descent into Hell.

Stanza 3

So far the movement of the poem has been downwards. In this verse the attention is drawn upwards to the terrain through which the stream flows. The stream runs through 'the groins of the braes', a phrase that perfectly evokes the rough Highland landscape. It refers to the steep banks of the river, which are 'Degged', or sprinkled, with dew. The guttural *g* sounds are complemented by the *b* and *d* sounds to create a cacophonous melody not unlike the music of the bagpipes. The river now 'treads' carefully, whereas in the first verse it roared and galloped. The banks are covered in heath and fern, but to make these seem more fearsome he uses the harsh-sounding 'packs' and 'fitches'. The final line is almost tranquil by comparison.

Stanza 4

The rhetorical question gives way to a plea on behalf of unspoiled natural scenes as the poet takes us from this particular place to a contemplation of the natural world. Two and a half years earlier, in Oxford, Hopkins had written the germ of an idea for which he had now found a place:

*O where is it, the wilderness,
The wildness of the wilderness?
Where is it, the wilderness?*

The weeds, wetness and wilderness of the scene represent the essential purity of nature, in contrast to the 'sordid selfishness of





man'. The weeds and wilderness are God's creation, untouched by human hand, still perfect and therefore sacramental. His plea is for the earth that has no tongue.

Yet his plea is not a hopeless one. He looks not to the likelihood of ruin, but to the certainty of resurrection. In his poem as a whole there is a structural contrast between the downward fall of the stream, to the drowning of Despair at the end of the second stanza, and the upward rising of the banks on either side, sprinkled as they are with bright dew and looking up to the sky through the branches of the 'beadbonny ash'. This rising movement culminates in the 'long live' of the final line, which is not just a ceremonial 'Viva!' or an outburst of forced enthusiasm, but the poet's confession of his faith in eternal life. Thus in the end of the poem we may discern theological undertones of Baptism and Resurrection. (Peter Milward)

Metre

This poem is written in iambic tetrameter (in imitation of Wordsworth's 'To a Highland Girl') but with elements of sprung rhythm. Iambic tetrameter normally has four stresses in a line with eight syllables: 'de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum'. It is possible for a tetrameter to gain or lose a syllable. However, this poem has between seven and 12 syllables per line. The extra syllables are unstressed:

Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through

de-de-dum de-de-dum de-de-dum de-dum.

The influence of Ruskin

A glance at the poem by Wordsworth that drew Hopkins to Inversnaid serves to illustrate the difference between the two poets as well as an important characteristic of Hopkins's poetry.

*...these grey rocks; that household lawn;
Those trees, a veil just half withdrawn;
This fall of water that doth make
A murmur near the silent lake ...*

This is very tame in comparison with Hopkins's poem. The rocks are just 'grey' and the water makes a 'murmur'. Hopkins described the Lake poets as 'faithful but not rich observers of nature'.

They were not disciples of John Ruskin. In *Modern Painters* and *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin advocated an almost scientific attention to the observation of detail: 'If you can paint one leaf, you can paint the world.' His journals illustrate this way of looking at natural objects:

I have particular periods of admiration for particular things in Nature; for a certain time I am astonished at the beauty of a tree, shape, effects etc.

There is a page of studies of ash-twigs. Ruskin wrote:

Each has a curve and a path to take ... and each terminates all its minor branches at its outer extremity, so as to form a great outer curve. Choose rough, worn, and clumsy-looking things as much as possible.

His readers were warned to avoid 'all very neat things'. Is it any wonder that Hopkins would proclaim 'Long live the weeds and the wilderness'?





Gaia: A modern perspective?

An English scientist, James Lovelock, put forward the 'Gaia hypothesis'. In Greek mythology, Gaia was the goddess of the earth. In Lovelock's theory the earth is a living organism, of which humankind is a part. In a lecture he said:

I sometimes wonder if the loss of soul from science could be the result of sensory deprivation – a consequence of the fact that the majority of us now live in cities. How can you love the living world if you can no longer hear a bird song through the noise of traffic, or smell the sweetness of fresh air? How can we wonder about God and the universe if we never see the stars because of the city lights?

The attraction of the city is seductive. Socrates said that nothing of interest happened outside its city walls, and that was two thousand years ago. But city life – the soap opera that never ends – reinforces and strengthens the heresy of humanism, the narcissistic belief that nothing important happens that is not a human interest.

City living corrupts: it gives a false sense of priority over environmental hazards. We become inordinately obsessed with personal mortality – especially death from cancer.

When we read 'Inversnaid' we cannot avoid thinking of the destruction of the Amazon rainforests, the extinction of species and the disappearance of our own green fields under a concrete jungle.





I WAKE AND FEEL THE FELL OF DARK, NOT DAY

This poem acts as a sequel to the previous one, 'Inversnaid'. The only consolation that could be found in the previous poem was in sleep; now the poet lies awake in the depths and darkness of the night.

'Fell' is another one of those words with several meanings. Darkness is like a wild animal whose fell, or hide, the poet feels – an eerie image. Darkness is a landscape in whose fell, or mountainous region, the poet wanders. Darkness is a mood whose fell, or cruelty and ruthlessness, torments him. Darkness is a creature whose fell, or blow, strikes the poet. All these readings of the word 'fell' combine to create a horrifying impression of the poet's experience of darkness. From his experience of daylight in the previous poem, we know that 'day' has its own 'fell' qualities.

In his discussion of this poem, F.R. Leavis wrote:

This is characteristic Hopkins in its methods of compression and its elimination of all inessential words. There is the familiar use of assonance: 'feel' becomes 'fell', i.e. feeling becomes an obsessing sense of the overwhelming darkness ... and the sequence 'night,' 'sights,' 'lights' suggest the obsessing horror of the night.

The poet makes dramatic use of exclamation and repetition in the second and third lines. The long vowel sounds and dragging repetition also contribute to the sense of anguish in 'What hours, O what black hoürs'. The address to his own heart serves to

emphasise his loneliness and desolation as he waits for dawn to break. The heart is the witness that can be trusted: 'The heart is what rises towards good, shrinks from evil, recognising the good or evil first by some eye of its own' (Hopkins). The 'sights' and 'ways' undertaken during the night suggest the waking nightmares that he has experienced.

The opening statement of the second quatrain almost challenges the reader to dispute the authenticity of his account. It is a curious sentence, yet it adds to the manic quality in the poem. This torment that he is enduring has not just been the experience of a few hours, it has been going on for years; in fact, his whole life has been cruel. His cries have been 'countless' and like 'dead letters sent/To dearest him that lives, alas! away'. It is customary to read 'him' as a reference to God; however, it would seem natural for the poet to capitalise the word if this is what he meant. R.B. Martin has suggested that 'him' is a reference to Digby Dolben, a friend from Oxford, for whom Hopkins felt unmanageable emotions. 'I have written letters without end, without a whiff of answer,' he wrote regarding his attempts to correspond with Dolben. Not long after, Dolben died in a drowning accident.

Here, and occasionally elsewhere in his poems, Hopkins seems deliberately to blur the dividing line between persons and Deity ... as if to indicate the difficulty of distinguishing between his feelings for other men and those for Christ; we are inevitably reminded of Dolben, who often followed the same practice in his poems to Gosselin/Christ. (R.B. Martin)





The sestet is astonishing. It divides into two tercets. The poet gives a description of himself that seethes with self-disgust. He changed the phrase ‘God’s most deep decree’ to ‘God’s most just decree’, and then changed it back again. What is the difference? ‘Just decree’ expresses confidence that God knows what he is doing, whereas ‘deep decree’ suggests that the poet has no understanding of God’s purpose. His suffering is caused by having to live with himself. He is a vile ‘curse’, a sinful, slothful creature who has failed in his mission. It is the nature of damnation to have one’s own senses torment one; here the torment is described in physical terms: ‘taste’, ‘scourge’.

In the final tercet the ‘Selfyeast of spirit’ may refer to his will, which ‘sours’ a ‘dull dough’, which may refer to the body. He identifies himself with the ‘lost’ in Hell because he feels he has been condemned, but there is the possibility of consolation in the final two words if we take it to mean that, unlike those in Hell, he is not condemned for eternity.

The fourth sonnet, ‘Carrion Comfort’, was probably written during a retreat at Clongowes Wood College in Co. Kildare. It strongly suggests that Hopkins battled with the thought of suicide. The fifth sonnet, ‘My Own Heart Let Me More Have Pity On’, reveals his acceptance of his lot. These five sonnets seem to chart an extraordinary mental journey, through profoundest torment and self-disgust to an eventual acceptance of life as it is lived. There is, of course, a possibility that these poems are not so much autobiographical as imaginary, some kind of Ignatian exercise, but their rawness and intensity make that an unlikely possibility.

The melancholy I have all my life been subject to has become of late years not indeed more intense in its fits but rather more distributed, constant, and crippling. One, the lightest but a very inconvenient form of it, is daily anxiety about work to be done, which makes me break off or never finish all that lies outside that work ... All impulse fails me: I can give myself no sufficient reason for going on. Nothing comes: I am a eunuch – but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.

He declined an invitation to spend that Christmas at home with his family, preferring to stay at Clongowes Wood in the hope that he would write. However, he did manage to visit his family in the summers of the next two years.

In September 1886 his spirits were so low that he was allowed a holiday in Wales with his friend Robert Curtis. These were the happiest two weeks of his time in Dublin. He also loved to escape from Dublin to Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, where he was a frequent guest of the Cassidy family. The suburb (then village) of Donnybrook was a short walk from Dublin and another refuge for Hopkins from the claustrophobic effect of city, colleagues and self.





NO WORST, THERE IS NONE. PITCHED PAST PITCH OF GRIEF

Background

Final vows and Dublin

1881–82: Roehampton

When he returned to Roehampton for his tertianship, the final stage of his training (1881–82), Hopkins wrote to Bridges that he intended to give up writing poetry for the 10 months leading up to his final vows. This excuse would have been plausible if he had been in the habit of writing, but he was not. The absence of inspiration and general listlessness he wrote about before his death was already a problem for him: 'I therefore want to get things done first, but fear I never shall.'

Despite the fact that tertianship was like a second novitiate and the candidates were treated like schoolboys again (Hopkins was now 37), he delighted in the opportunity and time for meditation, prayer and seclusion. Significantly, his health was robust during his time there.

On 15 August 1882, after 14 years of training, Hopkins took his final vows. A week later he left for Stonyhurst, where he would teach Greek, Latin and a little English to the 'Philosophers' – the academic elite who were preparing to take their BA. The order was not yet sure how best to use Gerard Manley Hopkins.

1882–84: Stonyhurst

I like my pupils and do not wholly dislike the work, but I fall into or continue in a heavy weary state of body and mind in which my go is gone ... make no way with what I read, and seem but half a man ... I find myself so tired or so harassed I fear they [books he proposed to write] will never be written.

It is clear that Hopkins had more to contend with than a lack of inspiration. The listlessness he describes seems to have been frequent and cyclical – perhaps a form of manic depression. The feelings of guilt that accompanied his lack of endeavour served to depress him even further.

His Provincial (superior) liked Hopkins but was not sure what to do with him: 'I am trying him this year in coaching the BAs at Stonyhurst, but with fear and trembling.'

During his two years at Stonyhurst, Hopkins wrote three poems of any merit, all concerned with the destruction of beauty. He worried about being moved again:

It seems likely that I shall be moved; where I have no notion. But I have long been Fortune's football and am blowing up the bladder of resolution big and buxom for another kick of her foot. I shall be sorry to leave Stonyhurst; but go or stay, there is no likelihood of my ever doing anything to last. And I do not know how it is, I have no disease, but I am always tired, always jaded, though work is not heavy, and the impulse to do anything fails me or has in it no continuance.

To his surprise, he was not moved that year, and shortly after this letter he went on holiday with his family. When he returned





he became acquainted with the poet Coventry Patmore. They corresponded frequently and acted as critics of each other's poetry. Patmore's comments on Hopkins's poetry are worth quoting.

It seems to me that the thought and feeling of these poems, if expressed without any obscuring novelty of mode, are such as often to require the whole attention to apprehend and digest them; and are therefore of a kind to appeal only to a few. But to the already sufficiently arduous character of such poetry you seem to me to have added the difficulty of following several entirely novel and simultaneous experiments in versification and construction, together with an altogether unprecedented system of alliteration and compound words – any one of which novelties would be startling and productive of distraction from the poetic matter to be expressed.

In a letter to Bridges, Patmore described the effect of Hopkins's poetry as 'of pure gold imbedded in masses of unpracticable quartz'.

At the end of January 1884 Hopkins was invited to become professor of Greek and Latin at University College in Dublin and a fellow of the Royal University of Ireland.

1884–89: Dublin

Hopkins was somewhat apprehensive about the honour that had been bestowed on him. He would have been even more anxious if he had known the circumstances of his appointment.

The Catholic University, founded by Newman a quarter of a century earlier, had been so unsuccessful that the hierarchy was only too happy when the Jesuits offered to take over the running of the college. Father William Delany was put in charge of the operation. His chief aim was 'by hook or by crook to put our College in front of Belfast' – not the loftiest of educational aspirations and one that Hopkins would have found utterly distasteful. Father Delany looked to the Jesuit order in England for highly qualified Jesuits who would raise the academic standards of the college, but the English Provincial was unwilling to lose those men, with the exception of Fr Hopkins. 'Fr Hopkins is very clever and a good scholar – but I should be doing you no kindness in sending you a man so eccentric.'

Delany offered the job to Hopkins, not least because his salary of £400 a year would be available for the running of the college (as Jesuits were not allowed to retain their salary or have money). The fact that he was English, and a convert, did not sit well with many of the influential figures in the clergy, but the appointment was made.

Hopkins was conscious of the fact that he was once again following in the footsteps of his mentor, John Henry Newman. 'I have been warmly welcomed and most kindly treated. But Dublin itself is a joyless place ... I had fancied it quite different.'

Indeed, it had been quite different a century earlier, when the aristocratic Anglo-Irish families presided over one of the finest cities in Europe. By the time of Hopkins's arrival they had moved to the suburbs and the rising Catholic merchant class was putting





its stamp on the city. It became as smoky as London, the Georgian townhouses were devolving rapidly into overcrowded tenements and the Liffey provided the chief public sewer. The high death rate was mainly due to poor sanitation and a thriving rat population. At 85–86 St Stephen’s Green, where Hopkins lived with his fellow Jesuits, two rats were found in the stew-pot in the kitchen.

Hopkins had to set and correct six examinations for the whole university each year – between 1,300 and 1,800 scripts. Of the examinations, he wrote:

I can not of course say that it is wholly useless, but I believe that most of it is and that I bear a burden which crushes me and does little to help any good end.

The physical and mental effort he put into these examinations contributed significantly to the deterioration in his state of mind during his time in Dublin.

He had to teach about a hundred arts undergraduates, most of whom had a utilitarian attitude to education, seeing it as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Hopkins’s style of teaching was based on the Oxford model, which encouraged students to enquire and to think for themselves. Not for the first time, Hopkins was subjected to ridicule, though admittedly, he drew some of it upon himself. He declared that he would not examine any topic that he had taught in lecture; this, of course, meant that his lectures were ‘not of much marketable value’ (Humphry House). His declaration of disappointment at never having seen a naked woman produced a predictable response from his young students – predictable by everyone, perhaps, except Hopkins himself. There

is the famous story of how a colleague entered the classroom and found Hopkins on the flat of his back, being dragged around the room by his students as he demonstrated how Hector had been dragged around the walls of Troy. Hopkins’s fellow Jesuits found his frequent complaints, his Englishness and his eccentricities less than endearing. He was ‘thought by most to be more or less crazy’.

He had one good friend in the community, Robert Curtis, a scholastic who was not allowed to take final vows because of his epilepsy. His friendship was valuable at a time when his other two friends, Dixon and Bridges, were getting married – a reminder to Hopkins of his own isolated state.

The reason of course why I like men to marry is that a single life is a difficult, not altogether a natural life; to make it easily manageable special provision, such as we [Jesuits] have, is needed, and most people cannot have this.

His letters to Bridges became more desperate. He felt that his life was wasting away and that there was little enough to show for it. (The average lifespan of a Jesuit in the nineteenth century was forty-four.)

1885: The ‘terrible sonnets’

I think that my fits of sadness, though they do not affect my judgment, resemble madness ... I must absolutely have encouragement as much as crops rain ... I have after long silence written two sonnets, which I am touching: if ever anything was written in blood one of these was.

The ‘terrible sonnets’ or ‘sonnets of desolation’ are completely different from Hopkins’s earlier religious poetry because they are





written by one who seemed to believe that God had abandoned him. Whether he had undergone a breakdown and had concealed his inner torment from colleagues, it is difficult to know. The poems, however, provide an insight as no other poems do into what St John of the Cross called ‘the dark night of the soul’.

One of these sonnets (not included in the anthology) is ‘To Seem the Stranger Lies My Lot’. In this poem he laments the fact that he and his family have been separated by religion; that he and his nation have also been divided by his conversion to Catholicism; and that the division between him and his Irish colleagues has alienated him further.

*To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
And he my peace/my parting, sword and strife.
England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
To my creating thought, would neither hear
Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I; I wear-
y of idle a being but by where wars are rife.
I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third
Remove. Not but in all removes I can
Kind love both give and get. Only what word
Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban
Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.*

It would seem that this was the first of the sonnets written and was followed by the two in the anthology.

Theme

There is no known limit to suffering. There is no such thing as the ‘worst’ because the abyss of suffering has never been ‘fathomed’; it is a bottomless pit.

Development

The opening statement is dramatic because of its brevity and its startling declaration that suffering has no boundary or limit. The poet feels that he has been ‘Pitched’ or thrown beyond the limit of suffering. To make matters worse, he imagines the torments or ‘pangs’ as living creatures capable of giving instruction to the next generation of torments on how to inflict even more pain.

The violent impact of the imagery is strikingly supported by the use of alliteration and monosyllabic words. The suffering is not solely physical, however. The word ‘pitch’ is a richly suggestive one: it can refer to sound or colour. In the first instance the impression is created that mental torment manifests itself through a hypersensitivity to noise: in other words, every sound is magnified, as it seems to be when one has a headache. With this in mind, the echoing sounds of the first two lines (*p* and *ng*) convey a sense of the aural torment that accompanies mental suffering. In her poem ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’, Emily Dickinson provides magnificent images of the aural dimension to nervous breakdown:

*And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb –*





‘Pitch’ can also describe a type of blackness, a colour – or rather, a non-colour – associated with a mood of despair. Hopkins was fascinated with words and their possible meanings. He showed great ingenuity in using words that had an impact on several levels. Here, one word, ‘pitch’, appeals to three different senses: touch, hearing and sight.

The abrupt change from description to address adds to the drama of the poem. He challenges the Holy Ghost, who is supposed to bring comfort to those who are afflicted by suffering. The accusatory tone is heightened by the repetition of ‘where’.

In line 4 he turns to the Blessed Virgin and, again, implies that she has been a neglectful ‘mother’. With the exception of the metaphysical religious poets of the seventeenth century, nowhere does one find such daring communication between humankind and God.

In the second quatrain the poet returns to description. He imagines his cries of pain, or perhaps cries for help, as a herd of cattle. Imagine for a moment the lopy, lugubrious appearance of cattle as they trundle home to the milking parlour. What characteristics do they share with his cries? Are they pitiful? Helpless? Indistinguishable from each other? No one can declare with authority what Hopkins meant. You are invited to engage imaginatively with the poem and arrive at an intelligent conclusion. (To suggest that the common characteristic between the cries and the cattle is that they are both covered in mud would not be an intelligent conclusion. There may be no such thing as a right answer, but there are many wrong answers!)

‘Heave’ is an onomatopoeic word; its sound suggests the enormous physical effort involved in uttering the cries. ‘Herds-long’ emphasises the frequency. They ‘huddle’ together like cattle. If there is one particular source of grief, it is ‘world-sorrow’. The poet leaves it at that. His concern in this poem is not to deal with the causes of his suffering, but rather to document the experience of suffering.

The image of sorrows beating against an anvil emphasises again the aural dimension of suffering. ‘Wince and sing’ is onomatopoeic. The anvil is presumably God’s discipline, and on it lies the poet as a piece of metal.

The two verbs [‘wince and sing’], the first with its sense of human suffering combined with metallic vibration, the second with its sense of metallic vibration combined perhaps with human triumph, make the metal suffer as metal under the hammer, and the suffering metal is terribly vivid. We suffer with the metal under the blow, and we forget that the literal metal does not suffer, that metal and blow are figurative. (Yvor Winters)

When there comes a respite, a ‘lull’, Fury, the personification of punishment – probably a personification of guilt – denies him the opportunity for rest. In classical mythology the Furies were grotesque women whose purpose was to torment the sinful. In other words, if the poet escapes from the suffering that comes from ‘world-sorrow’, he is set upon by the suffering that comes from within his own conscience. There is no ‘lingering’, no respite – no rest for the wicked, as we sometimes glibly say.





As one would expect from a Petrarchan sonnet, the tone of the sestet changes to one of reflection. The image of the mind as dramatic landscape, with high mountains and deep ravines, is vivid. It is quite common for people to speak of feeling 'high' or 'low'. Life is sometimes described as a 'valley of tears' or a 'rollercoaster ride'. Sometimes one can be 'on top of the world'. For a manic depressive, the imagery would be particularly apt. Hopkins's cyclical moods would have brought him many 'highs' and 'lows'.

The ellipsis in the third quatrain is very effective in increasing the intensity of the statement. Compare it with a prose rendition: 'Oh, the mind, the mind has mountains. It has cliffs of falling that are frightful, sheer, and no-man-fathomed. Those who have never hung there may hold them cheaply.'

The inversion of the natural word order also serves to create a dramatic impact. One is reminded of Michael Paul Gallagher's reference at the Centenary Mass to 'his wrenching of words into unheard-of collusions, into compressions that echoed his own wrenched self'. When one is suffering mental anguish, one does not worry about correct syntax. Hopkins reminds us that if we have never hung by our fingernails from the edge of a cliff with an abyss gaping below, we will not appreciate the sheer terror involved or, as Hopkins sparingly put it, 'Hold them cheap/May who ne'er hung there'.

People cannot survive for long in this mental state; our 'Durance' (endurance) cannot 'deal' with it. The only refuge is death or, more immediately, sleep. Hopkins seems to be grasping at any consolation he can find so as to escape from despair. The image

he uses is of a lowly creature crawling under a rock during a whirlwind. The unrelieved bleakness of the poem is emphasised by the fact that the only hope lies with the suspension or obliteration of consciousness. The poem is written in standard sonnet form, with strong sprung rhythm effects.





THOU ART INDEED JUST, LORD, IF I CONTEND

Background

Hopkins began the last New Year of his life at a retreat in Tullabeg, near Tullamore. His thoughts were preoccupied with the sense of being tired and useless.

What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise ... All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all. O my God, look down on me.

It was customary for a Jesuit to repeat *Justus es, Domine, et rectum judicium tuum* (You are just, O Lord, and your judgement is right). This was intended to fortify one's spirits when life was difficult; it signifies that the individual accepts his cross and is offering it up to God. These thoughts and feelings evolved into the final poem in the anthology. It was written the following St Patrick's Day, a day on which an Englishman might feel particularly isolated in an Ireland that was looking for its independence. When he sent the poem to Bridges he suggested that it be read '*adagio molto*', that is, very slowly and with great stress.

One preparation for St Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises is called a 'composition of person', in which one is expected to put oneself

into the mind of another. In this case Hopkins is imagining himself to be the exiled Jeremiah of the Psalms. There is a dramatic quality in the impression created that the poet is like an advocate before a judge. The poem begins formally with the quotation from the Bible, but it quickly loses its formality and the intensity of a real voice bursts through.

Theme

In the poem, Hopkins challenges God in a most humble yet provocative manner. God may be just, but the poet has justifiable cause for complaint. Why is it that the wicked seem to prosper while those who devote their lives to God meet with nothing but obstacles and frustration? It is a universal and timeless complaint. The poem then moves from a concern with the prosperity of the wicked, in contrast to his lack of success, to a desperate plea for poetic inspiration, the absence of which is emphasised by the fruitfulness of the natural world that surrounds him. The first part of the poem is concerned with morality and justice, the second part with creativity.

Development

The first quatrain is simply a translation from Jeremiah in the Vulgate (the Latin version of the Bible). It opens the argument in a formal manner. Yet the poet manages to invest some tension in the clipped monosyllabic diction of the second line and the inversion of natural word order that places the verb 'end' at the end of the line instead of after 'Disappointment'. The polysyllabic word 'disappointment' stands out from the words that precede it. There is a hint of frustration despite the humility of the address to





'Lord' and 'sir'. The poet might well have had in mind the 'sinners' who surrounded him, rebellious and nationalistic Jesuits – to his way of thinking – deviously and unlawfully plotting against the government of England.

One can almost imagine the poet's voice rising in the second quatrain as he struggles to restrain his anger. The rhetorical use of antithesis in the line 'Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend' cleverly illustrates the tension that exists between the servant's loyalty and the feeling that he is being abused.

The struggle between the two emotions becomes less manageable as the poem progresses. The exclamations and run-on lines build up the intensity of the poem. The extra syllable in line 7, the emphatic monosyllables and the 'spill' of octet into sestet serve to convey the idea that his frustration is bursting out of the sonnet straitjacket. 'Sir' at the beginning of the sestet acts almost as a temporary brake on his feelings, but the imperatives 'See' and 'look' heighten the sense of exasperation again as he points out that even vegetation and birds, which would have been in full flourish in mid-March, can enjoy the fruits of creation while he exerts every sinew without anything to show for it.

The image of the eunuch is very powerful, precisely because of its sexual association, which is continued in the phrase 'not breed one work that wakes'. Not only was a eunuch incapable of breeding but he was a slave, usually employed in a harem. As an image of frustration, it is most appropriate. The word 'work' probably refers to poetic work, but he may also have in mind the academic projects that he never finished; or perhaps it applies more

generally to anything that would mark his existence. Most people leave behind children; what will he have to show for his life?

So with me, if I could but get on, if I could but produce work I should not mind its being buried, silenced, and going no further; but it kills me to be time's eunuch and never to beget.

(Letter to Bridges, September 1885)

The final line of the poem is probably inspired by Jeremiah 17, which had been the Epistle for the Mass of the previous Sunday:

Blessed be the man that trusted in the Lord and the Lord shall be his confidence. And he shall be as a tree that is planted by the waters, that spreadeth out his roots towards moisture and it shall not fear when the heat cometh.

The poet now prays for the 'waters' that God had promised.

What is fascinating about this poem is the fact that a man and priest of such great faith can speak so directly to God and become so angry with him. Never was the use of the sonnet form, with its highly disciplined format, more needed to restrain the intensely felt emotions that strain to become wild and irreverent.

It is ironic that he actually left behind quite a monument in the form of his poetry.

The end

'I am ill today, but no matter for that as my spirits are good,' Hopkins mentioned in passing in a letter to Bridges on 29 April 1885. Two days later he informed his mother that he thought he had rheumatic fever. On 8 May he told her it was 'a sort of





typhoid'. No one else in the house caught the disease; in fact, there was no typhoid at that time in the vicinity of St Stephen's Green. Six days later his family was notified of an improvement in his condition. On 5 June he took a turn for the worse and his family was summoned. Having complained virulently over minor ailments, Hopkins was 'the placidest soul in the world' when faced with terminal illness.

His dying words were 'I am so happy, I am so happy'. Norman White suggests that this exclamation of joy in the face of death was a tradition among the Jesuits rather than a sincere expression of happiness at the prospect of leaving this life and meeting his maker. We will never know for certain what Hopkins intended with these words.

The obituary read: '1889. On the eighth day of June, the vigil of Pentecost, weakened by a fever, he rested. May he rest in peace. He had a most subtle mind, which too quickly wore out the fragile strength of his body.' He was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery in a plot reserved for Jesuits.

The death column of the *Nation* made reference to Hopkins's scholarship in classics, philology, literature and art but of course made no reference to his poetry, because outside a small coterie of friends, he was unknown as a poet. Hopkins had told Bridges that he was content to leave the fate of his poems in the hands of God, but the immediate responsibility lay with Bridges himself, since he was in possession of them. Bridges, however, was not yet wholly convinced of their quality; he felt they were too strange for public tastes. He decided to privately print a small collection

for family and friends, but the idea never materialised. In 1893 he submitted eight of the poems for an anthology of nineteenth-century poetry. A review of the book in the *Manchester Guardian* read, 'Curiosities like the verses of the late Gerard Hopkins should be excluded.'

In 1909 Katherine Bregy wrote a favourable essay on his poetry in *Catholic World*; three years later the essay was reprinted in *The Poet's Chantry*.

[His] exceedingly delicate and intricate craftsmanship – and not less the singularity of his mental processes – must, indeed, produce in many minds an impression of artificiality. Yet ... in all the poems of his manhood there is a poignant, even a passionate sincerity ... his chances of survival are excellent.

Others began to reassess Hopkins's work in light of Bregy's comments. In 1916 Bridges included a further six poems in *The Spirit of Man*, an anthology designed to lift spirits during the Great War. The response was very positive. Bridges decided it was time to publish all the poems. The book, he told A. E. Housman, 'will be one of the queerest in the world, but it is full of genius and poetic beauty and will find its place'.

Thus, the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins came to public knowledge at a time when originality and technical experimentation were becoming fashionable and they found their place.





CONCEPTS AND RHYTHM IN HOPKINS'S POETRY

Inscapē, haecceitas, instress

(It is not essential to have an understanding of these concepts to appreciate the poetry of Hopkins. If this section enhances your understanding of the poet's work, then it is worth reading; otherwise, it is a hindrance.)

What you look hard at seems to look hard at you.

When Hopkins was at Oxford he began to explore theories of perception. He copied into his notebook an extract from an essay on Wordsworth by J.C. Shairp:

Each scene in nature has in it a power of awakening, in every beholder of sensibility, an impression peculiar to itself, such as no other scene can exactly call up. This may be called the 'heart' or 'character' of that scene.

In our modern world we are familiar with the idea of each human being having a unique genetic code. Hopkins's theory was that everything in God's creation has its own unique characteristics. If an onlooker observes an object intensely and has the sensitivity to recognise its unique character, its haecceitas, or 'this-ness' – that which makes it itself – the object will reveal its 'inscape' or, if you like, its inner landscape. The observer reaches a point of intimacy with the object so that he feels as if he is within it, becoming both the observer and the observed. Finding the object's form and shape, both external and internal, is the same as finding its inscape. One of the reasons Hopkins abandoned the idea of being

an artist was that he found that he could not 'capture' the inscape of things in his drawings.

Instress is the energy of God pulsating through all created things ('The world is charged with the grandeur of God'). It is a coherent force, coherent because it comes from a single source. He sees the inscape and feels the instress. 'All things are upheld by instress and are meaningless without it.'

Essentially, what Hopkins was attempting to do with the words 'instress' and 'inscape' was to provide a theory on the way in which objects, natural or human, create a reaction in the person who is looking at them. He believed that what he saw was contained in the object rather than a result of his imaginative interpretation of that object. He believed that the impact of that object on him was due to the object rather than to his subjective response to it. 'I thought how sadly beauty of inscape was unknown and buried away from simple people and yet how near at hand it was if they had eyes to see it.'

As a Jesuit he would have been taught to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Emboldened by the teachings of Duns Scotus, he saw the two as one. In his journals he described a bluebell:

*I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at.
I know the beauty of our Lord by it. It is strength and grace, like an ash.*

(The passage continues with a detailed description of the unique characteristics of the bluebell.)





This is its inscape. The impact of the bluebell on the poet is its instress. Even if there is no impact on the viewer, the object still possesses its inscape because it is not dependent on being seen. In other words, in Hopkins's mind it has an objective reality. There lies behind his theory the Platonic idea that this world is an imperfect reflection of an ideal world and that we are sometimes blessed with glimpses of that ideal world. It was the duty of the artist to give to the work of art that 'life' that exists in the original subject. The purpose of poetry was to 'carry the inscape', or to capture it.

'The Windhover' provides an excellent example of these concepts. The effort to describe the bird goes beyond mere description of its physical form or appearance ('wimpling wing'): there is almost a scientific attempt to 'capture' its movements ('Of the rolling level underneath him steady air'). This, however, is only part of the process. The inner form of the bird, its virtues or strengths, are identified ('Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume'). There is more. The hidden 'meaning' or symbolic significance of the falcon is uncovered in a moment of mystical recognition that Joyce would call an epiphany. T.S. Eliot called it 'the intersection of the timeless with time'. It is the moment when the observer recognises God's plan for humankind in the actions of a bird in flight.

When he was at Roehampton, Hopkins became quite emotional over the felling of an ash tree. He wrote: 'I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more.' Individuality is irreplaceable. Can

you imagine, therefore, what Hopkins thought of the Industrial Revolution, with its emphasis on mass production and the reduction of people to cogs in a machine on an assembly line? Can you imagine what he would think of a world where species of animals and plants are becoming extinct at a frightening rate?

Sprung rhythm

His prosodic account in terms of Logaoedic Rhythm, Counterpoint Rhythm, Sprung Rhythm, Rocking Feet and Outriders will help no one to read his verse. (F.R. Leavis)

It is important to have a grasp of poetic rhythm, but it is not essential to have a detailed understanding of sprung rhythm. Pupils in the past memorised pages of notes on the complexities of it in the misguided notion that it was required for the exam. Poetic rhythm attempts to impose regularity on the rhythm of language. For example, a sonnet is normally written in iambic pentameter – that is, it has 10 syllables per line, divided into five feet. Each foot consists of two syllables. The standard rhythm of iambic pentameter is de-dum/de-dum/de-dum/de-dum/de-dum – for example, 'That time/of year/thou mayst/in me/behold' (Shakespeare).

If the whole poem were to be written in exactly the same rhythm, the effect would become extremely monotonous. Therefore, poets vary the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the same poem by Shakespeare, the line 'Bare ruined choirs/ where late/the sweet/birds sang' (dum-dum/de-dum/de-dum/de-dum/dum-dum) startles the reader because it diverges so much from the standard rhythm of the previous lines. In this way





a poet can use variations from the standard rhythm to achieve certain effects. In the line above, the frequent stresses make the line seem 'heavy', adding to the pathos of the image.

Poetic rhythm is 'an adjustment between a yearning for repetition and regularity, and a need to work variations upon them' (R. B. Martin). If there is no regularity, there is no scope for improvisation ('like playing tennis without a net', in the words of Robert Frost). Sprung rhythm is an attempt to 'loosen' the rules further in order to allow the poet greater freedom.

By the time Hopkins's poetry was published, many poets had already begun to dispense with regularity and rules anyway; nevertheless, Hopkins's revolutionary experiments with rhythm inspired many modern poets to be more daring and unconventional in their approach to composition. Of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', Hopkins wrote, 'I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper.' He called this new rhythm sprung rhythm because it springs naturally. It has the following characteristics:

- There is a fixed number of feet (rhythmic units) per line.
- Each foot has one stressed syllable.
- The stressed syllable may stand on its own or may be accompanied by any number of slack (unstressed) syllables.

Hopkins summed it up concisely when he wrote, 'One stress makes one foot, no matter how many or how few the syllables.'

He employed sprung rhythm because 'It is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech.' He added, 'My verse is less to be read than heard ... It is oratorical, that is the rhythm is so.'

One of the most important consequences of allowing any number of unstressed syllables in a line is that it generates energy. Unstressed syllables must be uttered quickly. The more there are in a line, the more energetic the line will be. This has a clear value for a poet who sees the world of nature as charged with the energy of God.

Sprung rhythm is used most blatantly in 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' and 'The Windhover', both of which vibrate with the energy of the natural world.

*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
(de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum)
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in
(de-de-dum de-dum de-de-de-dum de-dum de-de)
his riding
(de-dum-de)*

'Felix Randal' also employs sprung rhythm extensively; other poems contain elements of it.

The complexities of the explanations above can be simplified as follows: Hopkins believed in the idea of incarnation. Christ was both man and God; so, too, the world is a combination of the material and the divine. Seeing the divine in the world is the same as seeing its inscape. Feeling the divine presence is the same as feeling its instress. Sprung rhythm is a poetic device used to reveal





the energy of God that pulses through the world. Haecitas is the uniqueness of every object's way of revealing God.

On his obscurity

The blemishes [of Hopkins's style] ... may be called Oddity and Obscurity; and since the first may provoke laughter when a writer is serious (and this poet is always serious), while the latter must prevent him from being understood (and this poet has always something to say), it may be assumed that they were not a part of his intention. Here, then, is another source of the poet's obscurity; that in aiming at condensation he neglects the need that there is for care in the placing of words that are grammatically ambiguous. English swarms with words that have one identical form for substantive [noun], adjective, and verb; and such a word should never be so placed as to allow of any doubt as to what part of speech it is used for; because such ambiguity or momentary uncertainty destroys the force of the sentence. Now our author not only neglects this essential propriety but he would seem even to welcome and seek artistic effect in the consequent confusion; and he will sometimes so arrange such words that a reader looking for a verb may find that he has two or three ambiguous monosyllables from which to select, and must be in doubt as to which promises best to give any meaning that he can 'welcome; and then, after his choice is made, he may be left with some homeless monosyllables still on his hands'. (Robert Bridges)

F.R. Leavis, in a commentary on this passage by Robert Bridges, wrote:

A great deal is too readily assumed here: it is possible to put the readers of Hopkins too much at their ease. The 'obscurity' is ... intended. The 'oddity' ... Hopkins was aware of; but he felt that too big a price might be paid for the approval of [traditional readers]. What Dr. Bridges calls 'blemishes' are essential to Hopkins's aim and achievement ... He aimed to get out of his words as much as possible unhampered by the rules of grammar, syntax, and common usage. But to the late Dr. Bridges, as to so many people, these rules were ends in themselves.

... He had positive uses for ambiguity, and he presumed to expect from the reader prolonged and repeated intellectual effort ...

If we could deceive ourselves into believing that we were reading easily, his purpose would be defeated; for every word in one of his important poems is doing a great deal more work than almost any word in a poem of Robert Bridges. [Ouch!]

Hopkins himself said of his poetry:

No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness ... but as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern, or what I am in the habit of calling inscape, is what I above all aim at in poetry. Now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become





queer. This vice I cannot have escaped ... but take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right ...

I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now [in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'] I realised on paper ... I do not say the idea is altogether new ... but no one has professedly used it and made it the principle throughout, that I know of ... However, I had to mark the stresses ... and a great many more oddnesses could but dismay an editor's eye, so that when I offered it to our magazine, The Month ... They dared not print it ... The effect of studying masterpieces is to make me admire and do otherwise. So it must be on every original artist to some degree, on me to a marked degree.

The prescription he gives when warm from reading his verse – 'take breath and read it with the ears' – is a great deal more to the point, and if we add 'and with the brains and the body' it suffices.

His words and phrases are actions as well as sounds, ideas and images, and must, as I have said, be read with the body as well as with the eye: that is the force of his concern to be read aloud. (F.R. Leavis)

The poem which is absolutely original is absolutely bad; it is in the bad sense, 'subjective' with no relation to the world to which it appeals ... Originality, in other words, is by no means a simple idea in the criticism of poetry. True originality is merely development. (T.S. Eliot)





AN OVERVIEW OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Themes and issues

Nature

- The world of nature pulses with energy because it is charged with the grandeur of God.
- Spring is a glimpse of what the Garden of Eden must have been like.
- Everything in existence has its own unique identity and inscape. It is possible to recognise God's design in every natural object.
- The Ruskinian method of observing natural objects in minute detail establishes a way of seeing and consequently a way of relating to the natural object.
- Contrast (dappled things) and variety set off the beauty of things.
- Unspoiled nature (the weeds and the wilderness) is a precious resource.
- Humankind's sinfulness and the Industrial Revolution have made us insensitive to the beauty and preciousness of the natural world.
- Despite the destructive activities of humankind, the Holy Ghost protects and renews the natural world.

Suffering and alienation

- Humankind's sinfulness brings suffering and toil.
- Acceptance of God's will brings comfort and relief from pain.

- Spiritual desolation is a bottomless pit of suffering.
- The worst form of suffering, outside of Hell, is the desolation caused by self-disgust.

Relationship between people and God

- God makes himself known to us through the world of nature and in the faces of people.
- He is the 'dearest freshness' that permeates the natural world.
- Only through the submission of our own will to the will of God can we truly reveal our inner beauty.
- God has given us the gift of natural beauty, with all its variety.
- Humans are insignificant beings who have been rescued from death and oblivion by the sacrifice by Christ on the cross.
- God's will is a mystery to us.

Style

In order to have a full appreciation of a poet's work, one must have some sense of how the poet communicates theme. There are two aspects to understanding style: (a) the poetic devices employed by the poet and (b) the effect achieved by the use of these devices.

It is not as mere musical effects (if such were possible in poetry) – melody, harmony, counterpoint – that these devices are important; they are capable of use for expressing complexities of feeling, the movement of consciousness, difficult and urgent states of mind. (F.R. Leavis)





Summary of poetic devices

Sprung rhythm

- Allows greater freedom
- Adds energy
- Is closer to ordinary speech

Ellipsis

- Creates a greater concentration of meaning (suffering)
- Creates energy

Inversion

- Makes demands on the reader's concentration
- Contributes to originality of expression and freshness of language
- Allows for dramatic juxtaposition of words, phrases, images
- Conveys intensity of emotion
- Creates energy

Alliteration and assonance

- Produces characteristic sound patterns (influenced by the cyghanedd tradition in Welsh literature)
- Links words together
- Creates energy

Coined words: Nouns, adjectives, verbs

- Contributes to originality of expression, freshness of language
- Creates a greater concentration of meaning
- Creates the dramatic impact of the unfamiliar

Exclamations

- Conveys emotional intensity
- Adds dramatic quality

Condensation of meaning

- Creates obscurity
- Makes demands on the reader's concentration
- Creates intensity

Colloquialisms

- Contributes to originality and freshness of language
- Adds local colour

Variety of language and imagery

- Provides pleasure
- Emphasises the startling originality of the poet

Onomatopoeia

- Contributes to the wonderful sound patterns
- Adds energy
- Emphasises the aural quality of the poems

Tension between restrictions of the sonnet form and the poet's liberal interpretation of it

- Points to the central tension in his life and work





Main features of Hopkins's style

- Energetic
- Intense
- Concentrated in meaning
- Obscure
- Tortuous
- Original
- Musical
- Dramatic
- Oratorical
- Erudite
- Demanding





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

1. What impression of Hopkins the man do you get from his poetry?
2. Is it necessary to admire the author to admire his work?
3. Does the poet's profound faith make it easier or more difficult for you to relate to his work?
4. If you had the opportunity to interview Hopkins, what questions would you ask him?
5. Does biographical knowledge enhance your enjoyment of Hopkins's poetry or is it of no significance?
6. What do you like or dislike about the way Hopkins wrote poetry?
7. Do you think the themes of his poetry have relevance in the modern world?
8. Which lines, images or phrases from Hopkins's poems do you remember most? Explain why they are memorable for you.
9. Put together an argument as to why Hopkins's poetry should be retained on, or removed from, the Leaving Certificate course.
10. The Gerard Manley Hopkins International Summer School takes place every year in Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, in the last week of July (see www.gerardmanleyhopkins.org).





QUESTIONS

1. What are the central themes of Hopkins's poetry?
2. What are the central features of his poetic style?
3. 'Extremes of emotion, from ecstasy to despair, are what make Hopkins's poetry so interesting.' Do you agree?
4. Hopkins has been called 'the poet of energy'. How does the poet create this energy in his poems?
5. 'The language of Hopkins's poetry is vigorous, sensuous and intensely spiritual.' Discuss.
6. 'In a Hopkins poem, every word has a stringent part to play in the creation of meaning.' Discuss.
7. 'No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness.' Is Hopkins's poetry too 'odd' to be enjoyable?
8. 'This is a poet who celebrates unique identities and experiences, their meaning and their value.' Discuss.
9. 'To be a "devotional poet" is a limitation: a saint limits himself by writing poetry, and a poet who confines himself to even this subject matter is limiting himself too.' Do you agree?
10. 'Hopkins's poetry presents us with a deeply personal and passionate response to the world and its creator.' Discuss.
11. 'Complexity of thought and novelty in the use of language sometimes create an apparent obscurity in the poetry of Hopkins.' Discuss.
12. 'Hopkins does not allow the brevity of the sonnet form to hinder the expression of his complex themes and he uses its intimacy to give effective expression to all his moods.' Discuss.
13. 'Language, rhythm and imagery are forged into an exciting mode of expression in the poetry of Hopkins.' Discuss.





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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2019	OL 2019
HL 2022	OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

September 1913

The Wild Swans at Coole

An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

Easter, 1916

The Second Coming

Sailing to Byzantium

from Meditations in Time of Civil War: VI. The Stare's Nest By My Window

In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz

Swift's Epitaph

An Acre of Grass

from Under Ben Bulbin: V and VI

Politics

Overview of themes and issues

Developing a personal response to the poetry of W. B. Yeats

Questions

Bibliography





INTRODUCTION

A literary life

William Butler Yeats was born on 13 June 1865 at number 1 Sandymount Avenue, Dublin, son of John Butler Yeats and Susan Pollexfen. John Butler Yeats originated from Co. Down, where his father was a Church of Ireland rector and whose father before him had been rector at Drumcliff, Co. Sligo. The Butler part of the family name came from an eighteenth-century marriage to a relation of the Butlers of Ormonde, one of the oldest Anglo-Irish families. That marriage brought with it the more tangible asset of a few hundred acres of land in Co. Kildare, the rents from which continued to provide a measure of financial support for the family until the land had to be sold in 1886. John Butler Yeats had trained as a barrister before his marriage but decided to become an artist instead, and in 1867 the family moved to London so that he could study painting. This was the first move of a peripatetic childhood and youth for the young William, as the family moved from one house to another in London or between London and Dublin in pursuit of the father's artistic career, which never really became financially viable. William was the eldest surviving child, followed by Susan Mary (called Lily), Elizabeth Corbet (called Lollie) and John Butler (Jack) – all born within six years of each other. Their mother, Susan Pollexfen, was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and shipping family from Co. Sligo, and when John Butler Yeats got into financial difficulties the family spent a good deal of time there, which the poet remembered with great affection.

A good deal of Yeats's childhood and youth was spent in an atmosphere of genteel poverty, supported by better-off relatives. He was educated at the Godolphin School, London, 1875–80; the High School, Dublin, 1880–83; and the Metropolitan School of Art, Dublin, 1884–86. At first the young Yeats found it difficult to learn to read, and when by the age of seven or eight he still could not distinguish all the letters of the alphabet, his father is reputed to have thrown the reading book at him in a rage. In later life, Yeats's spelling continued to be idiosyncratic, supporting the later conclusion that he suffered from dyslexia. As it was unlikely that he would pass the entrance examination for Trinity College, his father's old university, he was tutored to some extent by his father, who regarded himself as the young man's chief mentor, and was therefore largely self-educated.

Consequently, his acquaintances and readings assumed a significant role in his development. Among the people introduced to him by his father was the old Fenian John O'Leary, and this sparked off an interest in nationalism, particularly as a subject for poetry. He was also influenced by the writings of Douglas Hyde, Katherine Tynan and Samuel Ferguson as well as James Clarence Mangan's versions of Irish poems. But it was probably the histories and the fiction of Standish O'Grady that most impelled Yeats to investigate Irish mythology. At this time he was fascinated by the folktales, fairytales and supernatural beliefs found in Co. Sligo and Co. Galway, which resulted in the collection *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888). He also wanted to reformulate in English the old Irish legends and so recreate Ireland's lost intellectual and





cultural heritage. This found expression in his collection of poetry *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889).

At this time Yeats also began to search for alternative philosophies to Christianity, such as Buddhism, magic, spiritualism and astrology. Influenced to some degree no doubt by his discussions with his friend, the poet George Russell, he began to explore mysticism and the occult, often through the practices of esoteric groups and cults. Among these were the theosophists (through whom he encountered the notorious Elena Blavatsky), who believed that knowledge of God could be achieved through spiritual ecstasy and direct intuition. He also became involved with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a Rosicrucian order that practised ritual demonstrations of psychic power, which he joined in 1890. The Golden Dawn was based on the desire for alchemical change – the transformation of people into gods, the possibility of transforming the world. Yeats became quite dedicated to the practice of magic, believed in the evocation of spirits and indeed was convinced that he himself was a magician. Among the principal beliefs that he subscribed to were that:

- The borders of our minds are ever shifting and that minds can melt and flow into each other, creating a single entity or 'Great Mind'.
- There is a 'World Soul' or shared memory in nature.
- The Great Mind can be evoked by symbols, which Yeats introduced into poetry in order to access truths.

He learned a great deal about symbolism from Shelley and Blake. Symbols reveal themselves in a state of trance. He felt

that the purpose of rhythm in poetry is to create meditative rhythms in which the mind is lulled into a state of trance. When poetry is working well it operates like a mantra or chant, helping us to see past the ordinary. Yeats believed that 'simple' people (those who were considered fools), ascetics and women can see beyond modern culture into the world of magical truths. Yeats also believed that Celticism was the remnant of a former world religion, that the occult is really the remnant of this old religion or magic and that Ireland is the place where it can best be contacted. Thus, Celticism and the occult are important and connected twin pillars of his poetic philosophy.

During the 1890s Yeats's poetry developed from simple pastoral poetry and verses about fairytales to the use of cycles of mythology of Ulster and the Fianna. He introduced heroes from these tales into his poetry: Cú Chulainn, Méabh, Deirdre and others. He began to use the Celtic material in a visionary way to create mystical poetry, which culminated in the volume *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

Women were important in Yeats's life and he had a number of troublesome and tempestuous love affairs. Of all the women he encountered, two were to be most influential: Maud Gonne and Lady Augusta Gregory. The former, whom he met in the late 1880s, was the source of passionate romantic involvement and disappointment for him over the succeeding three decades, but she was also the inspiration for some of his work, such as the play *The Countess Kathleen*, was a frequent reference point in his poetry and was the focus for some of his ideas on nationalism, women in politics, the aesthetic, ageing and others. He first met Lady





Gregory in 1894, and from 1897 onwards her home, Coole Park, near Gort, Co. Galway, was a summer refuge from his somewhat nomadic life. As well as helping him collect folktales, she provided both psychological and financial support and the opportunity to meet other writers, such as George Russell, George Bernard Shaw, George Moore and Edward Martyn. Lady Gregory, Yeats and Martyn were the principal co-founders of the Irish Literary Theatre. Their manifesto clearly outlines the driving philosophy and ambition of the movement:

We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.

Eventually this movement led to the founding of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1904, where Yeats was manager from 1904 to 1910. But the public did not always appreciate the movement's artistic vision. There was adverse reaction to Yeats's play *The Countess Kathleen*, and in 1907 John Millington Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World* sparked off riots in the theatre. Yeats was deeply disillusioned by this lack of understanding and aesthetic appreciation, a feeling that was deepened by the controversy over the Hugh Lane proposal. This disillusionment is reflected in his poetry in *The Green Helmet* (1910), *Responsibilities* (1914) and *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917). In contrast, his visit to Italy in 1907 with Lady Gregory and her son, Robert, highlighted the difference between the mob in Ireland and what it had been possible to create through aristocratic patronage in Florence and Ravenna.

The Easter Rising of 1916 forced Yeats to rethink his view of Irish society, as we see in the poem 'Easter 1916'. These years ushered in other decisive changes for Yeats. After a final round of marriage proposals to Maud Gonne and then to her adopted daughter, Iseult, he settled into marriage with Georgina Hyde-Lees on 20 October 1917. The marriage produced two children and much-needed domestic stability for Yeats. Whether by chance or design, it also produced the 'automatic writing' created by his wife, who, while in a sort of trance, transcribed the words of certain spirit guides or instructors. This seemed to offer a new system of thought to Yeats, incorporating themes of change within a new view of history, which he developed in his book *A Vision* (1925). The central idea of his philosophy was that civilisation was about





to reverse itself and a new era of anti-civilisation was about to be ushered in. The signs of this were everywhere: in mass movements in Europe and in the rise of communism, fascism, etc.

Yeats examined change against the backdrop of world history. In his review of history he noticed that certain eras favoured the development of human excellence in art and learning and also produced social harmony – Athens of the fifth century BC, Byzantium, the Italian Renaissance – all of which developed political culture and artistic culture and in general fostered human achievement, creating what Yeats termed ‘unity of being’. These eras were separated by 1,000 years, each reaching its peak about 500 years after it replaced the previous ‘millennium’. There were two main forces at work: what Yeats called ‘anti-thetical’ energies, which created this unity of being, and the opposite force, which he termed ‘primary’ energy. These two energies grew or waned in their turn over the course of each millennium. Yeats represented this theory of change by the symbolism of the gyres, two interpenetrating cones, one primary and the other anti-thetical, each growing or decreasing in strength as the centuries pass. He felt that his own time was now reaching the end of the primary gyre and that the growing violence on the Continent and in Ireland was an indicator of its imminent collapse, to be replaced by a new anti-thetical gyre. This is the philosophical background to the bleak view he took of the current fractious age in the volumes *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and, in particular, *The Tower* (1928). See in particular his poems ‘The Second Coming’, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ and ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’. This philosophy, which had as its central belief the notion that

the times were out of joint and that cataclysmic changes were about to happen, may help to explain Yeats’s flirtation with extreme political philosophies and movements: for example, his consideration of fascism, his exploration of the place of violence in politics, his scepticism about democracy and his preference for the political model of Renaissance prince–ruler (a model that cast the Anglo-Irish gentry in a similar role) and his engagement with theories of eugenics.

This search for solutions, for paradigms of thought and models for living continued into the poet’s old age, but it took more conventional forms in his volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). Here we find many elegies – to dead friends, to past times and to other, more unified eras, such as the 18th century, from which Yeats took his chief model, Jonathan Swift, whom he wished to emulate as poet–statesman. Indeed, he was pursuing that ideal in his role as a senator in the new Irish Free State. He devoted much energy to his work in the new senate, which first sat on 11 December 1922 and of which he was a member until 1928. During 1923, for instance, he spoke 19 times on such subjects as law enforcement, manuscripts, the Lane pictures, film censorship and Irish, and over the years he continued to contribute on issues such as partition, divorce and the new coinage. In 1922 the University of Dublin conferred an honorary doctorate on him and he was similarly honoured by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1931 and 1933, respectively. But the crowning international recognition was the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.





In the late 1920s and early 1930s Yeats experienced a number of health problems and the family began to spend more time in the sunnier regions of southern Europe. The house at 82 Merrion Square, Dublin, was sold and exchanged for a flat in Fitzwilliam Square. In 1933 Yeats took himself out of the city altogether when the family took a long lease on a house, Riversdale, in Rathfarnham, 'just too far from Dublin to go there without good reason and too far, I hope, for most interviewers and the less determined travelling bores' (see 'An Acre of Grass'.) But he continued to write, indeed with renewed vigour, and *New Poems* was published in 1938. His last public appearance was at the Abbey Theatre in August 1938. He died on 28 January 1939 at Roquebrune in the south of France; in 1948 his body was reinterred, as he had wished, in Drumcliff churchyard in Co. Sligo.

Principal Volumes of Poetry

Poems in this selection

The Wanderings of Oisín (1889)

Crossways (1889)

The Rose (1893) – 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'

The Wind Among the Reeds (1899)

The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910)

Responsibilities (1914) – 'September 1913'

The Wild Swans at Coole (1917; second edition 1919) – 'The Wild Swans at Coole', 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'

Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921) – 'Easter 1916', 'The Second Coming'

The Tower (1928) – 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'

The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) – 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', 'Swift's Epitaph'

A Full Moon in March (1935)

New Poems (1938) – 'An Acre of Grass'

Last Poems (1939) – 'Under Ben Bulbin', 'Politics'





THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE

Background

This poem was written in 1888 when Yeats was living in London, where he was unhappy and homesick for Ireland. A somewhat altered version was first published in the *National Observer* in December 1890 to much acclaim; this really was the poem that first made Yeats's name. It is included in the collection *The Rose* (1893). Yeats had been greatly influenced by the vision of self-sufficiency in nature found in Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden* (1854), which his father had read to him, and he too dreamed of living alone in nature in a quest for wisdom. This was a theme he explored not just in verse, but also in his prose writings, an indication of the pervasive autobiographical nature of the quest. For instance, there are close similarities between this poem and the scenario in *John Sherman*, a novel Yeats had written in 1887–88, in which a young Sligo man who had left home in search of a fortune and is now homesick in London recalls an island on a lake where he used to pick blackberries. He dreams of returning there, building a wooden hut and listening to the ripple of the water.

Yeats's vision and quest

The vision of self-sufficiency in nature obviously pervades this whole poem. However unlikely a scene, it shows the poet as rustic woodsman and gardener, writing in the first person, actually planning to build a simple, crude dwelling and attempting agricultural self-sufficiency. 'Clay and wattles' were the traditional rural building materials in centuries past. The hive and the bees

suggest the simple sweetness and richness of life as well as providing a natural musical ambience. Altogether the vision is one of idyllic rural primitiveness with a hint of the hermit's ascetic: a life 'alone in the bee-loud glade'. This is a romantic view of the human being in perfect harmony with nature, at one with its sights and sounds. It is an alluring picture, sensual even, where the feminised morning is draped in veils. But there is also a strange, slightly unreal quality about it. The light is different: noon is a 'purple glow'. The archaic language in the expression of 'midnight's all a glimmer' reinforces the strange, even magical nature of the atmosphere.

For representative sounds, Yeats chooses the simple, rhythmic, calming sound of lake water lapping and also the repetitive, rustic sounds of the cricket on the hearth, a common feature of rural stories and tales. Co. Sligo is one of the few places in the country that provides a year-round habitat for the linnet, a small, unspectacular bird that likes rough hillsides and uncultivated lands near the sea. With accurate recall, Yeats is celebrating the indigenous wildlife of the area.

His vision of happiness is a romantic one – a simple, unsophisticated lifestyle in an unspoiled habitat, surrounded by the sights and music of nature. It is a picture full of the rich textures of colour, sound and movement, in total contrast to his present environment, that of the cold, colourless and lifeless 'pavements grey'. So in one sense the poem can be read as an expression of Yeats's romanticised and nostalgic yearning for his native countryside. But it is also more than this, for it is no frivolous weekend in the woods that he is planning: rather, it is a





quest for wisdom, for deep, eternal truths – an attempt to see into the heart of things. This is the sentiment that comes across in the first line. The sound of water, one of the essential elements and a life force, haunts him and seems to suggest that only in nature will he find the truths of the heart. The ambiguity about whose heart is in question here further strengthens the connection between the poet's heart and the heart of the earth. This is a move he feels compelled to make, a compulsion. We can sense the strength of his resolve in the verbs 'I will arise' and 'I shall have'. But the biblical allusions underlying this expose even more complex layers of compulsion. The repeated 'I will arise' echoes the words of the Prodigal Son, who has wasted his inheritance, led a profligate few years in exile and finally resolves to go home: 'I will arise and go to my father.' So the words of the poem carry great unhappiness, a sense of failure and loss, the loneliness of exile and separation and perhaps even a feeling of guilt or remorse. The phrase 'always night and day' could also be a biblical allusion. St Mark's gospel (5: 5) refers to a man possessed by an evil spirit who was freed from his torment by Christ: 'Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones.' This allusion, if intended, hints at a somewhat manic compulsion and mental and spiritual turmoil, or at the very least a great discontent.

The music of the verse

The poet's feelings of unease and discontent and of being driven to take this course of action are hidden by the musical quality of the verse. Apart from the obvious repetitions of the end-rhymes in alternate lines, there are subtle musical vowel repetitions

throughout the poem. For example, there is a profusion of long *i* sounds in the first stanza ('I', 'arise', 'Nine', 'I', 'hive') and a repetition of long *o* and *a* sounds in the final stanza ('go', 'low', 'shore', 'roadway', 'core' and 'day', 'lake', 'pavements', 'grey'). The repetition, particularly of long broad vowels, gives this a languidness and soporific calmness that belies the tension at the heart of it.

Issues

Among the issues that preoccupy the poet here, we might emphasise:

- The yearning for self-sufficiency in natural surroundings
- The search for truth, wisdom and peace
- The poet's discontent, which impels him on this quest.





SEPTEMBER 1913

Background

This poem was written in September 1913 and was first published on 8 September in the *Irish Times*, where it was entitled 'Romance in Ireland (on reading much of the correspondence against the Art Gallery)'. It was included in the volume *Responsibilities* (1914) under its present title.

Yeats and politics: Some of his views on society

At one level of reading this is just a political poem – an angry poetical response to a particular event in which Yeats was passionately involved. Sir Hugh Lane, a wealthy art collector (and Lady Gregory's nephew), had presented a unique collection of modern paintings to the city of Dublin, with the proviso that the city build a suitable gallery to house them. There were various suggestions for building a gallery, such as one on a bridge over the River Liffey, but the entire project became entangled in increasingly bitter public disputes about the location, the architecture and particularly the cost. Yeats was furious about what seemed a mean-spirited, penny-pinching and anti-cultural response to Lane's generous offer. The opponents of the project drew attention to the poverty and slum living conditions that many Dubliners endured at the time and accused the proponents of the gallery of putting art before bread and also of an elitist arrogance typical of the Ascendancy class.

The controversy developed strong overtones of class conflict and set Yeats thinking about the recent changes in Irish society.

The make-up of society, the need for particular kinds of people in a cultured society and the responsibilities of particular classes were issues that had long preoccupied Yeats. In 1907, on the death of the old Fenian John O'Leary, Yeats wrote an essay entitled 'Poetry and Tradition' in which he talks about the ideals that he and O'Leary had discussed and shared. Though the primary emphasis in the essay is on poetry and culture, the views reflect Yeats's notions of the ideal society. Three types of men have made all beautiful things: aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life; countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear; and artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. All these look backward to a long tradition, for, being without fear, they have held to whatever pleases them. Thus, for Yeats, the really important constituents of society were the aristocracy, country people and artists.

It should not surprise us that Yeats was bitterly disillusioned with the changes in society that were proceeding apace from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century changes in land ownership hastened the demise of the aristocracy and a new upper and lower middle class emerged. Yeats saw only a new Ireland of small shopkeepers, clerks and traders, and it is at this section of the new society that he directs his wrath in the poem. In the main he makes two accusations. First, their only preoccupations are making money and practising religion, as he ironically says: 'For men were born to pray and save'. They are a money-grubbing and fearful people, tyrannised by their





religion. Yeats is revolted by this combination of materialism and religious serfdom; it is the antithesis of his Renaissance model of a cultured society where art and literature are valued. Second, these small-minded, self-regarding, blinkered people are incapable of understanding the generosity of spirit and the self-sacrifice that motivated the patriots of old. Lines 25–30 can be read in this way. The selfless patriotism of the heroes of the past would now be misinterpreted by this unenlightened generation as love-crazed emotion merely to impress a woman:

*You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son'*

The present generation and society are contrasted, most unfavourably, with previous generations. It is worth exploring Yeats's notion of the heroic past and his view of the influential figures of romantic Ireland. They were all political rebels, risk-takers who tried and failed gloriously to free Ireland. They all were men of action, soldiers who willingly gave liberty or life for the cause: 'They weighed so lightly what they gave'. They were hugely energetic, forceful characters:

*They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray*

In particular, Yeats seems to admire their extraordinary selflessness and courage, their almost manic bravery: 'All that delirium of the brave'. Yeats's thinking accommodated two sometimes conflicting notions of the heroic: the hero as representative leader of a people and the hero as a solitary figure, often even in opposition to the people. There are elements

of both notions here. There are some hints of their popular influence ('The names that stilled your childish play') and perhaps also in their willing sacrifice ('all that blood was shed'). But the overwhelming impression is that of the solitary figure, apart, different: 'they were of a different kind'; 'the wild geese spread/The grey wing upon every tide'; 'those exiles as they were/In all their loneliness and pain'. And it is this difference that gives them status in the poem. By implication, the present generation lack their qualities of nobility, courage, selflessness and self-sacrifice for an ideal.

Tone

This poem is built on contrast – an extreme, somewhat simplistic contrast between a present and a past generation, or what Yeats sees as representative figures from these generations. He idolises the heroic past in tones of reverence and awe. There is a suggestion of their strange power in the 'names that stilled your childish play' and in the reference to their going 'about the world like wind'. He empathises with their loneliness and pain and inevitable fate: 'But little time had they to pray':

*For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?*

His undoubted admiration for their selfless courage is carried in 'They weighed so lightly what they gave' and in 'All that delirium of the brave'. In contrast, the new middle class is lampooned in the caricature of the shopkeeper as a kind of subhuman creature, fumbling, shivering and certainly not capable of understanding more noble motives. The tone of savage mockery is often





achieved by the use of irony – for example, the perverse irony of ‘What need you, being come to sense’ – or the ironic statement of philosophy, ‘For men were born to pray and save’. The bitter contempt is hammered home through the repetition of ‘For this ... for this ... for this’. The sneer of disdain rings through these lines.

Altogether, this is a poem exhibiting passionate but contrasting emotions.

Themes and issues

- Bitter disillusion with recent social changes
- Contempt for the perceived materialism and religious serfdom of the new middle class of businesspeople
- Concern for the well-being of a cultured society; concern for its lack of altruistic principles and generosity of spirit
- A particular view of Irish history as a history of courageous failure in the struggle for independence
- A nostalgic, romanticised view of Irish history
- Thoughts on patriotism and the notion of the heroic.





THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

Background

This poem was written in 1916 and first published in the *Little Review* in 1917 and it is the title poem of the volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917).

The poem is structured as a retrospection by Yeats as he records how his life has changed since he first stayed at Coole Park during the summer and autumn of 1897 ('The nineteenth autumn'). It is important to be aware that this is an artistic construction, because in reality his state of mind had changed very little. Though he chooses to say that he was more carefree ('Trode with a lighter tread') at that earlier period, probably for aesthetic purposes and to set up a contrast, he had actually been in a state of mental and nervous exhaustion during that visit in 1897. His love affair with Diana Vernon had just ended. He was 'tortured with sexual desire and disappointed love', and, as his diaries reveal, 'It would have been a relief to have screamed aloud.'

In the summer of 1916, the year the poem was written, Yeats went to France to see Maud Gonne, the great, omnipresent, passionate love of his life for the previous quarter of a century. Her husband, Major John MacBride, had been shot for his part in the Easter Rising. She was working as a volunteer nurse with the war wounded and Yeats once again proposed marriage to her. On her refusing for the last time he contemplated the possibility of marriage with her adopted daughter, Iseult. Possibly it was this turmoil and the disparity in their ages that set him thinking of

time, age and immortality, the death of love or the possibility of its being eternal. But this is one instance where a biographical approach does not help very much, as the poet orders and alters events and ideals to suit an artistic construction rather than any actual reality.

When Iseult finally refused him in 1917, he married Georgina Hyde-Lees and bought a tower house, Thoor Ballylee, not far from Coole in Co. Galway.

Themes and issues

This poem, as Yeats's literary biographer Terence Brown says, 'sets a mood of autumnal introspection'. In a certain sense it is quite a personal poem, in which Yeats, at 51, unmarried and alone despite many passionate love affairs, takes stock of his emotional situation. Primarily he laments the loss of youth, passion and love. He regrets the loss of his carefree youth ('Trode with a lighter tread'), however inaccurate this nostalgia is. Now his 'heart is sore'; he is a man broken-hearted, discontented, emotionally unsatisfied. He no longer has what the swans appear to have – youthful passion.

Unwearied still, lover by lover ...

Passion or conquest ...

Attend upon them still.

He does not have unchanging or constant love, while 'Their hearts have not grown old'. Above all else, the poet seems to resent the loss of passionate love in his life; we cannot mistake this yearning in the many references to hearts, lovers, passion and conquests.





The loss of love is just one aspect of Yeats's general sense of regret here, which concerns ageing and the passage of time. Indeed, he seems to have been ambushed by time – 'The nineteenth autumn has come upon me' – and is forced to accept that 'All's changed'. His awareness of this and his resentment are accentuated by the seeming immortality of the swans: 'Their hearts have not grown old'. By implication, we sense the poet's yearning for changelessness, for immortality.

Yet another kind of loss is hinted at here: the possible loss or diminution of the poetic gift, insight or vision. Perhaps that is what he fears at the end of the poem in that final plaintive image: that the poetic sight or vision will have deserted him and passed to others. For him, the swans are in some way a manifestation of his poetic vision. We can see that he explores:

- The personal loss of youth, passion and love
- The consequences of ageing
- The passage of time and the yearning for changelessness and immortality
- The loss of poetic power and vision – the sense of failure

Imagery and symbolism

The entire poem is structured around the swans, real and symbolic, which have particular significance because they appear to have defied time for the past nineteen years. They give the illusion of immortality: 'Unwearing still ... Passion or conquest ... attend upon them still'. Our rational mind tells us that of course they may not be exactly the same swans, but the poet

glosses over and even builds further on this poetic illusion. He concentrates our attention on the patterns they establish, patterns that will survive even though they may die. These 'great broken rings', the spiral imagery they create, are similar to the gyres or cones of time that Yeats saw as the cyclical pattern behind all things, time and eternity. So there is a hint of the eternal about the spiral imagery the swans establish. In addition, they link the water to the sky, link earth and heaven, and so in a way they are both mortal and immortal. The swans provide an exciting, vibrant, multilayered symbolism, but they are also hauntingly and accurately described as real creatures. The real power and energy of the movement is evoked by the breathless enjambment of the lines and by the use of sinuous and muscular verbs and adverbs:

*All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.*

The swan imagery carries great resonances and symbolic value in the poem, but there are also other images that add to the richness of texture. The 'woodland paths' can be either the straight paths of the intellect or the winding paths of intuition. Whatever symbolic weight they carry, they are dry here, in keeping with the themes – lack of passion and creativity. The trees, a great symbol of permanence for Yeats, are in the ageing cycle of their lives, as is the poet.

Three of the four symbolic elements are used in the poem: earth, air and water. Only fire is not used – indeed, it is conspicuously absent. The suggestion is that this is more than just a poem, that





it carries elements of magical divination. Even the musical image ‘The bell-beat of their wings above my head’ reinforces this sense of the magical. And of course Yeats believed in and practised magic. Our sense of this is strengthened further by an exploration of the degree of patterning in the poem. Notice how the swans on the lake take to the air and finish by drifting on the still water again – creating a perfect round or circular pattern. Consider the pattern of antitheses in the poem – between the swans and the speaker and between the poet now and the poet nineteen years ago. And as the critic Donald Stauffer points out, the essential pattern is a contrast of moods, something experienced only by humans. The essential contrast in the poem is that between transient humanity and eternity.

All in all, there is a richness of imagery and symbolism here that can be enjoyed and appreciated at many levels.

Structure

There is a gradual opening out of both the voice and the vista as this poem progresses. Stanza 1 just paints the picture, unemotionally and accurately, as any ornithologist or naturalist might do. From this very anchored and particular opening, we go to the poet’s personal reminiscences in the second and third stanzas before moving on to more generalised speculative philosophising in the fourth stanza. The final stanza opens up unanswerable questions, speculating on the future, leaving us with the possibility of a completely empty final scene, a blank canvas. The future is as unclear and ungraspable as that final question – incidentally, the only question in the poem.

The poem moves from the particular to the general and then to the entirely speculative. Beneath the tranquillity of the imagery, the languidness of language and the sounds of the words, the ideas of the poem are tightly linked and structured. Notice how images or ideas are picked up from one stanza to the next, so that the stanzas are chain-linked. The first stanza ends with the enumeration of ‘nine-and-fifty swans’ and the second stanza takes up the count:

*The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;*

Stanzas 2 and 3 are linked by the poet’s looking: ‘I saw ... I have looked’. At the end of stanza 3 he remembers or fancies his carefree ‘lighter tread’ of nineteen years earlier. Stanza 4 opens with the still ‘Unwearing’ creatures.

The fifth stanza picks up phonetically on the word ‘still’, and though semantically different, it provides a phonic linkage. There is of course the imagery link too, where swans paddling ‘in the cold/Companionable streams’ of the fourth stanza are picked up in the fifth stanza as they ‘drift on the still water’.





AN IRISH AIRMAN FORESEES HIS DEATH

Background

This poem was one of a number written by the poet for Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son, including 'Shepherd and Goatherd' and 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'. Yeats saw Gregory as an educated aristocrat and all-round Renaissance man ('Soldier, scholar, horseman, he'). He was also an energetic boxer and hunter and a painter who designed sets for Yeats's own plays. The poem was written in 1918 and first published in the second edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919).

A reading of the poem

At one obvious level of reading, this is a type of elegy in memory of the dead man. But it is a variation on the form in that it is structured as a monologue by the dead man rather than the more usual direct lament by a poet praising the person's good qualities and showing how much he is missed, and so on.

It makes an interesting contribution to war poetry in its attempt to chart the motivation and psychological state of the volunteer. The reader is immediately struck not only by the fatalism – he knows his death is imminent – but also by the bleakness of his outlook on life, his disenchantment with living, despite his privileged background:

*The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind*

In contrast, the war seemed like an adventure, an 'impulse of delight', a 'tumult in the clouds'. The poem captures the excitement and exhilaration felt by many a volunteer. As Ulick O'Connor put it (in *The Yeats Companion*, 1990), 'There can seldom have been a better summing up of the sense of elation which the freedom to roam the uncharted skies brought to the young men of Gregory's pre-1914 generation.'

Yet the decision to volunteer was not a heady, emotional one. The poem stresses the thought and calculation brought to the decision. The concept of balance is repeatedly stressed:

*I balanced all, brought all to mind ...
In balance with this life, this death.*

He was not carried away by the emotion of enlistment meetings ('Nor public men, nor cheering crowds'). He was not moved by any sense of 'duty' or patriotism; neither was there conscription in Ireland ('Nor law, nor duty bade me fight'). These 'nor – nor' negatives of the rejected motives are balanced against the excitement of action. The general picture is of a young man who has chosen, after careful consideration, this path of action – almost, indeed, chosen his death.

This heavy sense of fatalism is most obvious in the opening lines. But there is never a sense in which this fatalism is merely weak surrender or opting out. He accepts his fate and he goes consenting to his death, but more like one of Homer's heroes. Yeats gives Gregory Homeric stature by allowing him to choose a heroic death, and this gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless





conflict. The airman feels none of the great passions of war, neither patriotic love nor hatred of the foe:

*Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love*

Further, he does not think the war will make a whit of difference to his own countrymen:

*No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.*

But it is the self-sacrificing death, 'this death' freely chosen, that raises the young man above the events of his time and confers particular significance on him. The awareness of impending death also brings this moment of insight, this clearness of vision that allowed him to evaluate his past life and contemplate a possible future as a country landowner – all of which he rejects for the 'tumult' of action.

As a war poem, this is an interesting, personal, even intimate approach, charting the thoughts and motivation of this young man. But it has a more general aspect too. Gregory may be seen as representative of all those young men of talent who were cheated of their promise by the slaughter of the First World War.

We have already mentioned that Yeats saw Gregory as the all-round Renaissance man – in other words, an educated man and person of culture as well as a man of action. Yeats had felt that the 'lonely impulse of delight' was what differentiated the artist from others, that the artistic impulse was essentially lonely and solitary. Here we see this artistic impulse motivating a man of

action, who is essentially instinctive rather than intellectual. Yeats felt that the impulse was sometimes hampered in the artist, who often thought too much. The later Yeats began to champion the non-intellectual hero and the instinctive man; the sportsman and the adventurer are given the status of mythic figures. The airman Gregory is essentially a solitary figure, like other mythic figures created by Yeats, such as the 'Fisherman'.

Some critics read this poem as a classic statement of Anglo-Irishness as Yeats saw it. In later life Yeats used to talk about the 'Anglo-Irish solitude'. Is there a sense here of not quite fully belonging to either side, of being neither fully committed English nor unreservedly Irish? There is certainly a sense of emotional distance on the part of the subject, both from those he guards and those he fights. Though he has an affinity with 'Kiltartan's poor' ('My countrymen'), he is aware that the war and his involvement in it will have no impact on their lives. In general, the feeling one gets is of some detachment from the events in which he participates, and this could be read as a metaphor for 'Anglo-Irish solitude'.





EASTER 1916

Background

On Monday, 24 April 1916, a force of about 700 members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army took over the centre of Dublin in a military revolution and held out for six days against the British army. At first the rising did not receive widespread support, but the British military authorities regarded it as high treason in a time of war, and the subsequent systematic executions of fifteen of the leaders between 3 and 12 May brought a wave of public sympathy and created heroes and martyrs for the republican cause. Though Yeats's poem was finished by September 1916 and a number of copies had been printed privately, it was not published until October 1920, when it appeared in the *New Statesman*. It is included in the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921).

The national question: Yeats's political views

Yeats spent a good deal of his time in England during his early life, but he felt that the English understanding of the Irish was stereotypical and condescending. One of his main ambitions was to help change Ireland's view of itself through a revival of its unique cultural identity. He had denounced the English government of Ireland and his refusal of a knighthood in 1915 was a statement of his political stance. Yet his view did not prevent him from living there, and indeed he was in England when the Easter Rising took place.

This ambiguity was further complicated by Yeats's arrogant and scathing dismissal of the current generation of Irish people

as ignoble, self-focused, materialistic and priest controlled, totally incapable of the idealism or courage necessary for heroic leadership and personal sacrifice. He had expressed these views very trenchantly in 'September 1913'.

The Rising took Yeats by surprise and blew some serious holes in his thinking. First, he now had to rethink his public stance and views on the new Irish middle class. These people had been prepared to give their lives for an ideal. Yeats had been quite wrong. Second, though he was disgusted, like most people, at the savagery of the executions, he began to realise that the establishment's brutality had created martyrs and had transformed ordinary men into patriots with a strange new unchallengeable power. Perhaps Pearse's idea of a blood sacrifice was correct. Yeats had to rethink the place and value of revolutionary determination. Thus, Yeats had to work out how this cataclysmic change had occurred in Irish society – 'All changed, changed utterly'.

A reading of the poem

Though on the surface it may not appear to be a questioning poem, this work is really an attempt to answer or clarify a great number of questions that the 1916 Rising stirred up in Yeats's mind, an attempt to come to terms with:

- How everything had changed.
- How wrong he had been.
- How ordinary people had been changed into heroes.
- The deep structure of change in society, the mysterious process, a kind of fate that directed and powered change.





(Terence Brown puts it eloquently: 'It seeks to penetrate beneath the appearance of history to comprehend the mysteries of destiny.')

- The place and functioning of revolutionary violence in the process.
- The change in his own position: how to resolve his own complex and contradictory feelings towards this violent process.

Yeats faced the diplomatic difficulty of having to recant his views on Irish society honestly and generously in the first section of this poem. Technically he achieved this by structuring the poem as a palinode, or recantation of his opinions in the earlier 'September 1913'. Recreating the drab, unexciting milieu of pre-revolution evenings, the poet acknowledges his own blindness and failure to engage with these people in any depth:

*I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered a while and said
Polite meaningless words*

He confesses to his own unpleasant, condescending mockery ('a mocking tale or a gibe') and his belief that all the pre-1916 organising was mere comical posturing:

*Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn*

He includes himself ('they and I') in this attempt at identification.

He spends the second section looking again at these people he knew, as he needs to understand how they have changed. They are still the flawed characters he remembers: Constance Markiewicz wasted her time in misplaced volunteer work ('ignorant goodwill') and became a shrill fanatic ('nights in argument ... voice grew shrill'); he thought MacBride was a 'drunken, vainglorious lout' who 'had done most bitter wrong' to Maud Gonne and Iseult. These are ordinary, fallible, flawed and unlikely heroes.

Furthermore, the impression Yeats perceives is not one of energetically active heroes, but rather the passive recipients of this mysterious change. MacDonagh 'might have won fame in the end'. MacBride 'has resigned his part/In the casual comedy'. This smacks of an unknown actor giving up his part in an inconsequential work. The impression given is of relatively insignificant lives, out of which MacBride 'has been changed in his turn'. Note the passive voice: the change was effected on him rather than by something he did, and it happened 'in his turn'. He waited his turn – perhaps a reference to the executions. Is Yeats saying that it was the executions that effected this change, transformed everyone utterly, and gave birth to this 'terrible beauty'? That it was not due to the nature or any action of heroes?

Another aspect of these patriots to which Yeats refers is their feminine qualities. 'What voice more sweet' than Constance Gore-Booth's (in younger days)? MacDonagh's thought is 'daring and sweet'. Even MacBride has his passive side. So there is a sensitivity about these people that balances their more aggressive and masculine qualities, also referred to.





It is this softer, feminine quality in man and woman that is destroyed by fanaticism, something Yeats explores in the third and fourth stanzas. But first it is worth noticing the feminine aspect of the new order. This utter transformation of the social and historical reality is imagined as a new birth, but Yeats is so disturbed and confused by it that he can only describe it in paradoxical terms as a 'terrible beauty' – something that is partly feminine, aesthetically pleasing, sexually alluring even, but which also carries suggestions of terror and of destructive power. This magnificent image carries all Yeats's confusions and contradictory feelings about the dramatic change.

In the third stanza he explores how change is effected. Only a stone, usually taken as a metaphor for the fanatical heart, can change or trouble the course of a stream, and it can achieve this only at a price. The heart will lose its humanness: 'Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart.' In the 1909 *Journals*, Yeats had already written about the effects of political fanaticism on Maud Gonne, in metaphors akin to those used here:

Women, because the main event of their lives has been a giving of themselves, give themselves to an opinion as if it were some terrible stone doll ... They grow cruel, as if in defence of lover or child and all this is done for something other than human life. At last the opinion becomes so much a part of them that it is as though a part of their flesh becomes, as it were, stone, and much of their being passes out of life.

In this third stanza Yeats is exploring the dangers of fanatical devotion to a cause or ideal, and he represents this metaphorically as the conflicting forces between a stone and a stream. The 'living stream' is marvellously evoked. It is a picture of constant change, the flux of natural life and bursting with energy. The seasons are changing 'Through summer and winter'; the skies change 'From cloud to tumbling cloud'; all is life and regeneration, as 'hens to moor-cocks call'. It is full of transient animal and human appearances, as they slide or plash or dive. And all this activity happens 'Minute by minute'. Against this stream of ever-changing energy and life is set the unmoving stone, the fanatical heart. It is not difficult to conclude that the weight of the poet's sentiment is with the 'living stream' rather than the unmoving stone. And yet out of this confrontation is born the 'terrible beauty'.

There is no easy answer to the conflicts posed by the poet, and indeed he seems to weary of the dialogue and of this dialectic in the fourth stanza. Having concluded that prolonged devotion to an ideal is dehumanising – 'Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart' – he seems to accept the necessity of it and at the same time wishes for an end in that sighing plea: 'O when may it suffice?'

The first seventeen lines of stanza 4 are structured rhetorical questions (questions that cannot be answered) thereby revealing the poet's uncertainties about the validity of the entire process of revolution and change. There is a shocked vulnerability about the poetic voice here, a realisation of helplessness as all the doubts flood in with the questions: Are they really dead? Was it necessary if England intended to grant home rule after the war? What if they





were just confused and bewildered by an excess of patriotism? There is an awareness that some things cannot be answered, that some of this mysterious dynamic of change cannot be understood – ‘That is Heaven’s part’. And the poet adopts a soothing mother’s voice and persona, murmuring ‘As a mother names her child’.

But then he seems to shake off the uncertain and shocked voice and finds a new assurance for that very definite, confident ending. Why is this? Terence Brown believes it has to do with the magical significance of the poem, deliberately created by Yeats. He suggests that the poem is a ‘numerological artefact’, based on the date when the rising began: 24 April 1916. There are four movements or sections, with the following numbers of lines in each: 16, 24, 16, 24. It is also suggested that Yeats intended this to be a verse of power, a magical recitation, seen in, for example, ‘I number him in the song’; ‘I write it out in a verse’. Certainly there is a surge of powerful assurance in those final lines, whether we read them as a litany of respectful remembrance or an occult incantation:

*I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*





THE SECOND COMING

Background

This poem was finished in January 1919 against a background of great political upheaval in Europe: the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires and uprisings and revolution in Germany and Russia. The events in Europe are most likely to have prompted the speculation that 'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world', but as the poem was not published for 22 months, in the *Dial* of November 1920, it came to be read as a reaction to the atrocities of the War of Independence in Ireland. It is included in the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921).

Yeats's occult philosophy and theories of history

Yeats was deeply interested in the patterns of history. He was also engaged in the study and practice of the occult and maintained regular contact with the spirits. These 'spirit communicators' helped him develop a cyclical theory of change in history, which is outlined in *A Vision* (1925). He used geometrical forms to express abstract ideas, and the concept of gyres, or cones, representing time zones is one of these. In this poem the reference is to a single gyre or inverted cone, but the full representation of the gyres consists of two interpenetrating cones expanding and contracting on a single axis. These represent the contrary forces, always changing, that determine the character of a person or the culture of a particular phase in history. There are particularly significant moments both for individuals and in historical time when the dominant influence passes from one gyre to its contrary.

In history, he believed, this can happen every 2,000 years. Hence the reference to 'twenty centuries of stony sleep' that preceded the Christian era, which is now waning and giving way to a new and anti-thetical era. In its Christian interpretation, the 'Second Coming' refers to the prediction of the second coming of Christ; in Yeats's occult and magical philosophy it might also refer to the second birth of the Avatar or great antithetical spirit, which Yeats and his wife felt certain would be reincarnated as their baby son, whose birth was imminent. In fact, the child turned out to be a girl, dashing that theory. In this poem the hideous 'rough beast' that 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born' is suggestive of the Anti-Christ, that legendary personal opponent of Christ and his kingdom expected to appear before the end of the world. See, for example, the Book of Revelations (Chapter 13) on the portents for the end of the world:

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?'





A reading of the poem

This poem reflects Yeats's interest in historical change and his real fear that civilisation would break down and be replaced by an anti-civilisation or an era of anarchy. This was sparked off in part by his disgust and revulsion at what was happening in European politics and history around this time (1919). But as we have seen, he was also preoccupied with patterns in history and immersed himself in the occult, with signs, portents, astrological charts and spirit communicators, and had developed a cyclical theory of change in history, which was represented graphically by the gyre symbol. This poem deals with the turbulence of historical change, but what is particularly exciting is the enormous perspective that the poet takes. Time is not counted in years or decades but in millennia, and it is this vast perspective that is both exhilarating and terrifying.

First stanza

Here, Yeats explores the break-up of civilisation in metaphorical language. The falcon, that trained bird of prey, 'cannot hear the falconer' and is reverting to its wild state. The falconer has also been interpreted as a representation of Christ, so the image has been read as representing the movement of civilisation away from Christ. This dissipation is happening within the framework of its allotted time span, at a point within the gyre representing the present. Yeats is bringing a critical philosophical viewpoint to bear on the social and political structures. He suggests that there is failure at the very heart of society, presumably in human beings themselves: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. Instead of clear-sighted vision and forward progress, there is this

confusing circular movement, an out-of-control centrifugal force that threatens to send everything spinning away in disorder. In this chaos, human beings are changing, becoming ignoble and destroying innocence: 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned'. People either have no convictions at all or are irrationally and passionately committed to causes; they have become either cynics or fanatics:

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

The first stanza embodies this very tension in its structure. Consider how the ideas are set up as opposites: falcon – falconer; centre – fall apart; indifference – intensity; innocence – anarchy. This polar oppositional tension is seen in the terrifying image of the 'blood-dimmed tide ... loosed ... innocence is drowned'. This sinister image has connotations of the great flood and its destruction of the world, but might also suggest a ruthless cleansing or purging. The repetition of 'loosed upon' and 'loosed' might suggest a savage wild animal, or at the very least the dogs of war. The circular imagery creates a sense of continuous swirling movement. Look at the repetition of *-ing*: 'Turning', 'turning', 'widening'. There is a sense of a world out of control, of inevitable disaster.

It is the force of the imagery that carries the ideas in this stanza. Consider the falconry image. This was the pastime of kings and lords, so the image carries associations of an aristocratic life, civilised living, affluence. We know how much Yeats valued civilised living. Falconry was a 'noble' pastime, requiring skill and patience. Now this trained bird of prey is reverting to its wild





state – a metaphor for the destruction of civilised living. It would also carry religious overtones and signal the breakdown of ordered religious systems. The falcon has also been interpreted as symbolic of the active or intellectual mind, so the breakdown of intellectual order might be signalled as well. Either way, the image suggests dissolution in a number of different spheres and levels.

The second graphic image, of the ‘blood-dimmed tide’, has already been explored for its layers of suggestiveness. Its general impact is powerful, both visually and intellectually: innocence is drowned in a sea of blood. This is the ultimate nihilism, a world without justice, reason or order. Note Yeats’s emphasis on the ‘ceremony’ of innocence. The rituals of civilised living will also be destroyed, of course.

The final image of the stanza, though somewhat ill defined, is a political one, suggesting that fanatical people now have all the influence and are in power. The general impact of the imagery is one of frightening and irrational disorder and break-up in life and society.

Second stanza

Yeats begins by casting around for a reason for the breakdown of civilisation, and the possibility of a second coming, together with the end of the world, suggests itself as the only one great enough to cause this: ‘Surely the Second Coming is at hand’. But it turns out not to be the Second Coming of Christ as foretold in the Gospels, but rather the emergence of the Anti-Christ that Yeats imagines, an Anti-Christ who embodies the absolute reverse of

the Christian era, which is now drawing to its end in the gyre of time. This ‘rough beast’, a nightmare symbol of the coming times, signals the end of this era, with its values and order.

Again, the image of this ‘rough beast’ carries all the ideas about the new era. It is a ‘vast image’, overwhelming and troubling. It is a horrific hybrid of human and animal, suggesting unnatural times, such as foretold in the Book of Revelations. Its blank gaze suggests no intelligent sight or understanding; indeed, it is as ‘pitiless as the sun’, incapable of empathy or feeling. The qualities it conjures up are gracelessness and brutishness: ‘moving its slow thighs ... Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born’. The final paradox is explained by the fact that its era has already begun, overlapping with the demise of the Christian era, so it is moving into position to initiate the new age or to be born. The paradox further emphasises the antithetical nature of the coming age: how totally contradictory or opposite it is. There is something blasphemously shocking in the idea of the beast being born at Bethlehem. The nugget of insight gained by the poet out of this horrific vision concerns the nature of time and changing eras. He realises that eras have come and gone before and that the advent of the Christian era must have been as troubling to the previous age:

... now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle





SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

Background

This poem was written sometime in the autumn of 1926 and is the opening poem in the collection *The Tower* (1928).

A reading of the poem

Writing for a radio programme in 1931, Yeats outlined some of the preoccupations of his poetry at that time, in particular the spiritual quest of 'Sailing to Byzantium':

Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul [an expression meaning to prepare for death], and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium'. When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells and making the jewelled crosiers of the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city.

This poem is structured, as he says, in the shape of a journey – more of a quest, really – with a tightly argued personal commentary by the poet. The main theme surfaces immediately in the first stanza. With that strong, declamatory opening he renounces the world of the senses for that of the spirit and the intellect, the timeless:

*That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms*

Notice the perspective ('That'): he has already departed and is looking back, not without a little nostalgic yearning for the sensuality of youth. The sensual imagery of lovers and the teeming rich life of trees and seas, the athletic vigour of the hyphenated words ('The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas') and the sensual *f* and *s* sounds of 'Fish, flesh, or fowl' – all used to describe the cycle of life in the flesh – would strongly suggest that he does not renounce it easily. Indeed, this ambiguity is carried in the paradox of 'Those dying generations', with its linking of death and regeneration.

The importance of the spirit is re-emphasised in the second stanza as the poet asserts that it is the soul that gives meaning to a person: 'An aged man is but a paltry thing ... unless/Soul clap its hands and sing'. Art enriches the soul, teaches it to sing: 'studying/Monuments of its own magnificence', i.e. works of art inspired by the spirit. Byzantium, as a centre of religion, philosophy and learning and also of a highly formalised art, is the ideal destination for the intellectual and spiritual person. In *A Vision* (1925), Yeats wrote about the harmoniousness of life in fifth-century Byzantium: 'I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one.' He had visited Ravenna in 1907 and when he composed the third stanza he probably had in mind a mosaic on the wall of *Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo* showing martyrs being burned in a fire.





Addressing these sages or martyrs directly in the third stanza, he entreats them to traverse history in the gyre of time, come to him and teach his soul to sing. He wants them to ‘make’ his soul, as he said, to purify it, separate it from emotions and desires and help it transcend the ageing physical body:

*Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is*

These lines betray a seriously troubled state of mind. Central to the conflict is a dualist view of the human being as composed of two radically different and warring elements: body, and soul or spirit. Yeats values one element – the soul – imaged as singer and bird, but is filled with self-disgust and loathing for his ageing body, imaged as a dying animal, not even dignified as human, that has entrapped the soul.

This confusion is evident even in the ambiguity of language in, for example, ‘sick with desire’. Is he sick because of the desires of the flesh he cannot shake off or does the desire refer to his spiritual aspiration, which continues to elude him? This acute existential conflict has led to a loss of spiritual identity: ‘It knows not what it is’, hence his emotional entreaty to the sages to ‘gather me/Into the artifice of eternity’.

It is worth exploring the richness of this ordinary language here. By using ‘gather me’ the poet is acknowledging how fragmented and scattered his condition is and how he needs both direction and comfort; it is as if he needs to be embraced, gathered in arms. Ironically, he wants to be gathered into the coherence and

timelessness of art – ‘the artifice of eternity’. It is through this transition that he will find immortality. But the language carries hints of ambiguity, even about this much-desired goal. ‘Artifice’ refers primarily to a work of art, but it can also mean ‘artificiality’. Is this the first hint that this great quest might be flawed?

Still, he begins the fourth stanza with great confidence that art holds the answer to the problem of mortality. ‘Once out of nature’ he will be transformed into the perfect work of art and so live on. The golden bird is ageless and incorruptible and will sing the song of the soul. The final irony, though, is that the song it sings is about the flux of time, ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’. There is no perfect solution after all.

Themes and issues

Discuss these and see if you can justify each from the evidence of the poem.

- Yeats in old age is attempting to develop his spiritual side. It is a poem about the values of the soul as against the world of the senses.
- It is an attempt to escape the harsh reality of old age and death through the immortality of spiritual things and of art.
- The view of the human being portrayed is that of a fractured, divided entity in an uncomfortable state of war between the spiritual and the physical.
- It is a meditation on the nature of art and its importance to humanity.
- It delivers fine insights into the nature of Byzantine imagination and culture.





Structure

As befits the theme of conflict, the ideas and images in this poem are developed in a series of antinomies, or contrasts. In the very first line, youth and age are set opposite each other: 'That is no country for old men'. While youth is imaged in those wonderful scenes of sensuous life in the first stanza, age is realised in the scarecrow image – 'A tattered coat upon a stick' – with all its suggestions of fake outward show, a grotesque parody of the human being and the sense of powerlessness and indignity. The body is imaged as a dying animal, while the soul is imaged as a priceless golden bird, singing.

The mortality of life is contrasted with the timelessness of art. The teeming sensuality of Ireland is set against the culture of Byzantium, with its religious ethos ('holy city', 'God's holy fire'), its reputation for learning and philosophical thought ('O sages') and its artistic achievement ('artifice', 'a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/Of hammered gold and gold enamelling', etc.). These conflicts reflect the internal struggle, the yearnings and the reality within the poetic persona here.

Yet the struggle is smoothed over by the grace and elegance of the language used. There is a regular pattern of end-rhymes or sometimes half-rhymes which gives the verses a musical ease. Yeats also uses a rhythmic phrasing, often grouping in lists of three, which has magical significance as well as producing a rhythmic rise and fall: 'Fish, flesh, or fowl', 'Whatever is begotten, born, and dies', 'unless/Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing', 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come'. We might also

notice other rhetorical qualities, such as the strong declamatory opening, the rhetorical plea to the sages or indeed the strong, confident, first person voice of the poet all through the poem. These sometimes belie the conflicts and uncertainties at the heart of the work.





THE STARE'S NEST BY MY WINDOW

Background: From 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'

'Meditations in Time of Civil War' is quite a lengthy poem, structured in seven sections. Apart from the first section, composed in England in 1921, it was written in Ireland during the Civil War of 1922–23 and was first published in the *Dell* in January 1923. It is included in the volume *The Tower* (1928).

In the poem as a whole, Yeats explores aspects of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy tradition: its origins and heritage and his own sense of sharing in the values of that tradition, particularly those of continuity, culture and family line. Conflict was a necessary element of that planter culture, and now he is brought face to face with the violence of the Civil War and must re-evaluate his own role in the continuing tradition of history. Images of houses and building provide one of the unifying metaphors and themes throughout this poem. Yeats acknowledges the violence out of which the great Anglo-Irish culture was built:

*Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day.*

His own house in Co. Galway, Thoor Ballylee, was originally a defensive fifteenth-century tower. He proudly acknowledges that conflict is part of his tradition; he wishes that his descendants will also find 'befitting emblems of adversity'. So in section V 'The

Road at My Door', when a band of Irregulars calls to his door, he experiences a certain envy of the men of action. Perhaps it is the graphic details of that war in section VI 'The Stare's Nest by My Window' that led to a reappraisal. The terrifying vision of the nightmarish destruction of civilisation in section VII throws him back to thinking on his own role as poet in his isolated tower.

Yeats wrote the following description of the genesis and context of section VI:

I was in my Galway house during the first months of civil war, the railway bridges blown up and the roads blocked with stones and trees. For the first week there were no newspapers, no reliable news, we did not know who had won nor who had lost, and even after newspapers came, one never knew what was happening on the other side of the hill or of the line of trees. Ford cars passed the house from time to time with coffins standing upon end between the seats, and sometimes at night we heard an explosion, and once by day saw the smoke made by the burning of a great neighbouring house. Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries. One felt an overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature. A stare (our West of Ireland name for a starling) had built in a hole beside my window and I made these verses out of the feeling of the moment ... [here he quoted from 'The bees build in the crevices' to 'Yet no clear fact to be discerned: come build in the empty house of the stare!'] ... That is only the beginning but it runs on in the same mood. Presently a strange thing happened. I





began to smell honey in places where honey could not be, at the end of a stone passage or at some windy turn of the road, and it came always with certain thoughts. When I got back to Dublin I was with angry people who argued over everything or were eager to know the exact facts: in the midst of the mood that makes realistic drama.
(From *The Bounty of Sweden*)

A reading of the poem

At one level, this poem is an attempt to balance the horrors of war with the healing sweetness and regenerative power of nature. As Yeats himself saw it, 'Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries. One felt an overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature.' The brutality of war is graphically represented here:

*Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood*

The onomatopoeic sound of 'trundled' carries suggestions of some primitive war machine or evokes the tumbrels and savage excess of the French Revolution. There is none of the traditional respect for a dead enemy here, but rather the ferocity of civil war enmity in the indignity with which the dead soldier was treated – 'trundled ... in his blood'. The bees are evoked as an antidote to this savagery. They may symbolise patience and creative force, as opposed to the destructive forces round about. They bring sweetness, healing and the richness of life. These may also be a classical allusion to Porphyry's bees, who visited the world to

perform tasks for the gods. Thus, the bees could be seen as a manifestation of the divine in the world. Whether they evoked for Yeats the simple beauty of nature or carried more complex connotations, his plea to them is a desperate, plaintive cry. That cry for healing and for natural regeneration of life echoes through that repeated refrain at the end of each stanza, culminating in the final direct personal address, 'O honey-bees'. There is honest emotion here. But this is more than simply a reaction to a specific event. Taken in the context of the poem as a whole, we could read this section as a metaphor for Yeats's own life situation and that of his traditional class, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The tower house, once a fortified planter house, used as a place of both safety and dominance, is now a place of 'loosening masonry'; the structures of that colonial past are crumbling. The Yeats' isolation in the tower during that particular fortnight is symptomatic of the isolation and uncertain future of the entire minority but once-powerful class:

*We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty*

This is not just physical imprisonment but a mental segregation, a way of viewing themselves as different, distinct and separate – a cultivated isolation.

The key has been turned from the inside. The physical barriers of stone or wood accord with the mental barriers created by class and outlook, so that we are acutely aware of how introverted and cut off the poet is. Yet there is a hint in the first stanza that some sweetness can come with the ending of his self-isolation:





*My wall is loosening; honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.*

Or is this just a vain hope?

In the final stanza he faces up to the illusions on which his philosophy is based and which are explored in the rest of the poem: that sweetness and beauty might grow out of bitter and violent conquest, that conflict and a life of adversity could be a glorious thing. These are the fantasies that sustain his class outlook and for which he now indicts himself. The consequence has been not beauty, but self-brutalisation: 'The heart's grown brutal from the fare'. He strips away any delusions of superiority or righteousness as he admits that negative emotions are strongest:

*More substance in our enmities
Than in our love*

It is as if the violence outside has forced him to confront the past violence of his own class in an honest moment of shared guilt. This is a critical moment of bleak insight, yet one that he attempts to balance with the final plea – 'O honey-bees' – a plea for sweetness and healing at a time of pain, for order in a time of chaos.

Imagery

Images of houses and buildings dominate this poem, but they are either abandoned, like the house of stone, or destroyed by violence ('a house burned'), or are gradually crumbling away in time ('loosening masonry', 'My wall is loosening'). They are

symbols of a way of life being destroyed or else they are isolating and self-imprisoning:

*We are closed in, the key is turned
On our uncertainty*

Any building done is for a destructive and disorderly purpose: 'A barricade of stone or of wood'. The poet's plea, while romantic and positive in outlook, is rather pathetic in the context. Only the bees and birds may build where the once-powerful colonising class raised great edifices.





IN MEMORY OF EVA GORE-BOOTH AND CON MARKIEWICZ

Background

This poem was written in the autumn of 1927, was first published in 1929 and is included in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). Constance Markiewicz had died in August 1927, her sister Eva had died the previous year.

A reading of the poem

This is one of Yeats's poems of age, the reverie of an old man addressing the now-dead companions of his youth: 'Dear shadows'. It is very much a retrospective piece, viewing life from the perspective of the end. Yeats avoids sentimentality, opting instead for retrospective judgments, assessing the significance of their lives. He felt that they had wasted their lives. He dismisses Constance Markiewicz's years of political agitation for socialist and republican ideals as dragging out 'lonely years' – 'Conspiring among the ignorant' – while Eva's social and women's suffrage work is merely 'Some vague Utopia'.

To understand this harsh condemnation of what to us seem idealistic and committed lives, we need to take the poet's value system into account. His view was that the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class, with its wealth and great houses, had a duty to set an example of gracious and cultured living; this was its value for society. As the critic Alasdair MacRae says, 'The graciousness of accustomed affluence, the unostentatiousness of inherited furnishings and family traditions, what he saw culminating in

courtesy, appealed to Yeats and he considered Eva and Con along with Maud Gonne as betraying something precious and feminine.' Yeats's idea of beauty is linked to the feminine. The image of feminine beauty he creates here is exotic. The 'silk kimonos' give a hint of Eastern mysteriousness, while the comparison with a gazelle suggests both a natural elegance and a certain wild, unknowable quality. And the two sisters are a decorative part of the Big House scene, a house that is elegant, imposing, a symbol of Anglo-Irish achievement and cultured way of life. It is primarily this image and what it symbolised that Yeats is nostalgic for: it is not the people he missed in the first instance, but the house and the cultured dinner-table conversation!

*Many a time I think to seek
One or the other out and speak
Of that old Georgian mansion, mix
Pictures of the mind, recall
That table and the talk of youth*

Yeats's negative retrospective judgments are not so much the bitter rantings of an old man, but rather what he saw as a failure to fulfil an inherited role in society.

But this has some of the more usual features of an age poem – the contrast of youth and age. The 'Two girls in silk kimonos ... one a gazelle' become 'withered old and skeleton-gaunt'. It is interesting that old bodies are rarely beautiful for Yeats: he is repelled and disgusted by physical ageing. We are made aware of the ravages of time very early on in the poem, right after the first four lines of that beautiful limpid opening, and it comes as quite a shocking contrast:





But a raving autumn shears

Blossom from the summer's wreath

Autumn is 'raving', mad, hysterical, out of control, and the sharp-edged onomatopoeic sound of 'shears' conveys its deadly potential. Even summer carries the seeds of death in its 'wreath'.

Out of this retrospection, Yeats attempts to distil a certain wisdom about life. He sets down this philosophy in the second stanza. In a more kindly address to the 'Dear shadows', he presumes they now agree with him about the vanity of all causes and all zeal, irrespective of rightness:

All the folly of a fight

With a common wrong or right.

Second, he knows that the great quarrel is with time, destroyer of innocence and beauty. He reflects on the vanity of it all, as it will end in a great apocalyptic 'conflagration' that will consume not just all they've built – great houses or mere gazebos – but all the anguished decisions of their lives. All is vanity before the end.

Tone

At times Yeats manages to be gently nostalgic, such as at the beginning and end of the first stanza, but he can be very censorious about lives wasted in political agitation and he seems quite excited by the possibility of the great final 'conflagration'. This is communicated by the energy and repetition of strong verbs (strike, strike, climb, run) and by the repetition of phrases ('strike a match').

Themes and issues

- What is a worthwhile way to live life?
- The vagaries of life, the imperfection
- Is it all vanity? What is the point of it all?
- The real enemy is time
- Contrasting youth and age

Rhymes and rhythms

Though Yeats imposes a quatrain rhyming scheme, *abba*, on the poem, he does not structure the thought in quatrains, apart from the first four lines. The first stanza, for instance, is structured periodically in groups of 4, 5, 4, 7. Thus, the thought structure provides a sort of counter-rhythm to the rhyming structure and gives it a conversational naturalness.

This naturalness is emphasised by the use of off-rhymes rather than full rhymes, for example south – both, wreath – death, ignorant – gaunt, recall – gazelle. Some could argue that the imperfect rhyme befits the theme – the imperfections of life. The rhythmic quality of the language is achieved partly through repetitions: repetitions of phrases such as 'And bid me strike a match', but more obviously with the repetition of the well-known refrain 'Two girls'. However, the tone of the second repetition differs markedly from the first because of the context, where it now carries all the bleak irony and the disappointment of hindsight.





Structure

The structure of this poem is almost unnoticed, so deftly is it done. It opens with 'The light of evening', proceeds to the darkness of 'Dear shadows' and erupts again into the final apocalyptic inferno of the end of time. It begins with youth and ends with death; it opens with the great house of Lissadell and ends with a fragile 'gazebo'.





SWIFT'S EPITAPH

Background

Begun in 1929 and finished in September 1930, this was first published in *Dublin Magazine* in the winter of 1931. It is included in the volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). The poem is essentially a translation, with some alterations, of the Latin epitaph on Jonathan Swift's memorial in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin:

Hic depositum est Corpus
JONATHAN SWIFTS.T.D.
Hujus Ecclesiae Cathedralis
Decani,
Ubi saeva Indignatio
Ulterius
Cor lacerare nequit.
Abi Viator
Et imitare, si poteris,
Strenuum pro virili
Libertatis vindicatorem.
Obiit 19o Die Mensis Octobris
A.D. 1745. Anno Aetatis 78o.

Here is laid the body of
JONATHAN SWIFT,
doctor of sacred theology,
dean of this cathedral church,
where savage indignation
can no longer
rend his heart.
Go, traveller,
and imitate, if you can,
an earnest and dedicated
champion of liberty.

He died on the nineteenth day of October
AD 1745, in the year of his age 78.

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) was dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. Poet, political pamphleteer and satirist, he was the author of such famous works as *The Drapier's Letters*, *A Modest Proposal*, *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Politically conservative, Swift voiced the concerns and values of Protestant Ireland with an independence of spirit and a courage that Yeats admired greatly. Swift's writing made him enemies on all sides, but this isolation endeared him even further to Yeats, who often spoke admiringly of 'Anglo-Irish solitude'. Yeats thought of Swift as a heroic figure, an artist-philosopher who despite the conflicts of his personal life served liberty by speaking out in his writings and freeing the artist from the tyranny of the mob. He ranked Swift together with Berkeley, Goldsmith and Burke as one of the intellectual founders of the Anglo-Irish tradition.





Yeats's play *The Words upon the Window Pane* (1930) explores some of the conflicts of Swift's life.

A free translation

Among the chief interests of the Yeats poem is the significance of the changes he made. For instance, 'Swift has sailed into his rest' is much more confident, energetic and vigorous than the original. It sounds more like a victorious progress, while being at the same time a gentle and graceful journey. There are also clearer overtones of a spiritual afterlife – 'his rest' – where the original merely notes the depositing of the body.

He retains the famous reference to '*saeva Indignatio*' (savage indignation), which was the driving force of Swift's satirical work, and the reference to his capacity for empathy and for being affected by the injustices and miseries he encountered ('Cannot lacerate his breast'). The challenge to the observer is stronger than in the original – to imitate him 'if you dare' rather than 'if you can'. And the traveller is described as 'World-besotted', worldly, lacking in spiritual values and outlook. The implication may be to enhance, by contrast, the unworldly qualities of Swift (which would be somewhat at variance with the facts). Yeats also retains the epithet noting Swift's defence of liberty, a philosophy they shared.

In general it might be said that Yeats has nudged the epitaph more in the direction of a eulogy. In addition, there is more transparent emotion and admiration in the Yeats version.





AN ACRE OF GRASS

Background

This poem was written in November 1936 and first published in *New Poems* (1938).

A reading of the poem

This poem is quite a remarkable response to old age and thoughts of death. The first stanza captures the shrinkage of an old person's physical world in the twilight years. With the ebbing of physical strength, his world is reduced to the gardens of his house, 'An acre of green grass/For air and exercise'. The final two lines of the stanza are a marvellous evocation of the stillness, isolation and sense of emptiness that can be experienced at night by the wakeful elderly, a feeling carried in part by the broad vowel rhymes 'house – mouse':

*Midnight, an old house
Where nothing stirs but a mouse.*

He could easily resign himself to restfulness and silence: 'My temptation is quiet.' But this old man, this poet, needs to write, to continue to find new truths, and he knows that neither a 'loose imagination' – an imagination that is not disciplined by the structure of writing – nor any ordinary observation of everyday occurrences will deliver up any significant truths:

*Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make truth known.*

Real creativity needs something more, like mystical insight, and that comes only through passionate endeavour or frenzy. Hence his prayer, 'Grant me an old man's frenzy'. That frenzy or madness produced insight and truth for King Lear at the end of his life, and mystical visions, which some interpret as madness, produced the beautiful wisdom of William Blake's poetry. Even at the end of his life, Yeats knows the huge transforming energy necessary to forge new insights and truths, and he faces up to it: 'Myself must I remake'. What courage for a person in his seventies!

Yeats had been reading Nietzsche's *The Dawn of Day*, about people of genius who can distance themselves from character and temperament and rise above the weight of personality like a winged creature. Yeats had used Nietzsche's ideas to develop his theory of the Mask: he felt the need to continually transform himself. And this is the ideology driving this poem – the need for transformation in order to achieve new insights and truths. The poet must discard the persona of dignified old man and remake himself as a wild, mad, prophet-like figure, such as Timon or Lear or Blake, and that will bring the searing vision, the 'eagle mind' 'That can pierce the clouds'. This is a poet's fighting response to old age and approaching death. It may remind us of Dylan Thomas's later 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light'.





Themes and issues

Explore the following ideas and expand on each with reference to what you find in the poem.

- A response to ageing: Refusing to accept a quiet retirement; summoning reserves of energy to continue working; aware of the huge demands, yet praying for the chance.
- The process of creativity: The ordinary imagination processing or milling everyday events is not sufficient; a frenzy or madness is necessary in order to see things differently or see into things; the after-truths or insights are all-consuming; the power of that insight can 'pierce the clouds' and 'Shake the dead'.
- The poet's need for continued transformation: Is it comfortable being a poet? Is it worth it?





FROM 'UNDER BEN BULBEN': V AND VI

Background

The final draft of this poem is dated 4 September 1938, about five months before the poet's death. Parts of it were published in 1939.

Some acquaintance with the poem as a whole is necessary for an understanding of the context of sections V and VI. It is recommended that you read through all six sections.

- 'Under Ben Bulben' can be seen as Yeats's poetic testimony, an elegy for himself, defining his convictions and the poetical and social philosophies that motivated his life's work.
- Section I incorporates the two main belief systems that informed his poetry: the occult philosophy and folk beliefs and traditions.
- Section II features another aspect of his belief system: reincarnation.
- Section III suggests that poetic insight is born out of moments of violence; that violence and conflict can be invigorating.
- Section IV outlines what he considers to be the great tradition in art, from Pythagoras through Egyptian and Greek sculpture to Michelangelo's Renaissance.
- In Sections IV and V Yeats urges all artists, poets, painters and sculptors to do their work in this great tradition of art, to promote the necessary heroic images that nourish civilisation. Specifically, he had in mind the forms of the perfected human body as the necessary poetic inspiration, a concept linked to

his ideas on eugenics (the pseudo-science of improving the human race through selective breeding). Yeats had joined the Eugenics Society in London in 1936 and became interested in research on intelligence testing. During 1938 he worked on a verse tract on this topic, published as *On the Boiler* (1939). Convinced that eugenics was crucial to the future of civilisation, he wrote: 'Sooner or later we must limit the families of the unintelligent classes and if our government cannot send them doctor and clinic it must, till it gets tired of it, send monk and confession box.'

- Section VI rounds his life to its close and moves from the mythologies associated with the top of Ben Bulben to the real earth at its foot, in Drumcliff churchyard.

A reading of the poem

Section V

This is Yeats's advice to Irish poets concerning the model or tradition they should follow, and the model he recommends is a new, composite one attempting to fuse together two cultural traditions, those of peasant and aristocratic cultures:

*Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen*

The former is the Irish tradition of folk and fairytales and fantastical mythology; the latter is the Anglo-Irish cultural tradition, which Yeats traced back to the 'other days' referred to, the eighteenth century and the intellectual contribution of Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith and Burke. He valued this tradition for its spirit of free





enquiry, its sense of order and the example of gracious living it produced in Georgian mansions and fine estates. To this fusion he adds the religious tradition as worthy of celebration ('The holiness of monks'), followed immediately by 'Porter-drinkers' randy laughter', which rather devalues the former. Perhaps it's meant to be ironic. The Irish nobility are worthy of celebration, even though they 'were beaten into the clay/Through seven heroic centuries'. Thus, heroic defeat is a fitting subject.

But once again Yeats scorns the present generation. Physically they do not conform to the traditional model of aesthetic beauty ('All out of shape from toe to top'). With an arrogance derived from the reprehensible theories of eugenics, he scorns their low intelligence and inferior lineage:

*Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.*

That arrogant tone continues, ending in that triumphant note – 'Still the indomitable Irishry'. The trouble with this poem is that it is so 'well made' – the rhythms of the language, the regular metre, the alliterative repetitions, the graphically grotesque imagery, etc. – that it can distract us from the seriously questionable class and racist attitudes.

Section VI

This section is beautifully structured, like a film shot. Opening with a long shot of the mountain, the camera draws back and focuses on the churchyard, panning by the church and the ancient cross until it finishes with a close-up of the epitaph cut in limestone. The effect is of a closing down of Yeats's life, a narrowing in to

death. Many of the important elements of Yeats's life are here: the mythology and folklore associated with Ben Bulben; the sense of ancestry, family and continuity provided by the rector; and the continuity of cultural tradition in the 'ancient Cross'. No ostentatious marble tomb or conventional, tired phrases are permitted, but rather a piece of indigenous material, local stone, to carry his epitaph. This is a curiously impersonal epitaph, neither celebrating the person's virtues nor asking remembrance or recommending the soul to God: rather, it is a stark piece of advice that the challenges of life and death should not be taken too seriously but should be regarded with a certain detachment. It is his final summation, that all the great issues merely come to this.





POLITICS

Background

We know that Yeats had intended that the volume *Last Poems* should end with 'Politics'. It is suggested that it was written as an answer to an article that had praised Yeats for his public language but suggested that he should use it more on political subjects. If so, then this is written as a mocking, ironic, tongue-in-cheek response.

A reading of the poem

The speaker affects the pose of a distracted lover who is too preoccupied with the woman to give any attention to the political chaos of European politics of the mid-1930s: Franco, Mussolini, etc. He is little concerned for these earth-shattering events, dismissing them casually in a throwaway comment:

*And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms*

We can almost see the shrug of indifference.

But the mask of the dispassionate observer slips in the final two lines as his passionate yearning breaks through and we realise that the 'she' is probably Caitlín Ní Uallacháin – Ireland. Thus, we understand Yeats's mocking response to those who have not understood one of his major poetical preoccupations.

The regularity of the four-stress lines alternating with three-stress lines and the simplicity of alternative end-line rhymes, together with the simplicity of the language, give the impression that this is

lightweight verse. But as with all good satire, we are lulled into a false sense of security until the final punch is thrown.





OVERVIEW OF THEMES AND ISSUES

On each point, return to the poem for reference and further exploration.

Yeats and the national question

Among the issues explored by the poet under this heading are:

- The heroic past; patriots are risk-takers, rebels, self-sacrificing idealists who are capable of all that 'delirium of the brave' ('September 1913')
- How heroes are created, how ordinary people are changed ('Easter 1916')
- The place of violence in the process of political change; the paradox of the 'terrible beauty' ('September 1913', 'Easter 1916', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War')
- The place of 'fanaticism' and the human effects of it – the 'stone of the heart' ('Easter 1916', 'September 1913', 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz')
- The force of political passion ('Easter 1916', 'Politics')

Yeats's notions of the ideal society

- The vital contribution that both the aristocracy and artists make to society; the importance of the Anglo-Irish tradition in Irish society ('September 1913', 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'Swift's Epitaph', 'Under Ben Bulben')
- His contempt for the new middle class and the new materialism ('September 1913')

- Aesthetic values and the place of art in society ('Sailing to Byzantium', 'Under Ben Bulben')
- The yearnings for order and the fear of anarchy ('Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'The Second Coming')
- His views on the proper contribution of women to society ('In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', 'Easter 1916')

Theories of history, time and change

- His notion of thousand-year eras, gyres, etc. ('The Second Coming')
- The world and people in constant change and flux ('The Second Coming', 'Easter 1916')
- Personal ageing, the transience of humanity ('The Wild Swans at Coole', 'An Acre of Grass')
- The yearning for changelessness and immortality ('The Wild Swans at Coole', 'Sailing to Byzantium')
- The timelessness of art, or the possibility of it ('Sailing to Byzantium')

Conflicts at the centre of the human being

- The conflict between physical desires and spiritual aspirations ('Sailing to Byzantium')
- The quest for aesthetic satisfaction ('Sailing to Byzantium').
- The search for wisdom and peace, which is not satisfied here ('The Lake Isle of Innisfree')
- A persistent sense of loss or failure; loss of youth and passion ('The Wild Swans at Coole'); the loss of poetic vision and insight ('An Acre of Grass')





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

1. Select the poem by Yeats that made the greatest impact on you and write about your reaction to it.
2. What issues raised by the poet did you think significant?
3. On reading this selection of his poetry, what did you find surprising or interesting?
4. What impressions of Yeats as a person did you form?
5. What questions would you like to ask him?
6. Do you think it important for Irish pupils to study Yeats?
7. What do you find difficult about the poetry of Yeats?
8. What do you like about his poetry?





QUESTIONS

1. Select any major theme explored by Yeats and outline his treatment of it.
2. Review critically any poem by Yeats that you considered interesting.
3. 'Yeats displayed great reverence for the past but little respect for his own time.' Consider the truth of this statement in light of the poems you have examined.
4. 'W. B. Yeats explored complex issues of national identity with great honesty.' Discuss.
5. Having read his poetry, what do you think Yeats chiefly valued in life?
6. 'Yeats's poetry is fuelled by conflict – conflict between past and present, youth and age, mind and body.' Explore this view of his poetry.





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ROBERT FROST

Notes and Explorations: Marie Dunne

HL 2020

OL 2020

HL 2021

OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

The Tuft of Flowers

Mending Wall

After Apple-Picking

The Road Not Taken

Birches

'Out, Out--'

Spring Pools

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Overview of Robert Frost

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INTRODUCTION

A literary life

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco on 26 March 1874. He was a sickly child and received his early education at home. Though pampered by his protective mother, he was often harshly disciplined by his violent and drunken father. In 1885 his father died following a long illness, leaving his family penniless. Robert moved with his younger sister, Jeannie, and his mother to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his grandparents lived. His mother found employment in nearby schools and the two children began their formal education in her class.

Robert entered Lawrence High School in 1888. He chose the classical curriculum: Latin, Greek, ancient and European history and mathematics. During his final year he fell in love with a classmate, Elinor White. They married on 19 December 1895, when he was twenty-one and she was twenty-three. After finishing secondary school Frost went to Dartmouth College, but he left in 1893, halfway through his first year. He taught his mother's senior class for several months until the term ended, then took a variety of low-paid jobs in a woollen mill, as a rural schoolteacher and as a newspaper reporter. In September 1897 Frost entered Harvard University, but again left without a degree.

When he returned home he was encouraged by his doctor to become a farmer in order to improve his health. He lived on small farms at first in New Hampshire and later in Vermont where the work – mowing, making hay and apple-picking – was done by

hand. He wrote his poems at night. Many years later he recalled his favourite activities as 'mowing with a scythe, chopping with an axe, and writing with a pen'.

A working life

Neither farming nor poetry earned Frost enough money to support his wife and four children, so at the age of thirty-two he was forced to seek regular paid employment. A pastor of the First Congregational Church suggested to him that he should apply for a vacancy at Pinkerton Academy in Derry Village. A trustee of the academy told him he would be employed if one of his poems were read at the banquet of the Men's League of the Congregational Church. Frost submitted 'The Tuft of Flowers'. It was well received and secured him the position. He taught English, Latin, history and geometry, coached the debating team, advised the school newspaper and assisted with athletics. Exhausted by his workload, he moved from the academy in 1911 and became a lecturer in the teacher training college in New Hampshire.

A literary education

Frost devoted his free time to reading the major poets. He studied their diction, their imagery and their formal techniques in order to perfect his own writing. His work was heavily influenced by his classical education. The concise language, concentrated images and clarity of thought in his poems reflect this training, while his knowledge of strict classical metre allowed him to write with confidence in traditional forms. Biblical references reflect his early scripture studies. Other influences on his work include Shakespeare, the English Romantics (Wordsworth, Keats and





Shelley) and the Victorian poets (Hardy, Kipling and Browning). He followed the principles laid down in Wordsworth's 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' concerning the language, people, places and events appropriate to poetry. Like Wordsworth, he relied on incidents from 'common life' and discovered in them 'the primary laws of our nature'. He agreed with Wordsworth that these events should be described in 'language really used by men'.

In his own poems he attempted to reproduce as accurately as possible the tone and modulations of the spoken word. 'Wordsworth was right,' he commented, 'in trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words ... actually used in common speech ... but their sound.' He believed that rhymes should be unforced and natural, although, unlike many of his contemporaries, he refused to abandon the rules of poetry to achieve this effect. 'The most important thing about a poem ... is how wilfully, gracefully, naturally, entertainingly and beautifully its rhymes are,' he wrote in 1939. He wanted the rhythm in his verse to spring from the tension that occurs when a strong rhythmic pattern based on iambic metre is played against the irregularity of ordinary speech. He repeatedly stressed the importance of the living voice, 'the rise and fall, the stressed pauses and little hurries, of spoken language', and insisted that the tone of voice added to the meaning of words in the poems. Frost found modernist poetry unappealing and wrote instead about preindustrial values, rural life and nature. Yet there is nothing sentimental in his work: the world portrayed in his poetry can be bleak, lonely, chilled, blighted and deadly. Acknowledging this, Frost once said, 'There's plenty to be dark about, you know. It's full of darkness.'

First publications

For a long time Frost had difficulty finding a publisher. Partly as a result of this the Frost family decided to emigrate from America to England in 1912 and they settled at Beaconsfield, near London. Frost arranged his lyrical poems in book form and then sought a publisher.

The collection called *A Boy's Will* appeared in April 1913; his second book, *North of Boston*, came out a year later. The books were widely praised and Frost was quickly introduced into literary circles in London, where he met W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. He was very pleased when Yeats told Pound that *A Boy's Will* was 'the best thing that had come out of America for some time'. *A Boy's Will* introduces the natural elements Frost would use in many future poems: stars, clouds, leaves, pools, brooks, flowers and birds. *North of Boston*, written between 1905 and 1913, saw a shift of emphasis from man as a solitary creature to man as a social being. Though he called it 'This Book of People', many characters in *North of Boston* experience a deep sense of loneliness. With his second publication Frost clearly indicated that, like the English poet Thomas Hardy, he would concentrate on the regional.

Frost is a New England poet. His previous experiences in low-paid jobs and on farms gave him an intimate knowledge of ordinary people living ordinary lives. His work expresses the value he placed on rural life, practical experience and the independence of the individual.





Return to America

Frost returned to America after the outbreak of the First World War, where he wrote his next book, *Mountain Interval*, which contains some of his best-known poems, including 'Birches', 'Out, Out—' and 'The Road Not Taken'. His characteristic themes of isolation, fear, sudden violence and death are all apparent here. The favourable reviews *Mountain Interval* received strengthened Frost's reputation. He bought a farm in New Hampshire and supported his family by teaching, readings and lectures as well as royalties from his books.

In January 1917 he was made professor of English at Amherst College, Massachusetts. By 1920 he could afford to move to Vermont and devote himself to writing poetry and apple-farming. Following his fourth publication, *New Hampshire* (1923), Frost was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He received the award four times in all: in 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943. His fifth volume of poems, *West-Running Brook*, containing 'Spring Pools' and 'Acquainted with the Night', came out in 1928.

Sadly, Frost's personal life was as unhappy as his public life was successful. His sister Jeannie was committed to a mental hospital, where she remained until her death in 1929. His wife's health began to deteriorate rapidly. His eldest daughter, Lesley, who had dropped out of university and divorced her husband, angrily blamed her father for her problems. His favourite child, Marjorie, had a nervous breakdown and by 1930 developed tuberculosis; she died in 1934, aged twenty-nine, leaving a husband and baby girl. Irma, his third daughter, suffered from mental illness and, like Lesley, blamed all her problems on Frost.

Despite this turmoil, Frost produced *A Further Range* in 1936; it contains 'Provide, Provide' and 'Design'. Here he displays his technical skills. Within this volume there is satire and comedy, the lyric, ballad, epigram, historical narrative and dramatic monologue. Teaching, public appearances, interviews and readings kept him busy until tragedy struck again. On 20 March 1938, Elinor died from a heart attack. Unable to cope with her death, Frost left the funeral arrangements to Lesley; in a stormy scene she accused him of ruining her mother's life. Irma became permanently estranged from him and his only surviving son, Carol, succumbed to deep depression. Frost was deeply upset. He turned to his friend, secretary and manager, Kay Morrison, for consolation. Disturbed by his mother's death and troubled by his father's relationship with Kay, worried by his wife's illness, a lack of money and the belief that he was a failure, Carol committed suicide in 1940.

Frost looked to poetry to save him from despair. Many of his new poems were written for Kay, expressing his love for her. *A Witness Tree* (1942) won him his fourth Pulitzer Prize. His eighth volume, *Steeple Bush*, was published in May 1947 and is dedicated to his six grandchildren. Having held academic positions already in the University of Michigan, Harvard University and Dartmouth College, Frost returned to Amherst College from 1949 to 1963.

The final years

In his final years Frost enjoyed public acclaim. He travelled as a celebrated visitor to Brazil, Peru, England, Israel, Greece, Russia and Ireland. He paid his first visit to Dublin in 1928, when he spent five pleasant days in the company of his friends, the writers Pádraic





Colum and George Russell. Colum and Russell took him to a reception where he met Yeats once again. He returned to Ireland in June 1957 to receive an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland, presented by the Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, who was chancellor of the university.

In 1961 he was invited to recite 'The Gift Outright' at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, watched on television by 60 million people. On his eighty-eighth birthday, in 1962, he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal; in the same year he published his final volume, *In the Clearing*. On 29 January 1963, two months before his eighty-ninth birthday, Frost died in a Boston hospital.





THE TUFT OF FLOWERS

A reading of the poem

'The Tuft of Flowers' introduces the themes that dominate much of Frost's poetry. These themes, developed as the narrative unfolds, include the passage of time, loneliness, communication and the power of the imagination. The use of a first person narrator makes the poem a more immediate and realistic experience; the reader is drawn into the poet's world and explores the themes 'as with his aid'.

The poem opens with the narrator setting out to turn the cut grass so that it will dry in the sun. In a scene reminiscent of the Romantic era, the speaker is depicted as a figure of isolation in the landscape. He searches in vain for the mower, 'But he had gone his way, the grass all mown'. The narrator sadly concludes that loneliness is intrinsic to the human condition, whether people 'work together or apart'. This marks the end of the first movement of the poem.

The second movement begins with the arrival of the butterfly, which, like the speaker, is searching for something it cannot find. It flutters in confusion around the withered flowers on the ground and then returns to the poet, who prepares to continue with his work. The butterfly, however, draws his attention to the tuft of flowers beside the stream. This leads us into the third movement. Unlike the other flowers, these have been spared by the mower because he loved them. He left them to flourish on the bank 'from sheer morning gladness'.

In the final movement the poet examines the effect of this discovery. The flowers connect the mower and the narrator, who sees in them a 'message from the dawn'. Through the power of the imagination he is transported back through time to the early morning, when the birds sang as the scythe cut through the tall grasses. The speaker recognises in the mower 'a spirit kindred to my own' and can reach out across time and space to touch the thoughts of the absent labourer. This connection forces the speaker to revise his earlier opinion that humans are destined to be lonely and alone. Now he can confidently declare: 'Men work together ... Whether they work together or apart.'

The turning points in the poem are indicated by the use of the word 'but'. The speaker, who has eagerly sought the companionship of the mower, comes to the sad realisation that 'he had gone his way, the grass all mown,/And I must be, as he had been – alone.' Almost immediately he is joined by another creature:

*But as I said it, swift there passes me by
On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly*

He makes to turn away from the butterfly,

*But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook*

The narrator's mood undergoes a significant change as a result: 'But glad with him, I worked as with his aid'. A form of communication exists between the mower and the speaker and the poem now ends with the consoling thought that 'Men work together ... Whether they work together or apart'.





Imagery

The central image in the poem is the tuft of flowers called butterfly weed; Frost describes it as a 'leaping tongue of bloom'. The key word here is 'tongue', for the flowers 'speak' to him, bringing him a 'message from the dawn'. They enable him to hear the wakening birds and the whispering scythe. This message permits the speaker to commune imaginatively with the mower and hold 'brotherly speech' with him. The mower with his long scythe is suggestive of the Grim Reaper. He cuts the grass and possesses the power to kill the flowers or to spare them. He comes and goes silently and is never seen by mortal eyes. His power over life and death is contrasted with the helplessness of the butterfly 'on tremulous wing'. (Frost returned to the image of the flower, the moth and death in a later poem, 'Design'.) The mower should not be seen solely as a symbol of death: he is at the same time a farm labourer and a spiritual companion for the speaker, one with whom the speaker can communicate 'from the heart'.





MENDING WALL

Background

This poem appeared in *North of Boston* (1914). During a reading, Frost explained that wall-mending was an occupation he used to follow. His neighbour was very particular every spring about repairing the boundary on their land. Frost never ceased to be amazed by the damage done to the wall during the winter; it reminded him of the line in St Matthew's gospel, 'There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.'

A reading of the poem

In a note to the original edition of *North of Boston*, Frost stated that 'Mending Wall' considers the beliefs that separate men and takes up the theme where 'The Tuft of Flowers' laid it down. There are two characters in the poem, the narrator and his neighbour, who see the wall in very different ways. They are brought together to repair the damaged boundary in the spring.

The poem opens on a mysterious note: some unidentified force exists that dislikes walls. The soft s sounds capture the sensation of the silently swelling ground that dislodges the stones. The broad vowels mimic the shape of the rounded boulders that roll off the wall, leaving O- and U-shaped gaps behind. Frost distinguishes between these unexplained gaps and those caused by the hunters. Of the gaps that he means, 'No one has seen them made or heard them made'.

The annual wall-repairing ritual occurs in the spring. Ironically, the narrator and his neighbour work together to maintain the boundary that separates them; they are unified by their divisions. It seems as if a magic formula is required to keep the stones in place. At first it is like a game. A more serious note is introduced when the need for the wall is questioned. Unable to provide a rational argument, the neighbour falls back on the proverb 'Good fences make good neighbors'. The narrator mischievously challenges this assumption. Borders wall things in as well as blocking things out. They cause offence – a pun on the word 'fence'. According to folklore, elves do not like walls or closed gates, but the speaker does not suggest this to his dourly practical neighbour: 'I'd rather/ He said it for himself'.

The narrator wants the neighbour to reject the division, even imaginatively, for himself. He describes the man as 'an old-stone savage armed'. Not only is he working with stones but his attitudes are primitive, his beliefs have not evolved. He is as territorial as his Stone Age ancestors. He is armed not simply with stones but with dangerous, inflexible attitudes. His attitudes are unenlightened: 'He moves in darkness'. The neighbour, as dark and prickly as his pine trees, refuses to change sides. He sticks doggedly to 'his father's saying', repeating the proverb as proudly as if he had coined the phrase himself.

Balance

Frost always claimed he was not 'taking sides' in 'Mending Wall': 'I've played exactly fair in it. Twice I say, "Good fences" and twice "Something there is".' The tension between these two opposites





is played out in the poem. With clear boundaries, each knows where his limits are, where he stands and what confines him; without a wall there is confusion and misunderstanding. Distance, like differences, can be good. This is one reason why the narrator informs the neighbour about the gaps, even though he later challenges him about the need to rebuild the wall.

The 'balancing act' Frost achieves between the arguments in the poem is mirrored in the image of the fallen stones:

*To each the boulders have fallen to each...
We have to use a spell to make them balance*

Frost presents strong arguments on both sides. However, it is slightly disingenuous for him to claim that there is complete impartiality in the poem. The 'something' that dislodges the boulders and swells the ground beneath the wall is, of course, frost heaving.

Themes

Frost explained that 'Mending Wall' is about boundaries. These boundaries can be physical, political and psychological. The physical boundary in the poem is the stone wall. The two men repair the wall, working together to maintain their divisions:

*... we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.*

Boundaries are often political in nature. In a discussion on 'Mending Wall' Frost once exclaimed, 'You can make it national or international.' Read in this way, the neighbours can be seen as representing different nationalities or cultures, separate yet co-

existing peacefully, learning to respect each other's differences and co-operating to uphold them.

The psychological differences between the two men are perhaps the most striking. The narrator seems more open to change, more willing to challenge accepted practices ('Why do they make good neighbors?'), more humorous ('Spring is the mischief in me') and more imaginative ('I could say "Elves" to him') than his conservative neighbour. The narrator realises that sometimes 'we do not need the wall', but this notion meets with firm resistance: 'He will not go behind his father's saying'. His neighbour is a traditionalist and stands behind received wisdom with the same tenacity as he stands behind the stone wall.

Structure

The poem moves through three stages. The first phase is largely descriptive. Frost distinguishes between the gaps in the wall, those created by the unseen force and those made by hunters. In the second phase he introduces the neighbour and explains how the two men work to rebuild the wall. In the third and final phase he contrasts the attitudes of the men. The narrator is portrayed as mischievous, imaginative, progressive and questioning, while the neighbour is depicted as 'an old-stone savage armed', conservative, lacking originality, staid, accepting and repetitive.





AFTER APPLE-PICKING

A reading of the poem

'After Apple-Picking' is a complex poem. At a surface level it can be read as a nature poem, like Keats's 'Ode to Autumn' – a celebration of the natural abundance of the harvest. At the same time it dwells on the languor of the weary harvester and can be compared to 'Ode to a Nightingale', with its lethargic mood and sensuous imagery. At a deeper level it can be read as a study of the creative process.

The orchard is described at the outset. The harvest is over. The air, heavy with the scent of mature apples, has a sensual, almost narcotic effect on the apple-picker. The long vowel sounds, the irregular rhyming scheme, the slow tempo and incantatory rhythm suggest that the repetitive work has lulled him into a semi-conscious state. (The word 'sleep' appears six times in the poem.) The speaker, like Keats in 'Ode to a Nightingale', sinks into a drowsy numbness. This suspension of consciousness releases his imagination. He enters a visionary state conducive to artistic creativity:

*... I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough*

In this dream-like state he evokes the sensuousness of the harvest. He can smell the 'scent of apples', see 'Magnified apples appear and disappear', feel 'the ladder sway' and hear the 'rumbling sound' of the fruit as it is loaded. The repeated sound patterns in the language used capture the sensuousness of the experience:

*There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.*

Art cannot permanently transform life; the visionary state cannot be sustained for long. Frost accepts the transitory nature of the experience. Like the sheet of ice, 'It melted, and I let it fall and break'. The creative effort has left him physically and mentally exhausted:

*... I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.*

The creative mood disappears and he slips into sleep, long, dark and deep, as experienced by the hibernating woodchuck, 'Or just some human sleep'. He has climbed down from the visionary heights, like the boy in 'Birches', and returned to earth.

Ways of seeing

Sight and insight are important issues in 'After Apple-Picking'. In the opening scene the speaker looks upwards towards Heaven and downwards to the barrel. This reflects the main movement in the poem: the ascent towards the visionary heights and the gradual descent to normality. The focus slips and becomes blurred when the speaker drowns off. He enters a semi-conscious state, neither





awake nor asleep. Paradoxically, this releases his imagination and frees it from its sense-bound limitations. He now sees in a new way. The familiar becomes strange, transformed in a visionary world by his imagination. In this state his perspective changes and his perceptions intensify. The focus is sharpened and magnified. Even the smallest details on the apple are visible: 'And every fleck of russet showing clear'.

In his heightened state of consciousness he is doubly aware of every sensation:

*My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.*

This in turn leads to new insights and understanding:

*One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine ...*

Finally, exhausted physically and mentally, he sinks into a long, natural sleep, his eyes closed, and he sees no more.

Mood

The poem describes the drift from consciousness to unconsciousness. The calm, peaceful mood in the opening lines is replaced by a sense of physical and mental exhaustion as the speaker becomes increasingly vague ('there may be', 'upon some bough', 'two or three'). The breakdown of the rhyming scheme and the repetition ('sleep' is mentioned six times, 'apple' or 'apples' seven times, 'I' 16 times) reflect his weariness. It seems he is too tired to vary his vocabulary and maintain the discipline of a strict rhyming pattern. The lethargic mood is reinforced through the use

of long vowels and the slow, irregular rhythm. He enters a dream-like state, yet it is not without a feeling of unease. He is overtired and cannot escape the sensations of the day's work. There are moments of tension when he remembers the care required to prevent the fruit from falling:

*For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.*

The languid mood is re-established in the final lines, where the speaker approaches complete loss of consciousness:

*The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.*





THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Background

When asked to list his likes and dislikes, Frost included 'The Road Not Taken' as his favourite poem. It was written for his friend Edward Thomas, killed in the First World War. In the film *Voices and Visions*, Frost stated that the poem was in part a gentle satire on Thomas's inability to make decisions: 'No matter which way he went he was always sorry he didn't go the other way. And he could go on like that until eternity.' One day Frost said to Thomas, 'No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another.' It seemed to Frost that there was a fundamental human dilemma here that could provide material for a poem.

In May 1915, before the poem was published, Frost revealed that the dilemma was his own as well as that of his friend. He went on to acknowledge that he had always taken the less practical, more poetic way: 'Every time I have taken the way it almost seemed as if I ought not to take, I have been justified somehow by the result.' The poem was also partly inspired by an unnerving experience Frost had in 1912. While walking towards two lonely crossroads after a winter snowstorm he met a figure approaching him who seemed to be his double – 'my own image'. The figure came up to him and passed silently by while Frost 'stood in wonderment' at 'this other self'. 'The Road Not Taken' was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1915 and in *Mountain Interval*.

A reading of the poem

This poem suggests vast thematic issues through a simple narrative. The speaker stands in an autumnal wood at a point where two roads run off in different directions. Reluctantly he is forced to make a choice about which one he will take. Both roads seem 'about the same', so the focus is on the decision made and its consequences. The traveller cannot see where the first path will lead, as it bends in the undergrowth, so he chooses the other. The grounds for his choice are unclear. While he states that this road had 'the better claim,/Because it was grassy and wanted wear', he goes on to admit that they were 'really about the same,/And both that morning equally lay' covered in leaves. He keeps the first 'for another day', knowing there is a finality inherent in his choice, and doubts he will ever return. He conveys the sense of momentous, life-changing decisions in the final stanza when he predicts that in the future the speaker will look back on this moment 'with a sigh'. He knows he will regret losing the opportunity to investigate the other option. The choice he has made has serious consequences for him:

*I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Imagery

Frost uses imagery in an almost symbolic way to carry the meaning in the poem. The two roads in the yellow wood represent two different journeys through life. The narrator describes himself as a traveller who must choose which path to follow. One road bends in the undergrowth, making it impossible to see where it will





lead, just as in life no one can foretell with certainty the outcome of a decision or what one's future will be like. Frost describes the woods as 'yellow' and the roads as covered 'In leaves no step had trodden black'. This suggests an autumn scene. Autumn is sometimes used in poetry to suggest maturity. The decision is being made at a time when the speaker is sufficiently experienced and wise to realise the implications of his choice; he knows 'how way leads on to way'. When he chooses, there is no turning back. He finally decides to take the road 'less traveled by' and this changes his life completely.





BIRCHES

A reading of the poem

The poem begins with a description of the birches bending against a background of upright trees. Their movement inspires an imaginative response in the speaker: 'I like to think some boy's been swinging them'. These opening lines establish the tripartite structure of the poem: first there is the description of the trees, then there is the account of the young boy climbing the birches and finally there is the speaker's response to this imagined scene.

The speaker describes the effect of the winter storms on the birches. He notes the noise they make as the ice-coated branches 'click', 'crack' and 'craze'. The hard *cr* sounds capture the tapping of the frozen twigs. The thaw causes them to shed their icy coverings. These 'crystal shells' litter the ground so thickly that it seems like 'the inner dome of heaven had fallen'. This is a reference to medieval cosmology, which depicted the earth surrounded by crystal shells that held the sun, moon and stars in orbit. Shelley alluded to the same image in 'Adonais'. The great weight of ice bows down the trees. They never recover their original position but grow with their trunks arched and their branches trailing the ground. In a striking image, Frost compares them to girls, heads bent, drying their long hair in the sun.

The speaker departs from pure description to speculate about the cause of the trees' movement. He visualises a boy, alone in a natural setting, tempted from his chores by the trees. He imagines this boy to be independent and resourceful, someone who 'could

play alone'. The boy challenges authority. He defiantly subdues his father's trees until 'not one was left/For him to conquer'.

He flings outward, feet first, and rebelliously kicks his way to his destination. With practice, he combines caution with daring. Skilfully, like an artist, he learns the importance of maintaining his poise until he reaches his point of departure, then he launches himself with carefree abandon through the air until he returns to earth. Similarly, a poet learns with practice 'over and over again' to take the 'stiffness' from his verse until he has mastered the poetic technique. A good poet, like a good climber, must not launch out too soon but keep his poise and then, when the poem is completed, return to the prosaic world.

In the third section the speaker recalls that he was once a 'swinger of birches'. Now, when weary and troubled, he longs to recapture the freedom he knew in his youth. He would like to remove himself from the world for a short time and then return to begin afresh. This is not a death wish – 'May no fate wilfully misunderstand me ... and snatch me away/Not to return' – nor does he wish to escape from reality. 'Birches', Frost asserted, 'is not an escape poem. Anyone can see the difference between escape and retreat, and "Birches" is a retreat poem.' The speaker dreams of a temporary withdrawal from his worries. He describes this process as climbing towards, but never reaching, Heaven. He wishes to be set down gently again. Leaving and returning are both pleasant experiences. This leads him to conclude that 'One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.'





Themes

Balance

Frost's preoccupation with balance is evident from the opening line, where the birches 'bend to left and right'. The boy carefully climbs the trees until he is halfway between Heaven and Earth. He maintains his poise, 'not launching out too soon', and then at the right moment he kicks his way down through the air to the ground. Like the boy, the speaker in the poem wishes to get away and return. He believes in 'going and coming back'. Frost balances the images in his poem: the sunlight and the ice, the straight trees and bent birches, the climbing boy and the 'girls on hands and knees', the black branches and snow-white trunk, Heaven and Earth, air and ground. The need to achieve a measure of balance or equilibrium is an underlying concern in much of Frost's poetry, including 'Mending Wall' and 'After Apple-Picking'.

Language

The language in the poem is, for the most part, simple and colloquial. Frost addresses the reader directly ('Often you must have seen them', 'You'd think', 'When your face burns'). The conversational tone creates an intimacy between the poet and the reader ('But I was going to say', 'I'd like to get away'). Using the language of ordinary people is a hallmark of Frost's work. He contrasted this flat, almost prosaic speech with formal patterns such as 'So was I once myself a swinger of birches./And so I dream of going back to be' or the impersonal: 'One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.'





'OUT, OUT—'

Background

'Out, Out—' is based on an event that took place in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, in March 1910. Raymond Fitzgerald, the son of Frost's friend, was cutting wood with a chainsaw when he accidentally hit the loose pulley and lacerated his hand. A doctor was called, but the young man died of shock. The incident made a deep impression on Frost. He wrote the poem between 1915 and 1916.

A reading of the poem

The title of the poem is taken from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. When Macbeth is told of his wife's death he responds:

*Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more*

This poem, like Macbeth's speech, emphasises the brevity of human existence. The boy is depicted as a tragic hero, destined by forces beyond his control to meet an untimely and pointless death. The title may also refer to the blood flowing from the mutilated hand and the departure of life from the body.

The poem opens suddenly with the snarling machine cutting wood into sweet-smelling logs. The 'stove-length' logs will be burned for the life-supporting purposes of cooking and heating. However, the saw has the power to destroy as well as create. It reduces the

wood to dust. The reader is reminded of the description of the body's decay after death: 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust'. This image anticipates the fatal accident that will occur later in the poem. The mechanical noises, evocative of predatory animals and rattlesnakes, are suggestive of danger and death. The machine, a 'buzz saw' (chainsaw), sounds like swarms of angry, stinging and biting insects.

These threatening images are contrasted immediately with the tranquil beauty of the natural world, as represented by the Vermont mountains. The effect is to heighten the menace of the saw. Significantly, the whole scene is enacted against the background of the setting sun. The fading light foreshadows the darkness that is shortly to fall upon the boy. As the sun sets, the brief candle of his existence will also be extinguished. His sister, homely in her apron, announces that supper is ready. Like the stove-logs, supper is life-sustaining. With cruel irony, the saw takes its cue, leaps to devour the boy's hand and bites into the flesh. The biblical overtones here of the Last Supper, flesh and blood, point towards the boy as an innocent victim, needlessly sacrificed, as the bystanders look on. In a double irony it appears as if he held out his hand to the saw:

*He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting.*

The tragic hero always contributes to his own downfall. Betrayed by the embrace, he realises his fate:

*Don't let him cut my hand off –
The doctor, when he comes.*





The doctor, a figure traditionally associated with restoration and healing, unwittingly assists the malign forces operating against the young man, putting him in 'the dark of ether'. The boy dies. The final image of the living turning away from the corpse draws attention to the cold indifference operating in the universe that Frost frequently stressed in his work. Their attitude appears to concur with Shakespeare's conclusion that life is indeed a tale 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing':

Sentence structure

The opening lines that set the scene are long, flowing and descriptive. The lines shorten when the accident occurs; this quickens the pace of the poem and heightens the tension.

*And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No-one believed. They listened at his heart.*

The use of pauses and exclamation marks adds to the drama and further increases the tension.

*'Don't let him cut my hand off –
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'*

The multiple caesuras at the end slow down the pace in order to echo with three little words the last three heartbeats as the boy's life ebbs away: 'Little – less – nothing! – and that ended it.' The full stop refuses to admit any continuation of life or hope. The brisk, matter-of-fact attitude is summed up in the brief line 'No more to build on there'. The return to normality is indicated in the full-length closing line.

Tone

There are many shifts of tone throughout the poem. The anger evident in the opening line subsides into calmness with the descriptions of the 'Sweet-scented' logs and the peaceful sunset over the Vermont mountains, only to return with double force as the saw 'snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled'.

The narrator wistfully comments:

*Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy*

Unfortunately he continues with the work, and when the accident happens his reaction, ironically, is to laugh with shock. Fear and horror succeed rapidly as the terror-stricken boy pleads pathetically with his sister not to allow the doctor to amputate his hand. The irony here is that the doctor can save neither his hand nor his life. The coldly factual statement 'and that ended it' prevents any suggestion of sentimentality from entering the poem. 'Out, Out—' ends on a bitter note:

*... And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.*





SPRING POOLS

Background

This poem was written in 1925 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Frost lived while teaching at the university there. One spring evening, as he sat alone by a blazing fire, lonely and homesick, he thought of Vermont and New Hampshire, and the images that came into his mind prompted him to write 'Spring Pools'. The poem is influenced by the Romantic lyric 'To Jane: The Recollection' by Shelley and 'Ballad of Ladies of Olden Times' by Villons, which includes the line 'But where are the snows of yesteryear?'

A reading of the poem

The title of this poem suggests fresh growth and renewal in the natural world when warm spring days return. The scene described in the first stanza, however, is bleak and wintry. The clear pools mirror the sky through the bare, leafless branches. In this icy-cold world the flowers and water 'chill and shiver' as if aware that their existence will be brief and they will soon perish. The pools will be absorbed by the roots of the trees, which will use the water to produce their dark leaves. The leaves will overshadow the flowers, denying them the sunlight they need to survive.

The second stanza emphasises the power of the great summer woods, whose immense strength can easily obliterate the still pools and the delicate flowers. Yet the dark trees are vulnerable, like the 'flowery waters and these watery flowers'. The pools were formed from the melted winter snows, only to be destroyed by the trees. The trees themselves will be destroyed by time.

Imagery

Frost uses nature images to elicit a range of responses in the reader. The scene itself generates conflicting emotions. The tranquil setting, the still pool mirroring the spring sky, the flowers and bare trees inspire awe at the beauty of the natural world. Yet it is a very cold scene, where the shivering flowers and chill water communicate a feeling of unease and fear.

The trees are a powerful and threatening presence in the poem. The warning that they should 'think twice' before they annihilate the pools and flowers reminds the reader that they are subject to an even more powerful force, which is time, the relentless destroyer.

The reversed adjectives and nouns in the 'flowery waters and these watery flowers' evoke their frail beauty, yet the flowers feed on the pools and the pools were fed by the meltwaters from the snows destroyed 'only yesterday'. This final image of the brevity of existence does not permit a hopeful reading of the poem.

Rhyme and rhythms

A slow, steady pace is achieved through the use of long vowels, regular iambic pentameter and a strict rhyming scheme, *abcbcb*. This suits the solemn tone of the poem:

u - - u - - u - u - - u -

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect

u - u - u - u - u -

The total sky almost without defect'





The lines are long and sometimes run into each other in a conversational manner. Each of the stanzas is constructed around a single sentence. In the second stanza the lines flow almost without interruption, indicating the relentless processes operating in the natural world.

Themes

'Spring Pools' is more than a simple nature poem. It explores a number of themes found elsewhere in Frost's work.

Natural creation and destruction

The natural world destroys in order to create, and whatever is created is destined to be destroyed again. The snows melt into pools; pools water the flowers and both are annihilated by the trees to produce foliage; and the foliage will in its turn be killed by the winter snows. The cycle of creation and destruction is incessant, inevitable and inescapable.

Indifference in the natural world

The natural world is an indifferent place. The seasons follow one another inexorably, producing and destroying: the winter snows, spring pools and summer woods. Nothing is spared and existence is brief.

A bleak view of life

Time dominates creation. The massive trees, the small flowers, the deep snows and shallow pools are all doomed to destruction. The weak and strong alike will be swept away.

Natural beauty

The natural world is filled with beauty. This beauty should not blind us to the forces operating within it, nor shield us from the darkness that exists in nature.





ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

A reading of the poem

This is one of Frost's darkest poems. The mood is predominantly sombre, the tone unmistakably solemn. It expresses an overwhelming sense of anxiety, isolation and despair. The recurrence of the word 'acquainted' is an allusion to the passage in the Old Testament where the prophet Isaiah predicts the coming of one 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows ... acquainted with grief'.

While the speaker is presented as a solitary figure walking at night through the city, the poem can be read as a psychological journey, where the townscape is coloured by the mental state of the speaker himself. The scenes portrayed are mental projections, reflecting the mood of the narrator. The world is covered in darkness and unrelieved gloom. The incessant rain is indicative of his depression as he travels through the blackness beyond hope and comfort, symbolised by the reassuring city lights. In this 'saddest' of places he shuns human contact, refusing communication with any who might enquire. Jealously guarding his privacy, 'unwilling to explain', he retreats into his own silent world.

The silence is punctured by a distant impersonal cry. The cry is 'interrupted', hinting at possible violence, repression and suffering. The anonymity and impersonal nature of the incident deepens the fearful mood of the speaker. Yet he is not in immediate danger: the cry comes from far away, another street. These events occur

beneath the 'luminary clock' – the moon, or perhaps a real clock – which marks the passage of time. This clock fails to offer guidance or comfort to those who look upon its face: it proclaims merely that 'the time was neither wrong nor right'.

In this short poem Frost explores his recurrent themes. He refers to darkness, isolation, the passage of time, sorrow, indifference and an absence of communication between people. It is important to note, however, that the poem is set in the past. He writes that though he has 'walked', 'outwalked', 'looked', 'passed by', 'dropped my eyes', 'stood still and stopped the sound of feet', he has not escaped the night; instead, he has undergone his ordeal alone ('I' is repeated seven times in 14 lines), coped with it and survived: 'I have been one acquainted with the night.'

Form

'Acquainted with the Night' is a meditative lyric composed in stanzas of terza rima. This form consists of linked groups of three rhymes following the pattern *aba, bcb, cdc, ded* and so on. Frost was familiar with terza rima from his reading of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. Like Shelley's ode, this poem ends with a rhyming couplet.

Imagery

The poem is carefully crafted with images of darkness and rain overshadowing the first stanza, creating the bleak atmosphere that is sustained throughout. The images of light serve only to intensify the gloom. The city lights are distant, while the 'luminary clock' stands at an 'unearthly height ... against the sky'. The





second stanza is preoccupied with seeing and not seeing: 'looked', 'watchman', 'dropped my eyes'. The sounds accentuate the silences of the third stanza, reinforcing his isolation. The clock in the fourth stanza emphasises the impersonal nature of the world. The repetition of the opening line in the rhyming couplet is a reminder of the speaker's harrowing experience.





DESIGN

A reading of the poem

The title refers to the idea that there is a design underlying the universe and that the one who created this design is a benign god. The concept, common in many religions, is supported by passages in the Bible. The poem challenges this belief, forcing the reader to face the dark side of the natural world and to confront the possibility that either evil is built into the universe as part of the design or there is no governing design in the first place.

In the poem, the normally blue flower and black spider have mutated into an unnatural colour for them: they are both white. White, the colour of innocence and purity, is here associated with treachery and death. The unsuspecting moth is lured by the heal-all, a medicinal flower, into the clutches of the predatory spider. The plump, well-fed spider is 'dimpled'; the coupling of this word with a spider creates a sense of evil triumphing over its hapless victim. The bloated, gloating spider has wrapped the moth in silken threads, thereby preserving the body so as to eat it later. The shroud-like case resembles a 'piece of rigid satin cloth'. Here the satin-like threads are woven into a sachet to cover the stiffened moth.

In the sestet Frost considers what malignant force corrupted the 'innocent' blue heal-all, making it white, what evil brought the albino spider to the very spot where it could ensnare the defenceless moth and what 'steered' the helpless creature to its ghastly end. One possible answer is that there is a 'design of

darkness' woven into the very fabric of the universe. In the final line, however, a second possibility is proposed. The design, if one exists, may not affect 'a thing so small'; nature may be subject to a series of random incidents governed by chance.

The critic Lionel Trilling pointed out that Frost's poetry does not offer reassurances or affirmations of traditional beliefs; instead, it presents the terrible actualities of life. Randall Jarrell also commented on the bleakness of Frost's vision, noting that his poems 'begin with a flat and terrible reproduction of evil in the world and end by saying: it's so, and there's nothing you can do about it'. If we accept and submit to the evil that befalls us, it should not be because of a religious acceptance that it is all for the best, but simply because we, like the moth, are helpless to change the world. 'Design' offers little or no consolation to the reader.

Form

'Design' is a perfectly executed sonnet composed of 14 lines divided into an octet and a sestet. The octet is largely descriptive, with little comment. The sestet poses a series of questions raised by the scene described in the octet. The rhyming scheme is *abba, abba, acaa, cc*.

Imagery

Frost presents the reader with two contrasting sets of images. The first consists of the spider, the blighted flower, the witches' broth and death. The poet deliberately juxtaposes these images with beautiful and delicate objects – white satin, snowdrops, froth and





a paper kite – to contrast their innocent appearance with their deadly nature. The spider, plump and white, gorged, glutinous and murderous, has conspired with the blighted heal-all to kill the unsuspecting moth. The flower, moth and spider together form a horrific tableau representing death and disease. They appear to be the nauseating ingredients of a foul brew, prepared to begin the ‘morning rite’ (a play on the word ‘rite’). The scene, therefore, rehearses a daily ritual that casts an evil spell upon the universe. The effect is to ‘appall’ and to force the reader to examine the forces governing life and death.





PROVIDE, PROVIDE

A reading of the poem

In this poem the old woman washing the steps was once a young and beautiful actress in Hollywood. She did not realise that she would age, so she failed to provide for the future. Fallen on hard times, she is now reduced to being a charwoman. According to Frost, the opening lines were inspired by a strike of cleaning women at Harvard College. The poet suggests a number of ways of avoiding this woman's fate. One could die young, or, if destined to live a long time, become rich. He observes satirically:

*If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call you crone.*

The rich and powerful always inspire respect, no matter how old. Some people rely on their intellectual abilities for security, others on fidelity and loyalty. To escape degrading poverty in later life it is better to buy friendship than to have no friends at all. Frost strongly urges the reader to 'Provide, provide!' At public readings he usually added, 'Or somebody else'll provide for you! And how'll you like that?' He urges readers to avoid hardship and the need to buy friends by providing for themselves.

Themes

This poem, written in seven triplets, deals with some of Frost's major themes.

The effect of time

Time destroys the 'picture pride of Hollywood', turning her into a 'witch ... the withered hag'. It also impoverishes her; she must now 'wash the steps with pail and rag' to survive. Her fate is typical of many 'great and good'. Youthful success is soon eroded by time. The end is always hard unless one learns to provide for old age.

The importance of independence

Frost admired those who could stand alone and fend for themselves. A central theme in the poem is that one should take control of one's own destiny rather than be at the mercy of others. One should provide for oneself through accumulating wealth ('Make the whole stock exchange your own!'), power ('If need be occupy a throne'), knowledge ('Some have relied on what they knew') or friendship.

Old age

Old age is seen as disfiguring, transforming beauty into ugliness. It is described as a descent, a going down into loneliness and misery. The old are subject to degrading poverty and derision. No memory of past successes can console them for their present plight or prevent 'the end from being hard'.

Imagery

The poem is structured around contrasting images of youth and old age, beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty. These support the central theme: that youth and beauty eventually succumb to the ravages of time, and only those who provide for themselves will survive with dignity.





Frost uses images of witches, hags and crones to portray impoverished old age. These are contrasted with images of attractive, successful women. Frost chose Hollywood to represent a place where dreams and fantasies are brought to life. Dreams cannot survive in the real world; harsh reality explodes myths and fantasies. The screen goddess, the centre of attention, is now ignored as she scrubs the steps. But such hardships can be avoided. Political power and material wealth, symbolised by the throne and the stock exchange, are two ways of resisting the indignities of old age. Intellectual status, loyalty and 'boughten friendship' are means of surviving, ways of keeping 'the end from being hard'.





OVERVIEW OF ROBERT FROST

Background influences

Frost studied the classics, had a thorough knowledge of the Bible and was well read in European and American literature. The Romantic and Victorian poets played an important role in shaping his poetic theory.

Romantic poetry (1798–1832)

Romantic poetry was written against a background of social, political, economic and religious change, not unlike the changes experienced by American society from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Frost was drawn towards aspects of their poetry when formulating his own distinctive poetic style.

- Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, among other Romantic poets, believed that poetry should express the poet's own mind, imagination and feelings. His emotions, thoughts and experiences should form the central subject of his work.
- The lyric, written in the first person, became the preferred Romantic form. The 'I' is often the poet himself, not a persona created by the poet.
- The natural scene, accurately observed, is the primary poetic subject. Nature is not described for its own sake but as a thought-provoking stimulus for the poet, leading him to some insight or revelation.

- Romantic nature poems are usually meditative poems. The landscape is sometimes personified or imbued with human life. There is a reaction against a purely scientific view of nature. Humans are depicted as isolated figures in the landscape.
- The Romantics subscribed to Wordsworth's belief that poets should 'choose incidents and situations from common life' and write about them in 'language really spoken by men' who belong to 'humble and rustic life'.
- Wordsworth insisted the poet should use 'a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect'.
- The poet's visionary imagination rises above his limited, sense-bound understanding and enables him to see things in a new way. The Romantics displayed a keen interest in visionary states of consciousness, dreams, nightmares and heightened or distorted perceptions.
- Romantic poetry is concerned with mystery and magic, folklore and superstition. The role of the imagination is related to the importance of instinct, intuition and the emotions or the 'heart' as the source of poetry, even though the 'heart' may be tempered by the 'head', the logical and rational faculty. According to Coleridge, 'Deep thinking is attainable only by a man of deep feeling.' The capacity to imagine permits the poet to enter a higher visionary state and regenerate the world.





Important Romantic poets:

- William Blake (1757–1827)
- William Wordsworth (1770–1850)
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)
- George Byron (1788–1824)
- Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)
- John Keats (1795–1821)

Victorian poetry

Frost studied Victorian poetry in great detail. He cited Thomas Hardy and Robert Browning among his favourite poets. Three features of this poetry made a particular impression on him:

- The use of traditional forms, such as the sonnet
- The revival of the narrative poem, prosaic in style and casually colloquial in tone
- An abiding awareness of time and its effect on humans

Robert Browning (1812–89)

Browning turned the dramatic monologue into a major art form. Many of his best-known poems are dramatic monologues. Frost saw the potential of this form for his own work. Browning experimented with diction and syntax, creating a harshly discordant style in some poems. Frost was intrigued by the possibilities of playing discordant sounds off one another in a poem.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

In his poetry, as in his novels, Hardy shows natural forces shaping human destiny. He portrays his characters at the mercy of indifferent forces, victims of fate in a world governed by chance. Like Frost, Hardy did not believe in a universe ruled by a benevolent god. Frost felt Hardy came closest to his own perception of life.

American writers

Frost was familiar with the works of such American writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), Walt Whitman (1819–92) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62).

Emerson was a philosopher and poet. He founded the Transcendentalist movement, which revered nature, and, like Frost, had been influenced by the Romantic movement. He encouraged writers and poets to make ordinary life the subject matter of their works.

Walt Whitman produced *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. This volume contained poems that were distinctly American in their setting and subject matter.

Thoreau wrote extensively about his experiments in self-sufficiency. The concept of the individual struggling to survive in rural America appealed to Frost.





Poetry and the historical tradition

Poets are part of a wider literary community and their works belong to the historical tradition. Each poet can look back at the works of previous poets while at the same time providing new material for the next generation. Frost believed the works of earlier poets provided a treasury of images and ideas available to all writers. He drew on the ideas and images, disguising and subtly altering his allusions, thereby enriching and deepening his poetry. The Bible, the classics, Shakespeare, metaphysical poetry, Romantic poetry, Emerson, Victorian poetry, popular ballads, even nursery rhymes provided him with material for his poetry.

Some themes and issues

The natural world

Frost was a keen observer of the natural world. Plants, insects, geographical features and the seasons have their place in his poetry.

- Creatures: dimpled spiders, trapped moths, bewildered butterflies
- Plants: butterfly weed, blue or white heal-all, yellow leaves, dark pines, apple trees, birches, russet apples, summer forests
- The physical world: spring pools, winter snows, the sky, brooks, Vermont mountains
- The seasons: autumn and winter are the dominant seasons, with falling leaves, bare trees, snow, ice, chill winds and rain

The natural world is rarely described for its own sake or as a background against which the action of the poem takes place. Instead, nature leads the poet to an insight or revelation. Often a comparison emerges between the natural scene and the psyche, what Frost called 'inner and outer weather'.

Frost's descriptions of nature are not sentimental. He describes a world that is bleak, empty and cold, where creatures suffer in silence and humans feel isolated. His natural world contains blight, darkness and death and therefore can be threatening, hostile or indifferent.

Isolation and communication

Humans are depicted as figures of isolation in the landscape. Not only are they isolated but they represent loneliness, and thereby acquire symbolic status. Loneliness can be seen as a human condition. Efforts to communicate effectively are at best difficult ('The Tuft of Flowers') and frequently fail ('Mending Wall'), are sometimes rebuffed ('Acquainted with the Night') and can have unforeseen consequences ('Out, Out—').

Frost shared with Emerson and Thoreau the belief that individuality and the independence of the individual were very important. Frost in particular felt that people should stand alone and make their own choices. Note the repetition of 'I' in his poems.

The role of fate and chance

Frost is far less affirmative about the universe than the American Transcendentalists. Looking at nature, they discerned a benign creator, whereas he saw 'no expression, nothing to express'.





In Frost's world, God is either hostile or indifferent to the plight of helpless creatures, who, like humans, are victims of fate or chance. His poetry records an ever-present, underlying darkness that erupts in a random manner with tragic consequences.

Mutability – the effect of time on people and nature

Time is perceived as being destructive:

- Yesterday's flowers wither
- Winter snows melt, spring pools are drained by trees, trees lose their leaves in autumn
- The boy dies at the end of the day
- Time destroys beauty and impoverishes the elderly

The effect of time can be overcome to some extent by the power of memories and the imagination ('The Tuft of Flowers').

The role of the imagination

The imagination enables the poet to see the world in a new way. In brief, intense moments he may enter a higher visionary state. This allows him to regenerate his imaginative and creative capability and provides him with fresh insights and new inspiration for his poetry. This state cannot be sustained for long, however, and he must return to the real world.

Style and technique

Language

From his study of Hardy's writing, Frost learned how to achieve simplicity in poetry through the use of a few well-chosen words. He made a conscious effort to use ordinary language in his

poems and captured the full range of human emotions, from joy to sorrow and from exaltation to fear, through the use of plain, monosyllabic speech. He stressed the importance of colloquial language, as it was appropriate to the subject matter in his verse and made his poetry accessible to a wide audience. Frost played the colloquial rhythms against the formal patterns of line and verse and constrained them within traditional forms, such as the sonnet or dramatic monologue. The plain diction, natural speech rhythms and simplicity of images contrive to make the poems seem natural and unplanned.

Frost used repetition for effect, to emphasise and to add to the musical quality of his verse. He described sound in the poem as 'the gold in the ore' and added that 'the object in writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other'.

Rhyme

Unlike many American poets in the twentieth century, Frost upheld formal poetic values during the modernist era, when formal practices were widely abandoned. He emphasised the importance of rhyme and metrical variety, observed traditional forms and developed his technical skills. He could claim without fear of contradiction that 'I am one of the notable craftsmen of my time'. His poetry is written so that the rhyming 'will not seem the tiniest bit strained'. He used terza rima, end-of-line rhymes, full and half-rhyme. He also wrote in blank verse.

Verse forms

Frost used a wide variety of verse forms, including the sonnet, dramatic monologue, narrative and lyric. His preferred metre was





based on the strict or loose iambic, as it echoed ordinary speech. The verse derives its energy from the tension that evolves when a rhythmic pattern based on strict or loose iambic metre is set against the irregular variations of colloquial speech.

Imagery

The imagery in Frost's poems is deceptively simple. There are images from the natural and the human worlds. Some are everyday and ordinary, some are grotesque and macabre. In a number of poems, such as 'Spring Pools', the imagery carries the meaning. Frost uses precise details to recreate the colour, texture and sounds of the world within the poem. This makes his poetry richly sensuous. Yet using the same technique, he can paint a cold, bleak scene that is chillingly realistic. His use of similes and metaphors creates layers of meaning in his poems. In 'Mending Walls', for example, the wall can be understood to be something that unites or divides, something that should be maintained or cast down. It can be physical, political, cultural or psychological.

Tone

The tone of voice used is vital to the meaning in Frost's poems. His poetry displays a great range of tone and it may vary considerably within a particular poem. It can be precise and matter of fact, sympathetic, sad, relieved, strong and confident, despairing, humorous, dark and ironic, wistful or weary.

First person narrative

Frost frequently used the first person for his narrative. The reader is permitted a glimpse into the speaker's life at a specific moment,

often during a crisis. The use of the first person creates a feeling of reliability: the reader is given a first-hand account of an event and trusts the accuracy of the narrator. The authenticity of the story is never doubted, such as in 'Out, Out—'.

Dramatic stories

A strong narrative structure is apparent in many of Frost's poems. The narrator takes the reader through a series of events and actions which lead to a dramatic conclusion. These events are often thought-provoking or provide an insight into life.

'The figure a poem makes'

The following is an essay by Frost, published as an introduction to *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, 1939.

Abstraction is an old story with the philosophers, but it has been like a new toy in the hands of the artists of our day. Why can't we have any one quality of poetry we choose by itself? We can have in thought. Then it will go hard if we can't in practice. Our lives for it. Granted no-one but a humanist much cares how sound a poem is if it is only a sound. The sound is the gold in the ore. Then we will have the sound out alone and dispense with the inessential. We do till we make the discovery that the object in writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other, and the resources for that of vowels, consonants, punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, metre are not enough. We need the help of context – meaning – subject matter. That is the greatest help towards variety. All that can be done with





words is soon told. So also with metres – particularly in our language where there are virtually but two, strict iambic and loose iambic. The ancients with many were still poor if they depended on metres for all tune. It is painful to watch our sprung-rhythmists straining at the point of omitting one short from a foot for relief from monotony. The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless. And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.

Then there is this wildness whereof it is spoken. Granted again that it has an equal claim with sound to being a poem's better half. If it is a wild tune, it is a poem. Our problem then is, as modern abstractionists, to have the wildness pure; to be wild with nothing to be wild about. We bring up as aberrationists, giving way to undirected associations and kicking ourselves from one chance suggestion to another in all directions as of a hot afternoon in the life of a grasshopper. Theme alone can steady us down. Just as the first mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as metre, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.

It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still

in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood – and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad – the happy-sad blend of the drinking song.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialised from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick. Modern instruments of precision are being used to make things





crooked as if by eye and hand in the old days. I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity. We prate of freedom. We call our schools free because we are not free to stay away from them till we are sixteen years of age. I have given up my democratic prejudices and now willingly set the lower classes free to be completely taken care of by the upper classes. Political freedom is nothing to me. I bestow it right and left. All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material – the condition of body and mind now and then to summon aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment. Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art. A school boy may be defined as one who can tell

you what he knows in the order in which he learned it. The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic. More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts. Originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. For myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.





QUESTIONS

1. 'The human being, lonely, helpless, and in crisis, is the main concern in much of Frost's poetry.' Discuss this statement with reference to three or more poems you have read.
 2. 'Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom.' Consider Frost's poetry in light of this statement.
 3. 'Frost's poems are a celebration of the ordinary.' Discuss this opinion with reference to three or more poems you have read.
 4. 'The local and the universal are seamlessly woven together in the poetry of Robert Frost.' Is this statement justified? Explain your answer, referring to four poems by Frost.
 5. 'Frost's poetry depicts the world as dark, dangerous and ultimately indifferent.' Discuss this statement with suitable reference to the poems on your course.
 6. 'Natural images are used to convey human emotions and moods in the poems of Robert Frost.' Examine four poems by Frost in light of this statement.
 7. 'Frost takes a pessimistic view of life, unrelieved by any gleam of hope.' Discuss.
 8. 'Frost's poems are deeply sensual.' Comment on Frost's use of language and imagery in light of this statement, referring to at least four poems you have studied.
 9. 'Universal truths plainly expressed are a feature of Frost's poetry.' Discuss.
 10. 'Frost's poems are strangely beautiful, unbearably bleak.' Consider this statement, referring to at least four poems in your answer.
11. 'Sound is the gold in the ore.' Examine the importance of sound in Frost's poetry.
 12. 'A wide range of tone and mood is found in Frost's poetry.' Discuss, referring to at least four poems in your answer.





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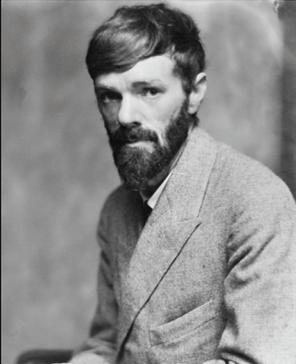
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D. H. LAWRENCE

Notes and Explorations: Louise O'Reilly

HL 2019

OL 2019

HL 2020

OL 2020

HL 2022

OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Call into Death

Piano

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What have they done to you?

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INTRODUCTION

The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention and 'discovers' a new world within the known world.

D. H. Lawrence

Lawrence wrote in 1928:

All poetry needs the penumbra of its own time and place and circumstance to make it full and whole.*

** the surrounding area in which something exists.*

In studying the poetry of Lawrence it is important to be aware of the time and place in which he wrote as well as his own personal circumstances at the time. The period of time between the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century saw huge developments in political, philosophical and scientific thought. It also saw the destruction caused by World War I and the increasing tensions that led to World War II. Lawrence reflected these thoughts in his writings as his own beliefs changed and developed. His personal life was also tumultuous at times and this is reflected in his writing.

Education

David Herbert Lawrence was born in 1885 in the coal-mining town of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire England. The son of a coal miner, Lawrence had always been a sickly child. He had missed a lot of school in his childhood due to illness but still managed to gain a

scholarship to Nottingham High School in 1898. His mother, Lydia Lawrence *née* Beardsall, pushed him to excel in school.

By 1901 he was working as a junior clerk in Haywood's surgical appliance factory but this ended with a severe bout of pneumonia. During his recovery, he spent a lot of time at Hagg's farm and formed a close bond with the daughter of the family, Jessie Chambers, who shared his love of writing. He began writing poetry around this time and started drafts of some of his published early work. Between 1902 and 1906 he worked as a pupil-teacher at the British School in Eastwood. By 1908 he had received his teaching Certificate from University College Nottingham and moved to Croydon in London to start his first teaching job. Also in this year, he had his first stories published including *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. By 1910 Lawrence's first novel *The White Peacock*, was published but this was also the year his mother died, which had a profound impact on the writer. After another bout of pneumonia, he eventually abandoned teaching to be a full time writer.

Romantic entanglements

Lawrence had numerous romantic entanglements in his early twenties, including a brief engagement to Louie Burrows, but in 1912 he was introduced to Frieda Weekley, *née* von Richthofen, the wife of his former university professor, Ernest Weekley, with whom she had three young children. Six years his senior, Frieda made a big impression on the young writer and after an exchange of letters and an intense affair, they ran away to Germany together. Their time in Europe was spent travelling from place to place,





starting in Germany, moving through the Alps and into Italy. They eventually returned to England and settled in Cornwall for a time.

His next novel *Sons and Lovers* was published in 1913 to excellent reviews. The couple married in 1914 when Frieda obtained her divorce and they were confined to England for the course of the War.

Condemnation

In 1915 his novel *The Rainbow* was published but it was very quickly condemned by reviewers due to its frank descriptions of sexual desires. By November the publishers were prosecuted on an obscenity charge and remaining copies of the book were seized and burned. For the young Lawrence this was a devastating blow. The possibility of publishing future novels was now doubtful and publishers rejected his works of fiction. In 1917 he managed to publish *Look! We have come through!*, a collection of poetry that charted his life with Frieda. He followed this with a number of short stories.

Years of exile

Once the war ended the couple left England and started their years of exile. They travelled through Italy, Sardinia, Switzerland and settled for a brief time in Taormina in Sicily. It was during this time that he wrote many of the poems that became *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) including 'Snake' and 'The Mosquito'. His next novel, *Women in Love*, was published in 1920 with numerous edits and revisions demanded by the publishers. Lawrence foresaw that his work would never be well received in England and set his

sights on America. The Lawrences travelled to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Australia before settling for a time in Taos, New Mexico.

His relationship with Frieda was tempestuous and they were both known for their infidelities. From 1924 onwards, Lawrence's health increasingly deteriorated. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and in early 1925 suffered from a combination of typhoid, malaria and influenza. When he had sufficiently recovered, he and Frieda returned to Europe and settled in Italy. By 1926 he had started what became his most famous novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and had also started painting.

His paintings were exhibited in the Warren Gallery in London in the summer of 1929. However, the gallery was raided by policemen in July and thirteen of the paintings were seized on the grounds of obscenity. Lawrence was outraged and started a collection of stinging attacks on the perceived hypocrisy called *Nettles*. A heavily censored version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published in America in 1928 and in Britain in 1932 after the author's death, but the full version of the text was banned until 1960.

His health continued to decline and he eventually agreed to be admitted to a sanatorium in Vence, France. But, in typical Lawrence style, when he failed to recover he discharged himself, refusing to succumb to the pressure of his illness. He decided to die as he lived, on his own terms. Under the care of Frieda and a nurse, Lawrence died on 2 March 1930.





CALL INTO DEATH

Background

Written in 1910, shortly after the death of his mother, this poem reveals the deep sense of loss experienced by Lawrence at her death. His feelings about his own life are ambivalent and he seems to wish for release from his earthly cares.

A reading of the poem

The death of the Lawrence's mother in 1910 inspired this poem. He was very close to his mother and was devastated by her death. Lawrence himself had been quite ill throughout his life and suffered from severe bouts of pneumonia and bronchial complaints. The poem opens with the plaintive, yearning phrase 'Since I lost you'. The poet addresses the subject of the poem directly, the one lost to him, and outlines his despair at the discontent and dismay he experiences as a result of this loss. He addresses her as 'my darling', 'my dear' and 'my love' revealing the intimacy once experienced and now lost to the poet. He expresses his deepest fears and feelings, but the one he would have shared these with has gone, and this loss is keenly felt.

In the first stanza Lawrence uses images of the sky, moon and stars to express the groundlessness he feels, 'the sky has come near/ And I am of it'. The moon moving among the stars like a maternal figure is compared to a white bird among snow-berries. The snow-berries, sometimes called corpse berries, were thought to be food for ghosts and are not palatable for humans. The overlapping images of the maternal figure and the bird are again echoed in the

final line of this stanza 'the sound of her gently rustling in heaven like a bird I hear'. The simple rhyming of near, near and hear in the first stanza make the starkness of the emotion evident while the harsh sibilance of the 'small sharp stars' reveals the depth of the hurt felt by the poet.

In the second stanza the poet states his willingness to follow her into death but his release is described more like a letting go than taking flight: 'As a pigeon lets itself off from a cathedral dome'. The oblivion sought by the poet is emphasised by the repetition of 'lost' in the last two lines of the stanza; 'To be lost in the haze of the sky; I would like to come/And be lost out of sight with you, like a melting foam'. The ephemeral nature of the state of being he seeks is captured in the images of the 'haze of the sky' and the 'melting foam'. These insubstantial images provide the dissolution he seeks. His desire to abandon the physical world and join his mother is repeated in the final lines of the poem 'To fall like a breath within the breathing wind/Where you are lost, what rest, my love, what rest!'

But, for Lawrence, the physicality of his despair results in his inertia. He is tired and cannot act. He describes his feet as 'tenacious', they keep his grip on this life, on this earth and will not let him go. The instinctual desire to survive and live means his torment is continued. The emphasis on 'breath' and 'breathing' in the second last line reinforces the physical nature of life and makes the wistful 'what rest, my love, what rest!' more poignant as the poet realises that 'the rest' is an illusion and he cannot go regardless of how tempting the prospect may be.





Rhyme and imagery

The poem is written in the Georgian/Imagist style which uses rhyme rather than free verse. The tension, evident in the rhythm and flow of the poem, conveys the constraining nature of the poetic form when faced with the task of trying to encompass his overwhelming emotion. The images used throughout the poem reflect several symbols commonly used by Romantic poets such as the white bird and the breathing wind but Lawrence takes these clichéd images and makes them his own. In contrast to the purity represented by the white bird, Lawrence compares himself to a pigeon, tainted by the world he lives in and unable to let go of the cathedral dome. He is outside the structures of religion and holding on to life tenaciously.

Themes

Death

The poet views death in an appealing manner. The call into death does not seem like a fearful prospect. Death is where his loved one is and the temptation of joining her again is almost palpable. Life, it seems, is wearying and the poet wishes to descend or ascend into oblivion where he can melt into nothingness. But the instinct to cling tenaciously to life remains and his feet refuse to let go of the dome of the earth.

The mother/son relationship

The tender endearments Lawrence utters suggest a close, loving relationship between mother and son. He cannot imagine life without her; life does not seem worth living. Her presence is felt

in the stirring air, 'The sound of her gently rustling in heaven like a bird I hear' but he cannot take flight and join her. What he longs for is the comfort and security that her presence would bring, 'Where you are lost, what rest, my love, what rest!'





PIANO

Background

This version of the poem was written in 1918 and published in a collection called *New Poems*. These poems marked a departure for Lawrence. While rhyme is still present, the rhythm of the poem takes precedence. In trying to capture the emotion, the poet uses structure and form to explore the emotion rather than constrain it.

An earlier version of this poem was more maudlin and wistful. Here the poet distills his memory down to the essential elements and presents a vivid depiction of a man overcome with emotion due to his nostalgic recollections of the past. Music plays a key feature in the poem and the swelling cadence of the lines echo the swelling emotion of the poet. The poet avoids sentimentalising the past by being aware of the 'insidious' nature of nostalgia. It 'betrays' him back to the past. Despite his awareness, the poet admits he is overcome and weeps like a child for the past. 'Piano' is elegiac in tone and the poet gives precise attention to his feelings. While Lawrence notes the discrepancy between the past and present, he does not try to retain his ironic detachment but instead feels his emotions intensely.

A reading of the poem

The poem begins with a simple image – a woman is singing to the poet at nightfall. By setting the poem at dusk, Lawrence situates the events as between worlds – night and day, past and present. Throughout the poem both past and present are evident, existing

side by side. The song of the woman takes the poet back to a time in his childhood when he sat under the piano as his mother played and sang. The poet distances himself from the image by referring to the characters as 'a child' and 'a mother'. As an adult he is aware of the passage of time and of the ability of time to distort and romanticise the past. The word 'vista' implies a broad expansive view provided by the distance of the years passed. But the familiarity of the music brings him back to this moment in his past. He is now external to the scene and can only view it as an outsider rather than participate in it.

The song creates images of an idyllic past, 'Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside/And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide'. The contrast between the warmth and security created in the family parlour and the harsh cold winter outside echo the contrast between the past and present as experienced by the poet. The fact that the past cannot be reached or recreated makes it all the more bittersweet for the poet to be caught up in the illusion cast by the singer and her song.

The power of the song to create such an illusion is hinted by the use of words such as 'in spite of myself', but yet the poet views this in a negative light as the melody is 'insidious' and Lawrence states that it 'betrays me back'. The poet knows the memory of the past is a fantasy and tries to resist the lure of memory. The sprung rhythm and simple *aabb* rhyme replicate a simple nursery rhyme or hymn but the trochaic structure (a stressed syllable followed by a weaker syllable, which gives the impression of falling, e.g. SOFT-ly), places the stresses on words that hold the attention of the poet and force the reader to slow down and experience the lurching trip into the past with the poet.





The rhythm builds in the final stanza, just like the song, but the poet is already lost in the memory of the past. The present jars with the memory of the past; the 'clamour' of the singer and the hulking 'great black piano appassionato' contrast with the soft tinkling. The spell of the music has been cast, however, and the poet is caught up in the remembrance of his childhood. The full force of his emotion is caught in the enjambment of the final couplet. The 'flood of remembrance', the powerful, unstoppable force of the past has cast down his manhood and reduced him to childishness. The man cannot openly weep for the past long gone, but the child within him weeps for what has been lost. His childhood innocence and security represented by the idealised image depicted of family life has no place in the realistic present.

Themes

Mother/son relationship

Lawrence deals with themes of family, time and loss in this poem. The family unit displayed, however, only consists of the child and the mother. Nothing else matters or has any meaning for the young child. The warmth and security created in the scene by the 'cosy parlour' contrasts with the distant cold outside and yet the contrast echoes the past and present experienced simultaneously by the poet.

Transience of time

The passage of time cannot be stopped. While music may return the poet down the vista of years, he can only observe. The aural imagery of the piano as a 'tinkling' guide to the past differs from the child's perspective where it is described as a 'booming' noise. The weeping of his heart builds to the image of the unstoppable flood in the last line.

Lawrence admits that the loss of innocence and youth is inevitable, yet he cannot escape from a romanticised view of the past, from youthful innocence. Lawrence reveals the lure of nostalgia but he is equally aware of the 'insidious' lure of the past.





THE MOSQUITO

Background

This poem was written in Siracusa in Sicily in 1920 when Lawrence's evolving poetic style focused on a detailed examination of a moment. In this case it is a detailed examination of an encounter with a mosquito. Lawrence's attitude towards the mosquito is hostile from the beginning. He is accusatory and petty in his dealings with the insect. He uses a dialectic style to question the mosquito and query his motivations in attacking him. The poem builds in scale to an epic battle of wits between poet and insect, until the insect is defeated and all that remains is a smear of blood. The poem contains very graphic imagery of the actions of the mosquito. The act of biting the poet is described in sexual terms. Famously, John Donne's poem 'The Flea' similarly uses the flea's bite as a sexual analogy. Here Lawrence takes that conceit but stays firmly within the physical realm. The actions and physicality of the mosquito remain central to the poem and the poet aims to capture the intense irritation, frustration and satisfaction such an encounter can provoke.

A reading of the poem

The poem begins with an examination of the mosquito but it soon develops into a battle of wits between the poet and the insect. He begins the poem with a series of questions directed at the mosquito, querying his actions or, as he calls them, 'tricks'. He addresses the mosquito as 'Monsieur', usually a term of respect, but here it carries a note of derision. The poet questions the

mosquito's need to stand tall on 'such high legs' with his 'shredded shank'. While the word 'shank' refers to the leg it is also used informally as a term for an implement such as a knife, so even the long legs of the mosquito seem dangerous to the poet. The legs of the insect raise it higher than it needs to be and the poet seems to regard this elevation with the same derisive tone as in the opening line, 'You exaltation'.

As the poet continues his microscopic examination of the mosquito he deduces that the long legs enable the insect to sit upon him without his notice. Its centre of gravity is raised and so the insect seems 'weightless' and can escape the attention of someone less vigilant than the poet. As the poem progresses, the poet addresses the mosquito in a variety of ways, from 'Monsieur' and 'You exaltation' to 'you phantom'. The poet then remembers another name given to the mosquito by a woman in 'sluggish Venice', the 'Winged Victory'. Mosquitos thrive in stagnant water, so 'sluggish Venice' is a perfect breeding ground for the mosquito larvae.

The 'Winged Victory' refers to a statue presently in the Louvre called the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (c.220–185 BC). The statue is missing various features, including its head, so the figure could be seen as resembling the shape of the mosquito. The winged figure represents the messenger goddess Victory (sometimes also called Nike). She would visit the earth bringing news of a victory in battle or competition and would present the victor with his laurels or crown. More importantly, she would take part in a sacrifice to the gods to celebrate the victory. The





mosquito, throughout this poem, is seen as engaging in a battle of wits with the poet. They each struggle for supremacy, despite the difference in size. The mosquito celebrates with a blood sacrifice, the blood of the poet. The representation of the mosquito as the Winged Victory then echoes not only the shape of the statue but also the actions of the goddess herself. As only female mosquitos bite, the depiction of the female goddess is also quite apt.

The poet personifies the mosquito as being quite smug as it turns its head towards its tail and smiles when addressed as the Winged Victory. His attitude towards the insect is revealed in the numerous ways he references the evil and supernatural aspects of the mosquito: 'so much devilry', 'evil little aura', 'translucent phantom', 'Ghoul on wings' and 'pointed fiend'. Yet the other aspect of the insect's existence is also acknowledged: its frailty and vulnerability. The body of the insect is called a 'frail corpus' and its 'thin wings and streaming legs' should mean that it could be easily disposed of. But the mosquito has other tricks in addition to its seeming weightlessness. The ability to numb the area to be bitten the poet calls 'filthy magic', the 'anaesthetic power/to deaden my attention in your direction'. The mosquito is viewed as a magician, 'casting numbness' on its victim like a spell. The 'streaky sorcerer' is the ultimate hunter; it will 'stalk and prowl the air/In circles and evasions'. The rhythm builds as the poet is caught up in the hunt and tries to outwit the mosquito. His triumphant assertion 'But I know your game now' contrasts with the realisation that the mosquito is 'enveloping' him with his tricks and turns.

The rhythm pauses, like the chase, with the line 'Settle and stand on long thin shanks/Eyeing me sideways'. The mosquito is

'cunningly conscious' of the poet's attention and the alliterative phrase gives the insect the upper hand in this game of cat and mouse. The poet breaks the tension with the aggressive and bitter 'You speak'. The mosquito had pre-empted the poet's actions and lurched 'off sideways into the air'. The actions are so swift that it seems the insect has read the poet's mind, yet another of its tricks.

The poet then issues a challenge, 'Come then, let us play at unawares,/And see who wins in this sly game of bluff./Man or mosquito.' The game is now on and the poet must assert his superiority over the insignificant speck. But the burning hatred the poet has for the mosquito is ignited by its last trick, its trumping blast. The noise of the mosquito causes the poet to become distracted. The repetition of 'It is your trump,/It is your hateful little trump' displays how passionately the poet dislikes the high-pitched noise. Lawrence compares it to a bugle blast traditionally used in a military attack to signal an advance on the enemy.

The rhythm changes as the poet allows himself to ponder the nature of the noise. He questions why it exists: to warn potential victims perhaps, evidence of divine protection for the innocent? But, no, he cannot accept these explanations as it sounds too much like a 'yell of triumph' and in his moment of distraction, he is bitten.

All attention is now focused on the blood drawn by the mosquito. 'Blood, red blood/Super-magical/Forbidden liquor.' The blood, like a sacrifice in a pagan rite, has magical properties. It is forbidden and so has an element of supernatural attraction. The vampiric mosquito has taken its fill and relishes its victory. It now is filled





with such ecstasy that it is 'enspasm'd in oblivion'. The graphic nature of the mosquito's fulfilment is seen by Lawrence as obscene, 'Obscenely ecstasied', but the poet is also transfixed by the event and repeats 'Sucking live blood, My blood.' The scene is suspended in time as both poet and mosquito are fixated on the event. The poet's repetition of 'such' shows his disbelief, 'Such silence, such suspended transport', but he feels violated by the mosquito as it gorges on the poet's blood, 'Such obscenity of trespass'.

The mosquito has won the battle and taken first blood but now it is weakened by its victory. Filled with its conquest it can only 'stagger' but its weightlessness and fragility allow it to be wafted away on the very breeze caused by the poet's movement, 'wafts you away on the very draught my anger makes in its snatching.'

The poet's anger builds in the final stanzas as he calls it a 'winged blood-drop' and questions his own ability to defeat the insect, 'Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?' The ultimate victory of the poet is not described, only the aftermath. The mosquito is now merely a blood-stain and a 'faint smear' as the poet reduces his existence to a 'dim dark smudge'. While the poet is victorious now, there is a sense that the mosquito outwitted him in their epic battle and he will still be plagued by more of its ilk.

Rhyme and rhythm

The rhythm, in the poem replicates the rhythm of the chase. As the poet becomes more frustrated by the elusive mosquito, the pace of the poem quickens and swells. When the mosquito alights on the poet the rhythm also pauses. In this way, the poet uses

free verse to capture his emotions and focuses attention on the spontaneity of the moment.

Theme

Man versus nature

In this poem, Lawrence explores the natural world through his examination of the mosquito. His distance from nature is articulated in his initial respectful salutations to the mosquito, 'Monsieur', but his bitterness and disdain become increasingly obvious with his building frustration, 'You speck!'. In this poem, as in 'Snake' and 'Humming-bird', nature remains alien to the poet. He can question, analyse and evaluate the aspects of nature he is examining, but he cannot completely understand or be at one with it.





SNAKE

Background

This poem, written in 1920 while the poet and his wife were staying in Sicily, consists of a simple narrative describing his encounter with a snake at the water-trough at his home. As with all of Lawrence's poems the simple narrative reveals other layers of meaning that explore man's place in the natural world, the role of societal conditioning and the pressures of masculinity. The fluid structure of the poem emulates the motion of the snake. The rhythm, assonance and enjambment throughout lend the poem a sinuous quality that reflects the reptilian traits of the snake.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with a simple statement, 'A snake came to my water-trough'. The day was hot and the poet was wearing only pyjamas. This leads to a sense of vulnerability evident in the poet. He is not dressed in protective clothing, just something light and flimsy, no match for the venomous teeth of the snake.

The sibilant 'strange-scented shade' mirrors the slithering snake in the water-trough. The poet must wait his turn to use the trough, even though it belongs to him, as the snake is there first. This polite adherence to social custom, 'must wait, must stand and wait', is second nature to the poet and yet still surprising to the reader as it acknowledges the snake's right to be there. The repetition of the word 'wait' echoes the inertia of the poet as he must wait his turn. The poet does not seem to fear the snake, instead he is fascinated by his movement and describes him in

great detail. Some critics have argued that Lawrence is critiquing the social classes here. The upper class, represented by the snake, take what they want from the well while others must wait in line.

The third stanza traces the movement of the snake from his hiding place in the cool earth-wall to the bottom of the trough where he drinks his fill. The soft sibilance runs through the stanza: 'slackness soft-bellied down' and 'softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body, Silently'. The snake is described as almost lethargic, 'rested his throat upon the stone bottom' and the assonance here slows the line to the snake's languid pace. The entire stanza has the same slack rhythm of the snake, with its trailing lines and leisurely pace. The snake is described in civilised terms – he 'sipped' his water. This civility and decorum exhibited by the snake is at odds with the rash, violent actions of the poet later in the poem.

Lawrence compares the snake to cattle drinking, mildly eyeing their surroundings. The comparison to cattle may seem strange at first, but it echoes elements of the story from the book of Genesis where a snake is also the central figure. Biblical references abound throughout the poem, but unlike the story of the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the snake does not seem to be a devil in disguise. The snake in fact is respected and revered by the poet. By the end of the poem the snake is compared to 'a god', 'a king in exile' and 'one of the lords/Of life'.

The imposing volcanic mass of Mount Etna is smoking and along with the image of the 'burning bowels of the earth' an atmosphere of turbulence and threatened destruction is created. The Greek





god Typhon was supposedly buried under Etna after being cast down by Zeus. The link between fire imagery and the snake continues in this stanza as the snake 'flickered' his tongue, rather than flicked. The harsh, aggressive alliterative 'burning bowels' of the smoking Mount Etna conveys this underlying threat of violence.

The poet analyses the situation and 'the voice of his education' tells him that the snake must be killed. The command is uttered in absolutist language, 'He must be killed'. There is no room for dissent. Critics have argued that here Lawrence is questioning the operation of societal conditioning. We are taught to believe some things, or people, are dangerous without questioning the situation for ourselves. In addition, the voices in his head also question the poet's masculinity: 'If you were a man/You would take a stick and break him now'. The poet, however, does not respond as expected. He confesses that he liked the snake and was glad he had come to his water-trough to drink, 'I felt so honoured'.

The poet uses anaphora when he repeats the phrase 'Was it ...' at the beginning of successive lines in the ninth stanza. He questions his own reasoning for not attacking the snake. The poet, in a moment of self-reflection, admits his fear. He is afraid, but also honoured that the snake has chosen him and sought his 'hospitality'. Lawrence is not afraid to reveal his own insecurities in his poetry. These insights provide a deeper awareness of the poet as man, one who has societal pressures and internal conflicts just like everyone else. This exposition of his faults and weaknesses can give his poetry an almost confessional air but also allows the reader to relate to his predicament.

The snake, sated by his drink, lifts his head and slowly retreats from the scene. This slow, languid movement and the prospect of losing the company of the snake, spurs the poet into action. The nook he is returning to is described as 'that dreadful hole' and 'that horrid black hole'. The poet is repulsed and yet now that the snake is 'deliberately going into the blackness' he resorts to the violence that he was incapable of earlier. He puts down his pitcher, picks up a log and throws it at the snake.

The poet's actions lack the fluidity of the snake's. The log is described as 'clumsy' and he does not think he hit the snake. The snake reacts to this assault. He 'Writhed like lightning, and was gone'. Bereft, the poet can only stare in fascination at the 'black hole' and regret his actions. The imagery used by Lawrence focuses on the physical and sensual actions of the snake, 'And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther'. The phallic image of the snake and the corporeal 'earth-lipped fissure' further amplifies the sexual nature of the description. The peaceful snake has been struck by the violent human and leaves in 'undignified haste' which contrasts with his earlier slow, deliberate movements. Here, it is man who is violent and aggressive and the snake is depicted as the civilised pacifist.

The final four stanzas of the poem deal with this regret. The poet realises that the act was 'paltry', 'vulgar' and 'mean' and he hates the voices of his education that encouraged his actions. He compares himself to the central character in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. In this poem, the sailor, to make amends for killing an innocent albatross, is condemned to repeat his tale. The poet has caused the snake to disappear and now he must tell





the tale to try to atone for his mistake. The snake is now described as 'a king in exile' returning to the underworld. The poet has to live with his actions and must try to make amends. The use of 'expiate' has religious overtones as it is usually used to repent for sins. The poet has sinned but he is left with the absence of the snake as his punishment.

Themes

Man's relationship with the natural world

As in 'The Mosquito', the natural world here is represented as a different, alien place. The snake is depicted as a civilised, peaceful being that holds a position of authority. The poet feels like the interloper who must wait in turn for the snake to drink and feels inferior to the elegant, graceful snake. The departure of the snake leads to the poet's violent actions and ultimate regret of those actions.

Societal conditioning/prejudice

The voices of his education make the poet question his actions and prompt him towards violence. The imperative, 'He must be killed', doesn't allow the poet to question the wisdom of the order. Society has conditioned the poet to believe the truth of the statement 'the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous'. The poet subtly questions the perceived wisdom of societal 'truths': should we always believe what society tells us to believe or should we question each situation ourselves? The implicit prejudices of society are brought to the fore by Lawrence and so, raises the reader's awareness of these prejudices.

Masculinity

In 'Piano' Lawrence compares his emotional state with a casting down of his 'manhood'. The association of emotional sensitivity with a lack of masculinity is continued here. The voices in his head question his masculinity when he fails to instantly kill the snake according to societal expectations, 'If you were a man/You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.' A man is expected to react with violence, as indeed the poet does by the end of the poem. But, by failing to adhere to his natural peaceful instinct, Lawrence is left regretting his violent outburst. This exploration of what it means to be a man in the modern world has even more relevance for the modern reader. The conflict between inherent instinct and the expectations of others is internalised by the poet but by revealing this conflict to the reader Lawrence raises questions without being didactic.





HUMMING-BIRD

Background

Written in 1921 while the poet was living in New Mexico with his wife, the poem takes one element of the natural world, in this case the humming-bird, and examines it in detail. Unlike poems like 'Snake' and 'The Mosquito', the poet does not give the reader a narrative of an encounter with the bird, instead his imagination is taken up with imagining the evolution of the bird. Lawrence takes us back to a primeval swamp, where we would scarcely recognise the birds and beasts.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with the poet as central to the experience 'I can imagine'. He takes us on his imaginary journey to an 'otherworld', a place where everything is strange and discordant. The free verse structure of the poem reflects the chaos and uncertainty of this world. Lawrence intersperses long, fluid phrases with short, staccato descriptions such as 'Primeval-dumb'. The dumb relates to the silence, nothing makes noise, there is an 'awful stillness'. But, it also relates to the lack of civilisation in this evolving world. Everything is simple in this otherworld. The silence 'gasped and hummed' as if trying to become articulate, trying to make itself understood. But into this world the humming-birds 'raced down the avenues'. Why the avenues? The broad expansive image is cultured and domestic, yet here the humming-birds raced. Their speed and agility are in contrast to the 'Primeval-dumb' and the stillness of the preceding lines.

*Before anything had a soul,
While life was a heave of Matter, half inanimate,*

The depiction of the primeval world relies on emerging scientific theories on matter. All things are made of matter; matter is weighty and ponderous. Here the world exists, before spirituality, before life has become fully animate. The word 'heave' suggests the great lumbering weight that is struggling to form and exist in this formless world. But the humming-bird is described as 'this little bit chipped off in brilliance'. This accidental fragment is 'brilliant' and whizzes through the 'slow, vast succulent stems'. This flash of brilliance could be the creative spark that resists the limitations of form that Lawrence's poetry could represent. The contrast between the 'whizzing' bird and 'slow' stems is to be expected. Flowers and plants are not known for their swift motion. Yet here Lawrence uses the plants purely to display the chaotic movement of the bird: a stationary object all the better to show the energetic, fleeting movements of the bird as he 'flashed ahead of creation'.

The poet continues his ruminations on the nature of the primeval world and asserts his belief that there were no flowers then, only vegetables. The bird 'pierced the slow vegetable veins' giving us a violent, aggressive image of the humming-bird feeding on the plants. Lawrence takes this image even further when he imagines the bird as a huge 'jabbing terrifying monster' when seen through the 'wrong end of the telescope of Time'.

The humorous 'Luckily for us' is Lawrence acknowledging that we don't live in this fictional world. But the words ring hollow. Part of





him does seem to wish for this inverted world where humming-birds can be huge and terrifying. Lawrence's need to subvert and undermine expectations is evident here.

The image of the bird may represent the chaos of the creative impulse striving to resist the lure of the inert matter, the pulsating life force that Lawrence tried to capture in his poem. The small dainty humming-bird is as unknowable and alien as any other creature depicted in his poetry. Its otherness is what makes it fascinating. Unlike Romantic poets who strove to find themselves in nature, Lawrence examined nature and found its fundamental difference and man's alienation from that world.

Themes

Man and the natural world

As with 'The Mosquito' and 'Snake', Lawrence examines the otherness of the natural world and man's alienation from it. The humming-bird, which seems now to be a benevolent creature, is described in graphic terrifying terms. Lawrence warns us against complacency when facing the natural world. The telescope of time can turn the tables very quickly and man's dominance should not be presumed.

Creativity

The speeding bird, racing ahead of creation may be seen as a symbol of the creative process itself. The bird ignores all the rules and races down the avenues, just as Lawrence moved away from the constraining rules of poetic form and developed his own poetic style.





INTIMATES

Background

This poem is from a later volume of Lawrence's poetry published after his death as *Last Poems*, and the style here is much more controlled than the outpouring of spontaneous thought evident in his poems from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* such as 'Snake', 'The Mosquito' and 'Humming-bird'. Here, Lawrence appears to return to a formal structure but continues to subvert stylistic formalities. This poem takes the form of a dialogue between two lovers, which was common to the poetry of the Romantic poets, but Lawrence uses a mocking tone throughout and litters his text with over-explosive exclamation marks. His sense of humour and irreverence for the form could mask the serious thought underlying the poem. The influence of existential philosophers and thinkers of the time led Lawrence to question the self and one's own sense of self-importance, themes which emerge clearly in this poem.

A reading of the poem

'Intimates' can be read in a number of ways: a bitter argument between two lovers where the poet ridicules his lover for her vanity and flees the scene at the end, or Lawrence may have layered this with other readings that reveal a significant depth in the relationship.

The poem opens with the bitter exclamation of the lady of the couple. She is referred to only as 'she' or 'her' throughout the poem, depriving her of any identity or depth. All we know of her is

through the reflection given to us by the poet. Her initial question is given 'bitterly' and she is held 'spellbound' by her own reflection. This echoes the story of Narsissus who glimpsed his reflection in a pool and was so entranced by the image that he lost the will to live. In the Greek myth, Narsissus was led to the pool by Nemesis as revenge for the disdain Narsissus had shown to those who had loved him. Here, the lady is equally disdainful of her lover. She peevishly asks 'Don't you care for my love?'. Her question is not 'Don't you love me?' but rather self-centredly asking if he doesn't care for her love, as if she is doing him a favour by giving her love to him. The relationship may be viewed then as one-sided – from this one perspective at least.

When charged with answering this question the poet responds by handing her a mirror. The mirror has a long history as a poetic symbol. It has been used as a reflection of the soul, as a means to represent clarity or self-awareness and as an illustration of the contrast between illusion and reality.

*And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I your glass
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of.
– William Shakespeare (Julius Caesar)*

Lawrence takes this well-known trope and the myth of Narsissus to explore a different aspect of the lovers' relationship. As he is handing over the mirror, the poet makes several exclamations 'Please address these questions to the proper person!', 'Please make all requests to head-quarters!' These exclamatory remarks





seem like an over-reaction to the sulky question posed at the start. Is the poet trying to make his partner take responsibility for her own happiness in their relationship? Why should she make all requests to 'head-quarters'? Surely, these are matters of the heart and not the head. What is Lawrence suggesting about the dynamic in a relationship where the head and heart are not in agreement? Or, is he suggesting that she must cease her emotional neediness and accept their relationship for what it is?

The poet refers to her as the 'proper person' and the 'supreme authority'. There are hints here of the respect with which he regards her. He does show that he cares for her love by redirecting her to herself. She is the most important thing in the relationship, she takes the lead in all matters of 'emotional importance'. Their relationship is strong enough that he can make fun of her and she can threaten him with breaking the mirror over his head. The poet's playful note at the end of the poem 'while I fled' may reveal the playfulness inherent in their relationship.

Throughout the poem the poet poses questions about reflections and emotions. He responds by handing her a mirror by which to see her own reflection. The emotional support she needs, according to the poet is all present within herself. This is proven when she is spellbound by her reflection at the end. Is to love ourselves all we need in a relationship?

Themes

Love and relationships

Lawrence provides just a snapshot or caricature of the couple so whether it is true love or not is difficult to discern. Probably written in 1929 when the poet was facing his approaching death, the characters' peevish nature and self-absorption may have been a reflection of his relationship with Frieda at the time. She was not noted for her empathetic character and was probably not the best nurse for the ailing Lawrence. The poet may also be commenting on society at the time and the increasing self-importance and vanity he witnessed. This poem can be viewed as a study of the fashionable emancipated ladies of the 1920s or a scathing attack on the insidious nature of self-absorption.

Appearance versus reality

The use of the mirror in the poem to reveal truth is interesting. The poet hands the lady the mirror to reveal the person she should be talking to. New theories of psychoanalysis and psychology emerged in the 1920s and Lawrence was very aware of these works (in fact he wrote various essays on the topic). Freud wrote of the structure of the psyche as containing the id, ego and super-ego. The id was the instinctual, unorganised aspect of the personality, the super-ego is the critical moralising aspect and the ego mediated between the first two. Does the mirror here reveal the super-ego or the id? The instinct or the critic? What is real when one loses oneself in a reflection or does the reflection reveal the inner truth?





DELIGHT OF BEING ALONE

Background

This poem was written towards the end of Lawrence's life when he was suffering physically from tuberculosis and was very frail. His wife Frieda had to deal with his business affairs, the plans for the exhibition of his paintings in London and juggle her many romantic encounters. The change in tone of his later poems, where Lawrence struggled with his dwindling physical strength, contrasts with the spontaneous vivacity of his earlier work. Like other poets, such as Keats, who died relatively young from consumption, Lawrence displays the tension between finding a mature voice while also being aware of his own approaching mortality. These contrasts can be found throughout this poem in the images of the cool, isolated moon and the triumphant ash growing splendidly despite the elements.

A reading of the poem

Lawrence, continuing his autobiographical style, begins the poem with an expansive assertion 'I know no greater delight than the sheer delight of being alone'. The repetition of delight and the growing urgency of 'greater' and 'sheer' build the expectation of the line that then unexpectedly falls away on the word 'alone'. The drop in rhythm creates a sense of anti-climax. A poet who had revelled in the physicality of being and the fraught intensity of relationships reveals his need for isolation.

The sensual sibilance of the 'delicious pleasure of the moon' shows Lawrence's lust for life is still visible but now it is focused

on the gentle, aloof quality embodied by the moon. The moon is female and she travels by herself 'throughout time'. The immortality of the moon is in contrast to his own approaching mortality.

The tone changes abruptly as the poet turns his attention landward, this time to the 'splendid growing of an ash-tree'. The image of the ash tree thriving, despite its situation on a hillside in the north, may indicate Lawrence's view of himself as a writer and artist. The ash tree, despite the harsh environment, is resilient, fast growing and renowned for sprouting again despite being cut back. Similarly, Lawrence suffered the harsh realities of a northern miner's family life and the many persecutions he endured after the publication of his works, his thoughts turn to the immortality of those works. His art exhibition was shut down amidst accusations of obscenity and his books were discussed in parliament and extensively censored or banned. The tree is 'humming in the wind' and creating music from the elements just like Lawrence himself. But, the tree is also alone. The pause on the word alone forces the reader to stop and take stock before the rhythm once again gathers pace.

The controlled passion of the poem is typical of the poet's later style. The use of halting rhythm and rolling enjambment is Lawrence revealing his poetic skill while refusing to adhere to poetic rules or devices of the past.





Themes

Isolation

Despite the great vitality apparent in Lawrence's earlier poems, this poem reveals his desire for isolation. The creative process demands a single-mindedness and the poet relishes this isolation. Even though he is depicted as being alone, he is not lonely. He compares himself to the moon and the ash tree, each isolated but strong and resilient.

Adversity

This brief, pithy poem focuses on objects that are resilient and long-lasting, both features that were absent from his life at this time. Facing the adversity of public censure and increasing dependence due to his illness, Lawrence looked to objects from the natural world that he wished to emulate. The moon looks down on the earth below and the tree grows stronger in the biting wind. Lawrence wishes these things for himself; the capacity to rise above the persecution and grow stronger as a result.





ABSOLUTE REVERENCE

Background

This poem was written when Lawrence's health was failing and in it Lawrence expands on his philosophical views of creativity. Raised by a strictly orthodox Methodist mother, Lawrence declared himself an atheist at an early age. However, his philosophy is not agnostic. He believed in a divinity that can be experienced in the world, though this divinity can be found in the natural world and in the experience of the creative life force rather than in the realms of organised religion.

A reading of the poem

The title of the poem hints at a religious theme. Reverence is associated with the feeling of religious respect and the word 'Absolute' allows for no deviation from that respect. Absolute requires blind obedience with no questioning of authority. The title therefore calls to mind a strict religious injunction to believe and unquestioningly observe the tenets of a religion. The poem opens, however, with Lawrence steadfastly admitting to his lack of respect and reverence. The list of things he has no absolute reverence for is quite detailed. He has no absolute reverence for 'nobody and to nothing human'. The obvious imperfections of humans and society leads Lawrence to reject any absolute reverence for such things.

He then goes on to list the other more abstract things he lacks reverence for: 'ideas, ideals nor religions nor institutions'. For Lawrence and his belief in the constantly evolving nature of the world, no idea or ideal can be held in such reverence that it

cannot be questioned. The religions and institutions represent the structures that society has tried to impose on the world. They are so caught up in their own traditions and conventions that questioning, spontaneity and vitality are rejected. This is not something that Lawrence can accept.

He does admit that he feels 'respect, and a tinge of reverence' for them but only when he sees 'the fluttering of pure life in them'. In his poetry Lawrence references a life force, a vitality of being that reveals the divine. This 'fluttering of pure life' can be found in all things and where it exists Lawrence can give his respect and some reverence. But for Lawrence, the difficulty is with the 'absolute'.

Lawrence reserves absolute reverence for the creative force. This force is 'unseen, unknown, creative'. The mystery remains and it cannot be fully understood or logically argued. It is mystical and beyond the ability of a mere mortal to articulate. Its ability to inspire makes Lawrence feel like a mere 'derivative', a pale imitation, a poor copy. And for that Lawrence feels absolute reverence. The powerful creative force, which is central to all existence, is the only thing that Lawrence can have absolute respect for. For a poet and writer, the unquestioning belief in the creative urge is essential. Lawrence takes it further and almost deifies that creativity. For Lawrence, that primordial urge to create is central to man's existence. There is no further explanation necessary and so he ends with the exclamation 'Say no more!'





Theme

Creativity

The theme of creativity and its significance in his life is touched on in this poem as it was in 'Humming-bird'. While creativity was viewed as a spark that whizzed without rules in 'Humming-bird', here it is described as 'unseen' and 'unknown'. He describes himself as 'derivative', a poor copy, and yet one learns a craft by copying from the best. Essentially, creativity is something that Lawrence views with the utmost respect and reverence.





WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?

Background

This poem was written in 1929 when Lawrence was in Forte dei Marmi in Tuscany. At the time his artwork was on exhibition in London and had been raided by police for obscenity. His last novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had just been published amidst scathing reviews and heavy censorship, again due to the public perception of obscenity. Lawrence was suffering from tuberculosis and focused on writing short pithy poems, sometimes with scathing undertones. Even though he had not been in England since 1926, this poem critiques modern British society. The image of the 'masses' has socialist undertones and the apparent success of the soviet state would have informed Lawrence's thinking at this time.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with the lamenting phrase 'What have they done to you, men of the masses, creeping back and forth to work?' The 'men of the masses' are nameless, faceless workers, drones of industry. They 'creep' to work. Are they scared or terrified of what awaits them or, are they reduced to animals that must creep below the upper classes who control the means of production? Their movement 'back and forth' echoes the repetitious machines they work on. This work has made them soulless and devoid of the spark that defines humanity.

Lawrence mockingly refers to the factory owners as 'the saviours of the people'. But the only thing they saved was money, while the people were 'devoured'. The horrific image of the 'vast maw of

iron' depicts the factory machines as savage beasts that greedily swallow up the 'frail' workers. The assonance of the 'vast maw of iron' gives the image a weighty strength and hints at the insatiable appetite of the machine.

The industrial bosses are also nameless and faceless and referred to simply as 'They'. Lawrence begins to list their actions, like a list of criminal offences of which he finds them guilty, 'they took away', 'they stole'. But unlike earlier poets who contrasted the industrial grime with a pastoral idyllic past, Lawrence is not so blinkered or nostalgic; he knows that they were saved from 'squalid cottages and poverty of hand to mouth'. But Lawrence is concerned with another type of poverty, the poverty of experience. While the workers receive a wage for their work and a dole payment if they don't, the work itself is meaningless and cannot fulfil the other needs of man. The 'native instincts and intuitions' common to all men are taken away by such a life. Instead, all knowledge and culture now comes from mass produced sources such as 'board-school education, newspapers, and the cinema'.

While Lawrence is disparaging of the worth of a 'board-school education', he himself worked as a teacher earlier in his life. A system of mass education had been introduced in Britain in the 1902 Education Act, but the narrow curriculum and dependence on rote learning left little room for imagination and creativity. Lawrence's attitude towards cinema is captured in his contemptuous description of the masses 'goggling at the film'. This passive entertainment for the masses and the trivial gossiping of the 'ha'penny press', in Lawrence's opinion, leaves the masses





as little more than ‘an animated carcass’. (Nearly one hundred years later, similar complaints are levied against computer games, smart phones and social media). The passion for life is missing and the workers continue with their paltry existence. Lawrence is left to bemoan the situation with his repetition of ‘Oh what have they done to you?’

Throughout the poem, Lawrence uses varied sentence length, rhyme and rhythm to create a layered narrative. His use of assonance in phrases such as ‘frail dangers’, ‘squalid cottages’ and ‘animated carcass’ gives voice to his anger and bitterness. He rages against the inexorable advance of the machine and the passivity of man in the face of this onslaught. He extols the reader to ‘look at them/the masses’, and is left repeating his rhetorical question, ‘Oh, what has been done to them?’ He finishes the poem at a distance from the masses he has addressed as ‘you’ throughout the poem. It is now ‘them’ he refers to. Despite his anger and frustration he can no longer reach his fellow man and ends on that note of despair.

Theme

Man and the modern age

The modern era in Britain is given a scathing review in this poem. Lawrence is dismissive of the benefits of modern society. The impact of industrialisation on man is to dehumanise him. Man has lost all instincts and intuition and is now a slave to the machine age. The repetition and questioning throughout the poem leave the reader with a sense that all hope is lost for mankind.





BABY-MOVEMENTS II, “TRAILING CLOUDS”

Background

The title of this poem is taken from the Wordsworth poem *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*.

The line reads:

*But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy.*

The poem asserts Wordsworth’s belief that a child retains some knowledge of the divine and, as maturity emerges so innocence and divinity are also lost. Like all Romantic poets, Wordsworth utilises imagery from nature to illustrate his themes. The ode is a very formal style. The poem consists of eleven stanzas of varying lengths and structures but with a controlled metre and rhyme.

This poem, while it shares the same subject matter, is very different. Lawrence immerses himself and the reader in the moment. The sense of immediacy is captured in the extreme focus on the physicality of the moment. The poem was written while Lawrence was in lodgings with the Jones family in 1908 and is written about their young daughter, Hilda May, then less than a year old. Lawrence wrote a sequence of poems called *Baby-Movements* of which ‘Trailing Clouds’ is one. In the other poem, ‘Running Barefoot’, the child is referred to as ‘the baby’ but here Lawrence makes the moment more immediate by referring to the child as ‘My baby’.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with the simile of the bee. Like a bee in the rain hangs from the flower, the child clings to the poet. The alliterative ‘drenched, drowned bee’ emphasises the physical torment the bee has experienced. It now ‘hangs numb and heavy’; it has survived the rain but is numbed by the experience. The slow, measured rhythm is created by the stressed ‘numb’ and ‘heavy’. Contrary to the usual depiction of the busy bee, here it has fought for survival and is now weary. The pause after ‘My baby’ gives breathing space and allows the poet to focus in on the details of the baby’s physical appearance. Her hair is wet with tears. Some childhood calamity has occurred but we are not informed of the details of the event. We only see the aftermath. She is ‘hanging heavily’ over the poet’s arm listening to a lullaby. The tender scene of the poet comforting the crying child is vivid and spontaneous. Unlike Wordsworth’s formalised ode, Lawrence captures an everyday moment in simple imagery. The focus is on the physical rather than the divine. Her ‘brown hair’ and ‘soft white legs’ are not idealised but given in a naturalistic style that lends authenticity to the moment. For Lawrence, awareness of the physical nature of life was essential and this is seen throughout this poem.

The total dependence of the child is explored in the latter section of the poem. She ‘hangs upon [his] life’ and relies on him for sustenance. Just like the bee at the end of the rain shower can over burden the flower, the poet now feels a weight of responsibility that was not felt before: ‘she who has always seemed so light’. But the child has experienced great sorrow. She is emotionally bruised by the event and needs the comfort of the





poet to sustain her. She is described as ‘storm-heavy’ and ‘storm-bruised’ and, like the drenched, drowned bee, may not fly again.

In response to the Wordsworth poem, Lawrence takes the image of the child’s divinity but places it in a very real setting. This child is living, breathing, crying and weighty. This is not an idealised concept with which to ponder life’s mysteries. For Lawrence, the real mysteries of life are found in the moment, and in an awareness of that moment. The child has had an emotional experience and in that moment has discovered a harsh reality of life; things do not always turn out as expected. This awareness of the disappointment life can bring weighs heavily on the child. This growing maturity, like the loss of innocence in Wordsworth’s ode, leads to her loss of the divine. The ‘floating hair’ now sinks, the wings ‘are a heaviness, a weariness.’ The angelic wings are weighed down by the realities of life and so innocence and divinity are lost.

Theme

Loss of innocence

The loss of innocence is found twice in the poem. The baby loses the innocence of thinking that all will be well when, heavy with tears, she clings to the poet. The poet too, loses innocence. The burden of responsibility is felt for the first time and this growing maturity has sparked this rumination on youth. The poet uses images from nature to describe the baby and her emotions. The bee, the flower and the storm all capture the growth, innocence, strength and frailty of the child.





BAVARIAN GENTIAN

Background

This is the final version of a poem that Lawrence worked and reworked in the final year of his life. The Bavarian Gentian of the title is a deep blue, trumpet shaped flower similar to the pansy. The flower takes on emotional significance to the poet as it symbolises his preparation for death and his transition to another realm of being.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with a rhyming couplet 'Not every man has gentians in his house. In soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas'. The individuality of man is asserted at the beginning; not everyone has these flowers. The almost jaunty opening rhythm is quickly subsumed by the long slow vowels in the second line. The caesura, or pause, after 'September' further enhances the ponderous atmosphere in the couplet.

The poet goes on to describe the flowers that often adorned his sickroom in his final few months. The darkness is encroaching on the poet's life, 'tall and dark, but dark/darkening the day-time'. Throughout the first stanza the duality of the flowers as torches is repeatedly emphasised, 'torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom' and, 'their blaze of darkness spread blue'. But, juxtaposed with these images of darkness are images of light and brightness, 'the heavy white draught of the day' and, 'Demeter's yellow-pale day'. These two things, light and dark, can only exist

in opposition to the other. You cannot have light without dark. This duality is found throughout the poem. Images of life and death, growth and decay, physical being and oblivion all exist side by side.

Although death is never explicitly mentioned in the poem, the journey into death is imagined by Lawrence. This journey is purely fantastical. He has no reference point for the journey and must rely on paradox and oxymoron to try to capture the unknowable. The paradoxical 'dark-blue blaze' and the 'black lamps ... giving off darkness' try to capture this inverted world where the physical gives way to the insubstantial. The flowers seem to be summoning him to the otherworld. As Lawrence was approaching his own death at this time, the attitude displayed in this poem could be read as an acceptance of death.

The myth of Persephone and Pluto forms the backdrop for this poem. Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter, like her mother, was associated with the harvest and the abundance of crops. Her abduction to the underworld led to a time of barrenness and decay for the earth. Her return in the spring marks a time of new growth and renewal. The poet's focus however, is on the journey to the underworld. The darkness and gloom of Pluto's realm seems to seep into the poem and drain the life of the flowers themselves. But for Lawrence what makes a flower a flower is that it will bloom and die. If it did not die, then it would be an imitation of a flower and would lose its worth. This approach to living life and accepting death is one of the central themes in this poem. Acceptance of the active process of dying and moving forward on the journey can be seen in his imperative demands 'Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!/let me guide myself'.





The 'halls of Dis' are not an easy path, however. Throughout the third stanza the atmosphere is dark and deceptive. Nothing is clearly lit and one can easily lose one's way. The poet demands a torch, a guide in the darkness, the gentian – 'the blue forked torch of a flower'. The descent into the underworld is down 'the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness'. Like the descent into the subconscious alluded to in the writings of Freud and his psychoanalyst counterparts, this journey moves away from the physical conscious being to a more abstract thought. The hypnotic rhythm of the descent creates an atmosphere of calm acceptance. The repetition of darkened, darkness and dark creates this hypnotic rhythm. Everything is unknown but there is no fear.

Persephone begins her journey in 'first-frosted September'. The first frost is the reminder that winter is approaching and cannot be stopped. The seasonal cycle moves on inexorably, just as all mortals must move towards death. The individual is gradually eroded as the descent continues. Even Persephone becomes 'but a voice'. But as with most of Lawrence's poetry, the delight in and awareness of the physical is essential for the appreciation of the life force. Persephone's reunion with Pluto is described in sensual terms:

*as a bride
a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again
and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark*

The use of words like 'ravishes' and 'pierces' reiterates the physical nature of their union. The repetition of 'once again' and 'once

more' builds the climax of the reunion. They are man and wife and their union symbolises life and death. The duality is needed to become whole. The end of the physical self is necessary, but Lawrence describes it in sexual terms. By the final line of the stanza, everything is inverted. The 'torches of darkness' rather than shedding light on the mystery of death instead are 'shedding fathomless darkness on the nuptials'. The poet's journey has been superseded by the union of Persephone and Pluto in the underworld. The individual is no longer important as we all must travel this path and so the journey is a universal one.

The poem ends with 'I will go to the wedding, and be wedding-guest at the marriage of the living dark'. The rest of the myth is not alluded to. The rebirth of nature and the return of Persephone to the real world mark the return to the beginning of the cycle. The ability of nature to renew itself after the harshness of winter is not a luxury that the poet can experience. His approaching death cannot be avoided and its inevitability colours his views on death. The poem ends in the darkness of the unknown as that is all that the poet can see. The 'utter dark' of Pluto's passions could imply a lifeless realm but by the end of the poem Lawrence is a guest at the wedding of the 'living dark'. Could this symbolise a recognition of an eternal life? Or possibly the representation of the dark slumbering winter before the rebirth of spring? Each of Lawrence's poems provides a brief snapshot of his thoughts in a moment of time and this poem captures his fears and acceptance of death.





Themes

Death

The poet's obvious preoccupation with death dominates this poem but Lawrence faced his death the same way he approached his life – with vigor. The use of the myth of Persephone and Pluto lends his personal experience a universal significance. The journey to the underworld is one that multiple mythologies from around the world have tackled as it is the mystery that all men must one day face. By using Persephone, herself a symbol of seasonal change, Lawrence's journey is presented as part of a larger cycle. Everyone must die. Such is the nature of life. The physical union of Persephone and Pluto is graphically sexual. Like all elements of his writing, Lawrence rejoices in the physical and even death is a physical experience.





OVERVIEW OF LAWRENCE'S POETIC STYLE

According to Lawrence 'the essence of art is its ability to convey the emotions of one man to his fellows'. Throughout the evolution of his poetic style, this focus on capturing the intensity of a moment and detailing the emotion precisely was central to Lawrence's style. He believed in living life deeply and experiencing it intensely. Lawrence's poetic style changed and evolved over the course of his writing career but certain themes such as life and death, nature and love, continued to reappear as his beliefs and thoughts developed in response to the times he lived in.

His poetry can be broadly divided into three separate stages. His early work focused on themes of love and relationships, and was mostly autobiographical. His middle works focused on the natural world and capturing his intense experience of it, and his later works where his approaching death and his disillusionment and frustration with society focused his attention on the realities of life.

G.G Williams (1951) said of Lawrence's poetry:

Each of Lawrence's poems is like a highly coloured fragment of some unassembled whole. To put the fragments together, to construct from the complete philosophical mosaic, is not an easy task.

To approach his style then is like approaching fragments of thought. Each poem contains a snippet of Lawrence's thought but you must view the selection in order to grasp an overall view of the poet and his works.

Georgian and Imagist style

Lawrence's first experiments in poetry tended to replicate the poetic forms favoured by the Romantic poets of his youth. A feature of this Georgian style included a short nature poem in rhyming verse. 'Call into Death' encapsulates some of this style with its focus on the natural world, its repetition, rhyme and layered similes. His themes at times can be overly sentimental but, like his more mature work, he uses the natural world around him as a springboard for his thoughts and emotions. His efforts to constrain his emotions within a strict poetic form created a tension within the poems. This tension was found in the rhythm. In a letter in 1913, Lawrence wrote: 'my rhythms fit my mood pretty well in the verse. And if the mood is out of joint, the rhythm often is'. The rolling rhythm is evident in the opening lines of 'Call into Death':

*Since I lost you, my darling, the sky has come near
And I am of it, the small sharp stars are quite near*

This is offset by the caesura, or pause, in the middle of the second line and the harsh sibilance of the 'small sharp stars'. The rhythm is out of joint, as indeed is his mood. His sense of loss is palpable. This use of rhythm as a means to express intensity of emotion remained a constant in his poetry as his style evolved.

In 'Piano', Lawrence uses the same enjambment (run-on line) and caesura to display the overflow of emotion:

*...The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for
the past.*





Lawrence himself was quite dismissive of his early poetic works and said:

Any young lady might have written and been pleased with them; as I was pleased with them. But it was after that, when I was twenty, that my real demon would now and then get hold of me and shake more real poems out of me.

Lawrence referred to his creative impulse as his 'demon'. He had sought to suppress it in his early poetry but as his style developed he tried to allow his 'demon' to speak without interference. This spontaneous, vivacious style can be seen in particular in his volume of poetry *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. In these poems nature remains an unknowable and alien thing. Unlike the romantic poets who sought oneness with nature, for Lawrence, nature always remained mysterious and beyond the comprehension of man. Lawrence was influenced by the Imagist style of poets such as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. The Imagist style described images with simple language and great focus. The style also breaks away from traditional concerns with rhyme and metre and instead uses free verse.

The poems 'Snake' and 'The Mosquito' both utilise a dialectic style (using a dialogue or conversation). Lawrence engages in a conversation with these creatures from the natural world. He questions the mosquito:

*When did you start your tricks,
Monsieur?
What do you stand on such high legs for?*

His questions reveal and explore his attitude towards the mosquito but in 'Snake' the dialogue is internal. He questions himself and his own motivations:

*Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?*

But the dialogue is also with the voices in his head, the voice of his education telling him the snake must be killed and the voices of his own self-doubt:

If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

This questioning style gives his poetry the immediacy and spontaneity that characterises the poems of his middle style. His focus on an intense experience brings the reader into his world. Lawrence's writing was deeply rooted in his awareness of and relationship with his surroundings. The poet is also not afraid to reveal his innermost fears and personal shortcomings. This intense almost confessional style makes Lawrence's poetry uniquely personal. Modernist poets concentrate on the personal response to nature and in this manner Lawrence conforms to the modernist style.

'Baby-Movements II, "Trailing Clouds"' is also written in the Imagist style. Its loosened rhythms and frequent repetition are typical of this form of poetry. The poet intensely focuses on a brief moment when the child is overcome by emotion. In that instant the poet is aware of both the child's reaction to its emotions and her dependence on him. The drama of the situation is captured in the poet's active attention to the details of the scene, 'her brown hair brushed with wet tears' and 'Her soft white legs hanging





heavily'. Each image is accompanied by a simile to further reveal the importance of each aspect – 'As a drenched, drowned bee', 'like storm-bruised young leaves' – but the simple language and repetition retain the focus on the key elements of the poem.

Philosophical thought

Lawrence read and wrote widely on philosophical, psychological, political and historical matters. His world was changing rapidly and the impact of new developments in these fields had an impact on his poetic thought. The Darwinian theory of evolution, increased industrialisation and mechanisation and the rise in socialism all had an influence on Lawrence's beliefs. In a poem such as 'Humming-Bird', the influence of evolutionary theories can be clearly seen. But, if the evolutionary process has taken this 'jabbing terrifying monster' and made it the small, harmless bird we experience today, what does say of man? Has man's evolution been in the opposite direction? The events of World War I may have justified this belief and caused Lawrence to doubt the positive evolution of man.

His hatred of the industrial process can be vividly seen in 'What have they done to you?'. The 'squalid cottages and poverty of hand to mouth' of the past is not ignored by Lawrence but his distaste for mechanisation is vividly depicted in the 'vast maw of iron' that devours the workers. His philosophy is not quite socialism, but his experiences of the destruction caused by industrial Britain had an impact on his view. This poem was part of a series of poems on the topic and his opinion of machines as implements that enslave the body and stupefy the mind has echoes in the modern context.

Religion

While his mother was a strict orthodox Methodist, Lawrence had rejected formalised religion by 1911. That is not to say he was not religious. He believed in a life force that flowed through all things, and that revealed the divine elements of the universe in concrete everyday experiences. He was influenced by cosmology, mysticism and mythology, all of which can be traced through his poems. His approach towards death reflected the culmination of his beliefs. An early poem such as 'Call into Death' reveals his belief in some kind of afterlife but one where the spirit of the deceased becomes one with the universe. The images of 'the haze of the sky', the 'melting foam' and 'the breathing wind' all represent the state of oblivion to be reached after death. A later poem such as 'Bavarian Gentians' explores the mystical divide between life and death through the mythology of Persephone and Pluto. The journey to death is unknowable and the poet must then employ paradox and oxymoron in order to try to imagine such a journey. Contradictory images such as 'their blaze of darkness', 'dark-blue blaze black lamps' and 'dark flames' are used to try to describe the unknowable, ephemeral world of the afterlife.

Pansies, Nettles and Last Poems

The original title for this volume of poetry was *Pensées*, meaning 'thoughts' in French. The volume consists of a series of short poems, each a snapshot of a moment and intense feeling. Written at a time when both his writings and paintings were subject to official scrutiny on the grounds of obscenity, Lawrence was bitter and frustrated with the hypocrisy and persecution visited upon him by the authorities. The name *Pansies*, has several important





symbolic associations for Lawrence. The flower is small and short-lived, just like the poems themselves. The poems are fragmentary, political and dogmatic at times. The subsequent volume, *Nettles*, was designed to be more stinging than its predecessor. His final collection of poems was published after his death as *Last Poems* and within this volume were several versions of poems he was working on up to his death including 'Bavarian Gentians'. These poems displayed his preoccupation with his approaching death and lacked the same bitterness and frustration of *Nettles* and *Pansies*, but revealed a more mellow aspect of Lawrence's writing.

Symbols and imagery

The power of Lawrence's poetry is in his use of imagery and symbolism to capture raw emotion without the substance being overtaken by the form.

Creativity or life force

Lawrence's beliefs in mysticism and in the creative life force that flows through all things can be found in several of his poems. Following the tradition of the Romantic poets before him, creativity was often depicted as being a wind or unseen spirit that visits the poet. Lawrence used this image of the wind in several of his poems on your course. In 'Call into Death', his loved one is described as 'rustling in heaven like a bird' and the poet longs to join her and 'fall like a breath within the breathing wind'. Even though the physical life has ended, the life force continues and joins the elements.

In 'Humming-bird' the bird is described as a small piece of matter 'chipped off in brilliance' that 'flashed ahead of creation'. This

embodiment of the creative spark retains its elusive qualities as it races and whizzes through the primordial world. In 'Absolute Reverence' Lawrence further describes creativity as 'something unseen, unknown' but it is the one thing for which he feels 'absolute reverence'. As a writer he creates in isolation. In 'Delight of Being Alone' the ash tree, the symbol of growth and resilience is described as 'humming in the wind'. The tree – or himself – delights in his splendid isolation when he can be one with his creativity without any distractions.

Domestic imagery

In 'Piano', Lawrence creates a scene of domestic bliss. This familial scene is created by his use of aural imagery echoed by the use of sibilance and rhythm in the lines themselves. In lines such as 'Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me' the subject matter is music but the phrase also has a lilting, musical quality. The 'cosy parlour' contrasts with the 'winter outside' and creates a sense of warmth and security. The mother figure 'smiles as she sings' and her 'small, poised feet' seem to exemplify the maternal qualities remembered by Lawrence.

A different domestic scene is created in 'Baby-Movements II, "Trailing Clouds"'. Here, the poet intensely recreates a moment of anguish and crisis in a young child's life. The details of the scene, 'her floating hair', and how she 'sways on his arm' all gain significance by being so thoroughly examined by the poet. By detailing these domestic incidents and memories Lawrence elevates the domestic to revelatory status. Each scene reveals an elemental truth of man's existence and his connection with the divine.





Religious imagery and mythology

'Snake' has the most obvious examples of religious imagery of the poems by Lawrence on the course. Snakes have long had association with darkness, evil and temptation. Lawrence uses these connotations and subverts them in this poem. The snake is the interloper and takes the life-giving water but the poet feels honoured to have witnessed him. He calls the snake 'a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld' and 'one of the lords of life'. By the end of the poem the poet feels he has sinned and has something to repent. Even the language used here, 'I have something to expiate', is more in keeping with a religious lexicon than a secular one.

The mention of the underworld in 'Snake' blurs the boundaries between religion and mythology. In 'Bavarian Gentians', Lawrence explores a journey to the underworld using the Greek mythological figures of Pluto and Persephone. Persephone as the embodiment of seasonal change descends to the underworld to be with her bridegroom, Pluto. The darkness and light imagery used in the poem represent this descent into the unknown. Unlike Persephone, who will return to the light when winter has passed, Lawrence is facing death with no return to the land of the living. The use of Greek mythology lends a universal quality to his themes of life and death. The journey into death has long been the subject of mythological retellings but it is an unknowable journey that each individual must undertake alone. The myths can only be a guide.

Sensual imagery

Lawrence's poetry, like his prose, was centrally concerned with the physical experience. For him, life was not just experienced by the head and heart but also by the physical self. This delight in the physical self and in the carnal, visceral nature of experience is evident in most of his poems. In 'The Mosquito', the mosquito's physical appearance is described in graphic terms. His 'shredded shank', 'thin wings and streaming legs' are contrasted with the ephemeral nature of the creature ('translucent phantom'). The bite of the mosquito is described in almost sexual terms (reminiscent of John Donne's 'The Flea'). The mosquito is 'enspasm'd in oblivion, obscenely ecstasied' as it sucks the blood of the poet.

In 'Snake', the physicality of the snake leaves the poet transfixed. The snake 'sipped with his straight mouth,/Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body'. Every movement is sensual, he 'flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips' and the poet can only watch in wonder. The phallic nature of the reptile and the dark, welcoming earth it returns to give the depiction a raw, erotic undertone.

*But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed
in undignified haste,
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.*

In 'Humming-Bird' even the simple actions of the bird are detailed with suggestive sensual imagery, 'he pierced the slow vegetable veins with his long beak.' A similar image can be found in 'Bavarian





Gentians' to describe Persephone's final descent into Pluto's realm:

*and Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride
a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again
and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark,
among the splendour of black-blue torches, shedding
fathomless darkness on the nuptials.*

Even the verbs used such as, 'enfolded', 'ravishes' and 'pierces', emphasise the sensual nature of the moment. The uniting of Persephone and Pluto in the underworld and the poet's approach towards death are described in sexual terms. Becoming one with death, joining the underworld and reaching oblivion is described in a physical way. For the poet the experience of the spiritual and the physical are essentially interlinked.

Themes

Lawrence's poetry explored themes that had personal relevance and yet retain universal significance for the reader. As he matured his concerns with love and relationships changed to an exploration of the world around him and a commentary on the society he lived in.

Mother/son relationship

'Call into Death' and 'Piano' both explore the relationship between a mother and her son. In 'Call into Death' the son is grieving the loss of his mother. Lawrence was very close to his mother and saw her suffer with her illness throughout the autumn

of 1910. The images of release throughout the poem may relate to her eventual release from suffering but also his own desire for release from the grief he felt.

*And I am willing to come to you now, my dear,
As a pigeon lets itself off from a cathedral dome
To be lost in the haze of the sky.*

In 'Piano' the poet is reminded of a happier time when he was a child and his mother sang at the piano. While this is depicted as a familial scene only two characters are detailed: the child and the mother. The centrality of the mother/son relationship is emphasised by the total disregard for anything or anyone outside their immediate circle.

*A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling
strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles
as she sings.*

The sense of grief and loss experienced by the poet at the end of the poem, 'I weep like a child for the past', echoes the grief expressed in 'Call into Death'. The relationship with his mother was very important to the poet and the loss of that intimacy and security had profound effect on him.

Natural world

'The Mosquito', 'Snake' and 'Humming-Bird' explore man's relationship with the natural world. These creatures are closely examined and questioned and, in the case of the humming-bird, its evolutionary history is imagined. The natural world is not a





welcoming one in which man can find himself and be at peace. It is a place of danger and mystery. The mosquito seems to be taunting the poet with its 'high, hateful bugle' and manages to draw blood. In retaliation, the poet reduces the mosquito to a 'dim dark smudge'. In 'Snake', the reptile strikes fear into the heart of the poet and again he lashes out in violence. The snake 'Writhed like lightning, and was gone' leaving the poet feeling regret at his actions. The humming-bird of the primordial era is described as 'a jabbing, terrifying monster'. This is not the exploration of the natural world favoured by the Romantic poets, who wished to become one with nature. Lawrence recognises the fundamental differences between man and nature. It is an alien world that man cannot fully understand or appreciate.

Relationships

Other than the mother/son relationship outlined in 'Piano' and 'Call into Death', the selection of poems by Lawrence on the course only deal with personal relationships in a fleeting way. Lawrence wrote extensively on his relationships and his collection of poetry *Look! We have come through!* charted the early stages of his relationship with Frieda Weekley, in graphic detail. The poem 'Intimates', however, gives us just a character sketch of a couple in a relationship. The bitter tone and casual disdain with which he treats the lady doesn't reveal the deep loving relationship that the title might suggest. Or it may be the case that when the first bloom of love has faded, the couple see each other for what they really are, including their flaws, and this is what marks true intimacy.

*And she would have broken it over my head,
but she caught sight of her own reflection
and that held her spellbound for two seconds
while I fled.*

Commentary on society

'What have they done to you?' is an obvious indictment of society and what industrialisation and mechanisation has done to humanity. The repeated imagery of the 'masses, creeping back and forth to work', describes the lack of dignity ascribed to the work force of industrial England. They face the terrible brutality of the 'vast maw of iron' that chews them up and spits them out. The trappings of modern society such as 'a board-school education, newspapers, and the cinema' are also seen in a negative light. They limit the instincts and intuition and leave nothing but 'an animated carcass'. Lawrence's bitterness and fears for humanity are asserted by the repeated plaintive questions at the end of the poem.

Similar feelings are expressed in the poem 'Absolute Reverence'. Lawrence dismisses many of the trappings of modern society such as religions and institutions, as being beneath his notice and unworthy of his respect. 'Intimates' may also be read as a scathing attack on the self-absorption prevalent in modern society. The lady is only concerned with herself and so is easily distracted by her own image. In a culture of 'selfies' and social media, the message here may have implications for our society also.





QUICK GUIDE TO REVISING LAWRENCE

Poem	Theme	Key Quotations/Examples of features of style
Call into Death	Mother/son relationship Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Since I lost you, my darling' ● 'And the sound of her gently rustling in heaven like a bird I hear' ● 'As a pigeon lets itself off from a cathedral dome/To be lost in the haze of the sky' ● 'like a melting foam' ● 'My tenacious feet' ● 'To fall like a breath within the breathing wind/Where you are lost, what rest, my love, what rest!'
Piano	Mother/son relationship Transience of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;' ● 'A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings' ● '... the small, poised feet of a mother ...' ● 'In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song/Betrays me back' ● '... with winter outside/And hymns in the cosy parlour' ● 'my manhood is cast/Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child/for the past.'
The Mosquito	Man versus Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'When did you start your tricks, Monsieur?' ● '... you phantom?' ● 'How can you put so much devilry/Into that translucent phantom shred/Of a frail corpus?' ● 'Your evil little aura' ● 'Ghoul on wings'





		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'You speck' ● 'It is your hateful little trump' ● 'A yell of triumph as you snatch my scalp' ● 'For a second enspasmed in oblivion,/Obscenely ectasied' ● 'Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?' ● 'the infinitesimal faint smear of you'
Snake	<p>Man's relationship with the natural world</p> <p>Societal conditioning/ prejudice</p> <p>Masculinity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'and I in pyjamas for the heat' ● 'And must wait, must stand and wait' ● 'And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down' ● 'Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,/Silently.' ● 'flickered his two-forked tongue' ● 'Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth' ● 'And voices in me said, If you were a man/You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.' ● 'I felt so honoured' ● 'And looked around like a god' ● '... that dreadful hole' ● 'I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education' ● 'Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld' ● 'And I have something to expiate'





Humming-Bird	Man and the natural world Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Primeval-dumb' ● 'Humming-birds raced down the avenues' ● 'This little bit chipped off in brilliance' ● 'And went whizzing through the slow, vast, succulent stems' ● 'the humming-bird flashed ahead of creation' ● 'he pierced the slow vegetable veins with his long beak' ● 'Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster' ● 'Luckily for us'
Intimates	Love and relationships Appearance versus reality Commentary on society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Don't you care for my love? she said bitterly.' ● 'Please make all requests to head-quarters!' ● 'she would have broken it over my head' ● 'she caught sight of her own reflection/and that held her spellbound for two seconds/ while I fled.'
Delight of Being Alone	Isolation Adversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'no greater delight than the sheer delight of being alone.' ● 'realise the delicious pleasure of the moon' ● 'the splendid growing of an ash-tree/alone, on a hill-side in the north, humming in the wind'
Absolute Reverence	Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'neither to persons nor things nor ideas, ideals nor religions nor institutions' ● 'when I see the fluttering of pure life in them' ● 'to something unseen, unknown, creative' ● '... I feel I am a derivative' ● 'Say no more!'





<p>What have they done to you?</p>	<p>Man and the modern age Commentary on society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'men of the masses, creeping back and forth to work?' ● 'what have they saved you from, while they pocketed the money' ● 'devoured you with the machine, the vast maw of iron' ● 'your squalid cottages and poverty of/hand to mouth' ● 'they took away your man's native/instincts and institutions' ● 'left you an animated carcass' ● 'unless goggling eyes, to goggle at the film' ● 'a ha'penny newspaper intelligence' ● 'Oh what has been done to them?'
<p>Bavarian Gentians</p>	<p>Death</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas' ● 'but dark/darkening the day-time, torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom' ● 'blaze of darkness spread blue' ● 'black lamps from the halls of Dis' ● 'Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!' ● 'to the sightless realm where darkness is married to dark/and Persephone herself is but a voice' ● 'the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark' ● 'at the marriage of the living dark'





<p>Baby-Movements II, "Trailing Clouds"</p>	<p>Loss of innocence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'As a drenched, drowned bee/Hangs numb and heavy from the bending flower' ● 'clings to me' ● 'her brown hair brushed with wet tears' ● 'Her soft white legs hanging heavily over my arm' ● 'My sleeping baby hangs upon my life' ● 'She who has always seemed so light' ● 'Even her floating hair sinks like storm-bruised young leaves' ● 'As the wings of a drenched, drowned bee/Are a heaviness, and a weariness'
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QUESTIONS

1. 'Lawrence's poetry ranges from deep analysis of life and loss, to poetry that refuses to take itself seriously.' Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Lawrence on your course.
2. 'In Lawrence's poetry non-human creatures are seen as more able to embody vitality than modern man stifled by civilisation.' Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Lawrence on your course.
3. 'For Lawrence, closeness to death enhanced his appreciation of life.' To what extent would you agree with this statement? Support your view with reference to the poetry of Lawrence on your course.
4. 'Regardless of subject matter, the poetry of Lawrence is primarily concerned with the physical experience of the world.' To what extent would you agree with this statement? Support your view with reference to the poetry of Lawrence on your course.
5. Lawrence's innovative style in capturing intense emotion reveals moments of universal significance. Discuss this view, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Lawrence on your course.

Ordinary Level questions

'Humming-Bird'

1. (a) Describe, in your own words, the scene created by the poet in this poem.
(b) Select a line or phrase from the poem that made an impact on you and explain why it made an impact on you.
(c) In your opinion, is the poet mainly optimistic or mainly pessimistic in this poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
2. Answer **ONE** of the following:
 - (i) Do you like or dislike this poem? In your response identify at least two aspects of the poem that influence your view. Support your answer with reference to the poem.
OR
 - (ii) You have been asked to organise a performance of this poem by one or more performers. Describe the set you would create, the costume(s), the make-up, the music you would use and any sound or special effects that you think would enhance the performance. Support your response with reference to the poem.
OR
 - (iii) Write a piece about the language in this poem, beginning with one of the following phrases:
 - I find the language in this poem interesting and unusual ...
 - I find the language in this poem challenging and complicated ...



**‘Baby-Movements II, “Trailing Clouds”**

1.
 - (a) Describe, in your own words, the scene created by the poet in this poem.
 - (b) Based on your reading of the poem, what effect does the baby have on the poet? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
 - (c) Why do you think the poem is called ‘Trailing Clouds’? Explain your answer with reference to the poem.
2. Answer **ONE** of the following:
 - (i) Using one or more of the following statements, describe your personal response to this poem.
 - – I find this poem amusing.
 - – I find this poem powerful.
 - – I find this poem thought-provoking.Support your answer with reference to the poem.

OR

- (ii) Use one or more of the following words to write a piece about the poet’s use of language in this poem.
Descriptive Evocative Dramatic
Support your answer with reference to the poem.

OR

- (iii) In which of the following collections of poetry do you think this poem best belongs?
 - – A collection of poems about childhood.
 - – A collection of poems about bees.
 - – A collection of poems about becoming an adult.Explain your answer with reference to the poem.





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ELIZABETH BISHOP

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2019

OL 2019

HL 2021

OL 2021

HL 2022

OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

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The Fish

The Bight

At the Fishhouses

The Prodigal

Questions of Travel

The Armadillo

Sestina

First Death in Nova Scotia

Filling Station

In the Waiting Room

Overview of Elizabeth Bishop

Developing a personal response to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop

Questions

Bibliography





INTRODUCTION

A literary life

Elizabeth Bishop was born on 8 February 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her parents, William Bishop and Gertrude Bulmer (the family name was variously spelled Bulmer, with a silent l, and Boomer), were both of Canadian origin.

Her father died when she was eight months old. Her mother never recovered from the shock and for the next five years was in and out of mental hospitals, moving between Boston, Worcester and her hometown of Great Village in Nova Scotia, Canada. In 1916 Gertrude Bulmer's insanity was diagnosed as permanent and she was institutionalised and separated from her daughter, whom she was never to see again. She died in 1934. Elizabeth was reared for the most part by the Boomer grandparents in Great Village, with occasional long stays at the wealthy Bishop household in Worcester, which she did not enjoy. As a child she suffered severe lung illnesses, often having to spend almost entire winters in bed, reading. Chronic asthma became a problem for her all her life.

She describes her early days in Nova Scotia from a child's point of view in the autobiographical short story 'In the Village'. The elegy 'First Death in Nova Scotia' also draws on some childhood memories. 'Sestina' evokes the sadness of this period. These and snippets from unpublished poems and papers point to an unsatisfactory relationship with an ill and transient mother. Yet in spite of these difficulties her recollections of her Nova Scotia childhood were essentially positive and she had great affection

for her maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles in this small agricultural village.

In 1927 she went to Walnut Hill School for girls, a boarding school in Natick, Massachusetts. From 1930 to 1934 she attended Vassar College, an exclusive private university in Poughkeepsie, New York, where her fees were paid at first by the Bishop family and then by the income from a legacy left by her father. She graduated in English literature but also studied Greek and music, and she always retained a particular appreciation for Renaissance lyric poetry and for the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was at Vassar that she first began to publish stories and poems in national magazines and where she met the poet Marianne Moore, who became an important influence on her career as a poet and with whom she maintained a lifelong friendship and correspondence. It was also at Vassar that she formed her first lesbian relationship, and here too, by her own admission, that her lifelong problem with alcohol addiction began.

Between 1935 and 1938 she made a number of trips to Europe, travelling to England, Ireland, France, North Africa, Spain and Italy in the company of her friends Louise Crane and Margaret Miller, the latter losing an arm in a road accident on the trip. Bishop dedicated the poem 'Quai d'Orléans' to Miller.

In 1939 she moved to Key West, Florida, a place she had fallen in love with over the previous years. 'The Fish' reflects her enjoyment of the sport of fishing at that time. She and Louise Crane bought a house there, now called the Elizabeth Bishop House. Later she lived with Marjorie Carr Stevens, to whom 'Anaphora' was





dedicated posthumously after Stevens's death in 1959. Key West became a sort of refuge and base for Bishop over the next 15 years.

In 1945 she won the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award. In 1946 her first book of poetry, *North and South*, was published and was well received by critics. 'The Fish' is among its 30 poems. At this time she met and began a lifelong friendship and correspondence with the poet Robert Lowell.

In 1948 Bishop won a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1949–50 she was poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, supervising its stock of poetry, acquiring new works and providing opinions and advice. The income from this work was important to her, as she had dedicated herself exclusively to her poetry, at which she was a slow and often erratic worker.

The years 1945 to 1951, when her life was centred on New York, were very unsettled. She felt under extreme pressure in a very competitive literary circle and drank heavily. 'The Bight' and 'The Prodigal' reflect this dissolute period of her life. In 1947 she began receiving medical support for her chronic depression, asthma and alcoholism. In 1951 she left for South America on the first stage of a trip around the world. She stopped first in Brazil, where she went to visit her old acquaintances Mary Morse and Maria Carlota Costellar de Macedo Soares. She was fascinated by the country and by Lota Soares, with whom she began a relationship that was to last until Soares's death in 1967. They lived in a new house in the luxurious Brazilian countryside at Petrópolis. 'Questions of Travel' and 'The Armadillo' reflect this period of her life.

A Cold Spring, her second volume of poetry, was published in 1955. It contains 'The Bight', 'At the Fishhouses' and 'The Prodigal'.

In 1956 she won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1957 *The Diary of Helena Morley* was published. This was a translation by Bishop of the diary of a girl aged between 13 and 15 who lived in the Brazilian village of Diamantina in the 1890s. In 1965 *Questions of Travel*, her third volume, was published. Among this selection, as well as the title poem, are 'Sestina', 'First Death in Nova Scotia' and 'Filling Station'.

In 1966–67 Bishop was poet in residence at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she met Suzanne Bowen, who became her secretary, human caretaker and, after Soares's death, lover. They lived in San Francisco (1968–69), where Bishop found the new culture bewildering, and then in Brazil until the tempestuous ending of the relationship in 1970.

In 1969 *Complete Poems* was published. In 1970 Bishop won the National Book Award for Poetry. She was appointed poet in residence at Harvard University, where she taught advanced verse writing and studies in modern poetry for her first year and, later, poets and their letters. She described herself as 'a scared elderly amateur prof'. It was here she met Alice Methfessel, an administrative assistant who became her minder and companion for the rest of her life. She began to do a good many public readings of her poetry to make a living, as she had not been able to get much of her money out of Brazil. She continued to teach courses for the remainder of her years, though she found the work draining and it interfered with her already slow production of poetry. But she needed the money to maintain her style of life and to travel.





In the summer of 1972 she went on a cruise through Scandinavia to the Soviet Union. From 1973 to 1977 she secured a four-year contract from Harvard to teach a term each year, until her retirement in May 1977. She continued to do public readings, punctuated by spells in hospital necessitated by asthma, alcohol addiction and depression. She managed to visit Mexico in 1975 and went on a trip to Europe in 1976.

In 1976 *Geography III* was published. This slim volume includes 'In the Waiting Room' and 'The Moose'. The poems in this volume show a new, more directly personal style and a return to her past and her sense of self in search of themes. Competing with failing health, including a bleeding hiatus hernia, she continued her usual round of readings, travel and some writing. She died suddenly of a brain aneurysm on 6 October 1979.





THE FISH

Background

In the late 1930s, Bishop discovered Florida and a love of fishing. Based on real fishing experiences, her notebooks of the time show images and line fragments that were later developed in 'The Fish'. She worked on the poem during the winter of 1939 and sent a finished draft to Marianne Moore in January 1940, and the poem was first published in the *Partisan Review* in March that year. It is included in her first published collection of 1946, *North and South*.

The speaker: The I and the eye

The poem is narrated in the first person, so we get to meet the poet – the 'I' in the poem – directly, as we do in quite a few of Bishop's poems. This gives the experience described in the poem an immediacy and an intimacy for the reader. But while the reader may feel closely involved in the drama, there is a hint that the speaker herself is something of an outsider, not a native of the place, the inhabitant of a 'rented boat'. Perhaps this lends a certain objectivity to the drama and the description of it.

We are also introduced here to the famous Bishop 'eye', which sees both the beautiful and the grimy and which describes not only surface detail but even imagines the interior:

*the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.*

Minute descriptions and calculated use of detail are a feature of Bishop's poetry. This is how she apprehends the world and comes to grips with experience: through aesthetic recreation. Detail is important as a basis for understanding.

Bishop recreates the fish in minute detail. This is how she 'interiorises' it, comprehends it. At first she domesticates it in the imagery, making it familiar by linking it to details of faded everyday living (he is 'homely', 'brown skin hung in strips/like ancient wallpaper', 'shapes like full-blown roses', 'rags of green weed'). Yet something of its essential wildness, the otherness of its creative being, is retained in some of the descriptions:

*– the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly –*

This is also rendered in war imagery:

*... from his lower lip ...
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line ...
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering*

But perhaps the most crucial moment in the poet's comprehension of the fish is when she examines the eyes:

*which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.*





The detail is recreated poetically, using all the echoes and sound effects of alliteration and assonance reminiscent of a Hopkins ‘inscaping’, recreating in words the essence of the thing observed (‘shallower’, ‘yellowed’, ‘backed and packed’, ‘tarnished tinfoil’). The detailed recreation leads to the poet’s realisation that these eyes are unresponsive: the fish is oblivious to her; there is no real sentient contact between human and animal:

*They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.*

There is no question here of humankind’s heroic struggle against Nature, such as we find in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. The experience is not glorified or mythologised, but rather rendered as she saw it. She is reported as saying to her students (quoted by Wesley Wehr):

I always tell the truth in my poems. With ‘The Fish’, that’s exactly how it happened. It was in Key West, and I did catch it, just as the poem says. That was in 1938. Oh, but I did change one thing: the poem says he had five hooks hanging from his mouth, but actually he only had three. Sometimes a poem makes its own demands. But I always try to stick as much as possible to what really happened when I describe something in a poem.

We notice that even as she is asserting the absolute integrity of her eye and the accuracy of the descriptive process, she is also aware of the creative demands of the poetic process. The poem is an accurate record, but only up to a point.

A dramatic poem

The critic Willard Spiegelman, reflecting on the dramatic quality of Bishop’s poetry, said, ‘We do not normally think of Bishop as a poet of struggle; the tension in her poems is mostly internalised, and confrontations, when they occur, are between the self, travelling, moving or simply seeing, and the landscape it experiences.’ This is particularly applicable to this poem. The first and last lines (‘I caught a tremendous fish’ and ‘And I let the fish go’) frame this drama. There is little external conflict, though there are hints of military antagonism and danger from the fish. The confrontation framed by these lines is mainly internal.

So why does she release the fish? Was it because of the lack of heroic struggle?

*He didn’t fight.
He hadn’t fought at all.*

Does the lack of contact in the eyes disappoint her? Or does she release him out of respect for his history of previous successful encounters, a record emblazoned on his lip (‘a five-haired beard of wisdom/trailing from his aching jaw’)? Perhaps these are part of the decision, but the real moment of truth occurs because of the sudden appearance of the accidental industrial rainbow when the bilge oil gleams in the sun (‘where oil had spread a rainbow/ around the rusted engine’). Fortuitous as this may be – a grim parody of natural beauty, an ironic comment on humankind’s relationship with nature – it provides the poet with a moment of aesthetic unity with the grandeur of the world, and everything is transformed (‘everything/was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!’). It is a





moment of revelation, in which this new image of the fish colours the environment and alters her relationship with nature. No longer antagonistic or confrontational, she has metaphorically tamed, recreated and understood the fish.

The ending of the poem is very similar to a Wordsworth nature poem such as 'The Daffodils': the hypnotic vision ('I stared and stared'), the wealth accruing to the viewer ('victory filled up/the little rented boat') and feelings of inspiration and joy through creating a connection with the world, a world that has been transformed by the vision, this moment of epiphany:

*where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
... until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!*





THE BIGHT

Background

'The Bight' was probably written in early 1948. In a letter to Robert Lowell dated January of that year, Bishop tells of the excavations at Garrison Bight, Key West. 'The water looks like blue gas – the harbor is always a mess here, junky little boats are piled up, some hung with sponges and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane – it reminds me a little of my desk' (Brett Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*). She wrote to Lowell again the following month, saying that she was trying to finish two poems about Key West, 'and then I hope I won't have to write about the place any more'.

A reading of the poem

Bishop's idiosyncratic descriptions

This is a typical example of the poet's technique of description, minutely detailed and accurate yet coloured in a personal way, either by her wit or by the view implicit in the imagery. The extraordinary quality of the water is emphasised by the poet wittily turning the accepted view of things on its head. It is made to look strange, so that we look at it afresh:

*Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn't wet anything.*

She presents the water to us through a number of sense perspectives: touch, sight, smell and sound:

*the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.*

To Bishop, the world of the bay seems predominantly mechanical – not just the dredge at work, but 'Pelicans crash ... like pickaxes', 'man-of-war birds' have 'tails like scissors' and 'glinting like little plowshares,/the blue-gray shark tails'. There is even a hint that the scene is dangerous, potentially explosive ('the pilings dry as matches' and the water 'the color of the gas flame'). The helpless, ineffectual aspect of creatures and things is displayed (pelicans 'rarely coming up with anything to show for it', boats 'stove in,/ and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be'). Altogether a detailed picture is presented of life chugging along in the midst of disorder and ineffectuality.

View of the world

Bishop's world here is a tired, run-down, worn-out, unromantic one. It is a world of mechanical reactions, of trained responses:

*The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in
with the obliging air of retrievers*

There may be routine, but there is little sense of spirit, of wholeness or of perspective in the picture. The usual mechanical, monotonous pulse of life goes on ('Click. Click. Goes the dredge'), but against a background of 'untidy activity', 'unanswered letters', 'old correspondences' and a general lack of cohesion. This atmosphere is created, at least partly, by the disparate nature of the imagery: picture follows unconnected picture, and there is





no sense of any linkage or pattern (water, dredge, birds, frowsy sponge boats, fence of sharks' tails for the Chinese-restaurant trade, little white boats stove in, and again the dredge). Yet the prevailing attitude is one of stoicism: life goes on, 'awful but cheerful'.

A personal poem?

The subtitle of this poem, 'On my birthday', colours the entire poem. Despite the absence of the first person voice, the subtitle forces us to acknowledge the shadowy presence of the poet, like the ghost at the feast. Why does she mark her birthday in this unusual way, viewing this particular scene? What special significance does the scene have for her?

It has been suggested that the 'disorder and latent violence in the vehicles convey the disorder in Elizabeth's mind' (Millier) as she thinks about her own life. 'Thirty-seven and far from heaven', she noted. The comparison between the confusion in the bay and the clutter of her own desk, as recorded in her letter to Lowell, together with the extraordinary simile or conceit of the 'little white boats ... like torn-open, unanswered letters', would indicate a high degree of personal meaning in the poem, even though the description of the bay has been universalised. Indeed, often in Bishop's poems, private significance is revealed out of apparently objective description.

Does she identify with the 'frowsy sponge boats', the 'little white boats' piled up against each other or the wrecked ones 'not yet salvaged'? Perhaps she is celebrating the survival against the storms of many small craft, as much of her own life was spent at

the mercy of the tides of alcoholism and depression. It is difficult not to read 'awful but cheerful' as a personal statement.





AT THE FISHHOUSES

Background

Elizabeth Bishop travelled to Nova Scotia in the summer of 1946. It has been suggested that she undertook the trip in order to be out of the way when her first collection, *North and South*, was published. At any rate, it was her first visit to Great Village in 15 years. She had spent the previous two years undergoing counselling, trying to understand the origins of her alcoholism and bouts of depression. Now she was returning to her physical origins, the scenes of her less-than-idyllic childhood.

From her notebook entries of the time we know that the trip was disturbing, but it gave rise to a number of poems. 'At the Fishhouses' was published in the *New Yorker* on 9 August 1947.

Subject matter and themes

This poem could be read as a meditation on the significance of the sea and its influence on humanity and landscape. The poem is set at the convergence of sea and shore and at a place of important interaction between humankind and the sea. Human enterprise depends on the sea and is subservient to it. Symbolically, the 'cleated gangplanks' lead up out of the water to the storerooms, but the 'long ramp' also descends into the water, 'down and down'. This symbiotic relationship is also alluded to in the 'talk of the decline in the population/and of codfish and herring'. The sea's influence permeates and colours everything, having the power to transform magically ('All is silver: ... the silver of the benches,/ the lobster pots, and masts, scattered/among the wild jagged

rocks,/is of an apparent translucence') or to bring decay and ruin ('an ancient wooden capstan ... where the ironwork has rusted'). Humankind is surrounded by the sea and dwarfed by it. One has the sense of the sea as some forbidding power encircling humanity ('element bearable to no mortal'), indeed indifferent to humanity's fate, as suggested in the incantatory evocation of the tides:

... the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones

Yet the sea provides that crucial moment of epiphany for the poet, when she gains insight into the nature of knowledge: that it is temporal and transient:

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

The poet's method

The speaker slowly draws us into the picture in the opening sequence, with vivid details of sight (the 'old man ... a dark purple-brown', the description of the fish-houses: 'All is silver'), sense ('a cold evening', 'The air smells') and sound (the talk, the presumed sounds of wheelbarrow and scraping). The specific detail augments this sense of realism in the opening ('five fishhouses', 'steeply peaked roofs', 'narrow, cleated gangplanks', etc.). The present tense of the narrative gives it immediacy.

The reader is invited to share in the speaker's 'total immersion' in both the uncomfortable reality ('it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water') and the mesmeric fantasy ('If you should dip your hand in ... your hand would burn/as if the water were a transmutation of fire').





Once again the poet uses detail as a way of possessing. Only by describing and imagining the mysterious movements and powers of the sea does the speaker win some control over them.

Through total immersion and conjuring up, she finally wins some insight and understanding. Her method, as usual, is a combination of straightforward description and poetic imagining. In the latter, she often transforms the scene or the object in the retelling: she deliberately makes it strange in order to force us to see it afresh ('your hand would burn/as if the water were a transmutation of fire/that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame').

The process of winning through to her final visionary insight is marked by fits and starts, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of achieving any kind of self-knowledge. The poetic contemplation of the silvering of the landscape is interrupted by the mundane conversation on population decline. The renewed contemplation of the sea in the third section ('Cold dark deep') is interrupted by the humorous episode with the seal:

*... He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.*

But it finally manages to build to that rhythmic incantation of the climax ('indifferently swinging above the stones').

This stop-start method employed in the narrative is also used by Bishop in the rhythm of the language to control the emotion in the poem. She uses the metre as well as the repetition of words and phrases (anaphora) to convey the hypnotic power of the sea:

*I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones, and then the world.*

But she breaks this atmosphere with the everyday language of the conditional clause ('If you should dip your hand in'). The flow of the verse builds again and is again brought down to earth by 'If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter' before it is allowed to build to that intense and rhythmic conclusion.

Visionary insight

This entire poem is devoted to the strange and inexplicable power of the sea, a subject revealing Bishop's romantic impulses. The sea in this poem takes on qualities of the other elements, particularly air and fire, thereby establishing itself as the primal force in nature. More significantly for the poet, the sea is equated with knowledge, and it is the realisation of this, achieved gradually through her total immersion and recreation process of poetry, that forms the climax of the poem.

Knowledge is broken down into its elements ('dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free'). Could these epithets be translated as disturbing, preserving, transparent, ever-changing and outside our control? The description of knowledge might be read as a view of human knowledge in general, but it is difficult not to also read it as personal. The reference to its darker side, as well as to its objectivity and transparency, could be seen as a personal note in view of Bishop's psychological search and journey back to the





roots of her depression and alcohol problems. The nature of the knowledge in the poem is overtly sexual, with maternal overtones:

*drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts*

This hard, forbidding maternal image might be taken as a reference to her unsatisfactory relationship with her mother and to the human and genetic knowledge derived from her. This knowledge is temporal and transient, no lasting inheritance, but rather ‘flowing, and flown’ – quite a bleak view of life, with its suggestion of the isolated individual, unconnected to the past, at the mercy of the tide.





THE PRODIGAL

Background

Elizabeth Bishop said that this poem originated from her thoughts when one of her aunt's stepsons offered her a drink of rum in the pigsty at about nine o'clock in the morning during her trip to Nova Scotia in 1946. Perhaps that was the final spark that engendered the poem, but the theme could never have been far from her thoughts, as she herself struggled with alcoholism all her life.

About the time of her thirty-eighth birthday, on 8 February 1949, she fell into a deep trough of depression. In an effort to rally out of it she went on a holiday to Haiti, from where she wrote to Marianne Moore to say that she had finished some poems, including 'The Prodigal'. Ironically, on her return from Haiti she went into a long and heavy drinking bout.

'The Prodigal' was published in the *New Yorker* on 13 March 1951.

Theme and development

This poem deals with the exile of the alcoholic. Like all good poetry, it functions at the level of the individual in the narrative but also at a universal level, exploring the metaphorical exile of alcoholism: the isolation, the skulking, the deception and hiding, the lack of control, aspirations rather than action.

There is enormous human understanding in this poem. Despite the physical dirt of odour and ordure, the heart can still lift to the religious impulse ('the lantern – like the sun, going away –/laid on the mud a pacing aureole') or thrill to the romantic beauty of

nature ('the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;/the burning puddles seemed to reassure'). In fact, the prodigal seems to retain a particularly benign relationship with nature, appreciating the delicacy of even these animals ('Light-lashed ... a cheerful stare') and maintaining a comfortable domesticity between animal and human ('The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored'). Nature here is a bringer of wisdom. The bats' 'uncertain staggering flight' is the spur to his self-awareness, his moment of 'shuddering insights', and so his eventual turning back.

The poem is depressingly realistic in its evocation of filth and human abasement:

*even to the sow that always ate her young –
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.*

But it is noble and uplifting in its awareness of the spark of soul that still flickers even in the most abject circumstances.

Form

The poem is structured as two sonnets of a rather loose nature. They each have the requisite 14 lines and the first one maintains the conventional octave–sestet division, but the rhyming schemes are eccentric, if not absent altogether. The rhythm is a mixture of iambic pentameter and four-stress lines.





QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL

Background

In 1951 Bishop left for an intended journey around the world, travelling via South America. But she stopped off in Brazil, where she remained, with brief intervals, for the next 15 years or so. This poem reflects her fascination with travel and with Brazil in particular. 'Questions of Travel' is the title poem of her third volume of poetry, published in 1965, though it had been worked on for some time while before that; there are at least seven earlier drafts in existence.

Themes

This is a travel poem with a difference. True, it features the expected descriptions of the unusual and the exotic, as Bishop views, with a traveller's curiosity, 'the crowded streams', 'the trees ... like noble pantomimists, robed in pink', 'the sad, two-noted, wooden tune/of disparate wooden clogs', the 'music of the fat brown bird', the 'bamboo church of Jesuit baroque', the 'calligraphy of songbirds' cages' and the silence after rain – all the elements of a superior imaginative letter home.

Her observations are given a particularly temporal significance as they are made against the great dwarfing background of the ages of time. But it is a time that, with typical Bishop quirkiness, has a disorderly aspect:

*– For if those streaks ...
aren't waterfalls yet,*

*in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.*

Bishop goes deeper than the postcard façade in order to acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge and understanding of a foreign culture:

*To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable*

She really doesn't expect it all to add up in the visitor's mind ('to have pondered,/blurr'dly and inconclusively').

Even more basically, Bishop examines and questions the very need to travel. Partly motivated by a traveller's exhaustion ('Think of the long trip home'), she rises above this to engage the question at a philosophical level:

*What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life in
our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?*

Is it lack of imagination? she wonders. She presents the idea as a philosophical debate between movement and travel ('Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?' and 'could Pascal have been not entirely right/about just sitting quietly in one's room?'). She seems to attribute the travel urge to the human need to achieve our dreams:

*Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too?*

The conclusion of her musings, expressed at the end of the poem, is that the human being is not absolutely free to choose:





the necessity for travel is often forced upon a person ('the choice is never wide and never free'). She seems to see travel or homelessness as part of the condition of humankind ('Should we have stayed at home,/wherever that may be?').

Setting

The setting is the interior, away from the coast, the more usual scene of Bishop's conflicts. But even here she is ever-mindful of the sea and her geographical mind frame continues to make connections ('the crowded streams/hurry too rapidly down to the sea'), as if the sea is associated with oblivion and annihilation, and even the beauty here is threatened and transient.

Poetic method

She uses the now familiar method of combining precise observation with her idiosyncratic descriptions, where objects are made to look entirely strange so that we view them in a new light. She draws the reader in with detail and then challenges us visually to look hard and understand.

We can see this at work in the first section of the poem. Using all the conventional poetic devices of alliteration, assonance and sibilance, she recreates the fluid continuity of the waterfalls as they 'spill over the sides in soft slow-motion'. With graphic, clever imagery she evokes the gigantic scale of the scene, giving it an aura of sadness ('those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains'). Then, shockingly, we are invited to this upside-down view of the mountains:

*the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.*

She has domesticated them by reference to human machinery, yet allowed them to retain their strangeness by the imagery associations with the secret depths of the earth.

The poem is structured as a dramatic monologue, a dialogue with herself, which is an appropriate form given the philosophical approach to the subject. Having asked if it would not have been better to stay at home, she proceeds, by a series of negative questions, to reach that indefinite conclusion.

The poem is written in free verse. Flashes of humour sparkle here and there as a welcome relief from the gentle complaining and insistent questioning. We notice the comparison of equatorial rain with politicians' speeches ('two hours of unrelenting oratory/and then a sudden golden silence').

*And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?*

Should this be read as a genuinely romantic urge or as a sardonic swipe at acquisitive and sentimental tourists?





THE ARMADILLO

Background

This poem was published in the *New Yorker* on 22 June 1957 and falls among the later of the first batch of poems about Brazil that Bishop published. She had been working on various components of it – imagery, etc. – for a number of months, if not years. The fire balloons, the armadillo, the owls and the rabbit feature in her letters of the previous year.

Dedication to Robert Lowell

Lowell had said that his famous poem ‘Skunk Hour’ was indebted to ‘The Armadillo’, so when she finally published it, Bishop dedicated her poem to him. But there may be more significance than just personal sentiment in the dedication, as Lowell had become a conscientious objector to the Second World War when the Allies fire-bombed German cities. The gesture of defiance of destruction from the skies finds an echo in the last stanza of the poem.

A philosophical reading of the poem

What view of humanity informs this poem? Does the poet see humankind as deliberately destructive? No; but unthinking and primitive, yes. The balloons are a manifestation of primitive worship. They are also illegal and dangerous. But they are beautiful and romantic, likened to hearts, stars and planets, with the planets developed as the main association in the poem. There is also a hint of the fickleness of the human heart (‘light/that comes and goes, like hearts’). Humankind aspires to the beautiful and to a religious spirit but is unthinking, and the consequences

of our actions bring destruction on human beings and the environment, threatening the balance of nature.

So it is really an ecological outlook of Bishop’s that is at play here. Lacking a religious outlook on life, what is the big question for humanity? It must be how we best preserve for the future what exists here. One of the options is to return to a world that existed before man began to impose his egotistical will on it, to try to recover childhood’s innocence, structure and security. It might be suggested that this is what Bishop is attempting in ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’ and ‘Sestina’, but here all she can do is make an uncertain gesture of defiance, as in the last stanza.

Poetic method

- The usual detailed observation is evident, accurately catching, for example, the frantic movement of the owls or the stance of the armadillo. Sometimes the descriptions are poetic (‘It splattered like an egg of fire’).
- Bishop’s eye is that of the observer rather than the expert (‘the pale green one,’ she says of a star). Rather like ‘the fat brown bird’ of ‘Questions of Travel’, this creates an easy familiarity with the reader.
- She is adept at leisurely, detailed portraiture, as when describing the balloons that take up the first five stanzas. But she is also good at swift drawing that catches the essential image – of the armadillo, for example: ‘a glistening armadillo left the scene,/rose-flecked, head down, tail down’.
- But she is no longer able to dupe herself into believing that her descriptions are accurate. She does realise that she has





recreated the scene poetically: *'Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!'* In this final stanza she stands outside the poem, reflecting on the poetic process and on the opposition of her two modes: accurate description versus poetic recreation in order to understand.

Tone: How Bishop controls feelings

The last stanza provides what is for Bishop a most unusual emotional outburst. The critical cry *'Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!'* can be read as aimed at the poetic method but also at the fire balloons' imitation of the destructiveness of war. The gesture of defiance is vulnerable, for all its posturing ('weak', 'ignorant'). It is little better than a hopeless, passionate, vain gesture, which further emphasises the poet's emotional involvement:

*... a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!*

This is an unusual outburst from Bishop, whose poetry is tightly controlled even when dealing with an emotive subject. This technical control over her verse keeps it from sentimentality and gives it 'an elegant, muted, modernist quality', as Penelope Laurans put it (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom). Laurans examines in detail how the poet shapes the reader's response to this beautiful and cruel event:

- By a factual presentation, as we have seen.
- By metrical variation – continually changing rhythm prevents the reader from becoming lost in the lyrical music, stopping the momentum of the verse. A detailed study of the first four stanzas will show how this operates. Stanzas 1 and 2 have a regular metrical pattern: lines 1, 2 and 4 are all of three stresses,

with the five-stress third line emphasising the descriptions of the balloons – their frailty, beauty and flashing romanticism. Then stanzas 3 and 4 change to varying three-stress and four-stress lines. Even in the first two regular stanzas there are irregularities. For example, the first sentence of stanza 1 ends in the third line, so the sense is against the flow of the metre. The *abab* rhyme of the first stanza changes in the second. The rest of the poem has three-stress and four-stress lines, but they vary from stanza to stanza. Technically, the overall effect is to arrest any flow or musical momentum that might allow the verse to become sentimental.

- By using metre and other technical strategies to draw back from moments of emotional intensity, just at the point where a Romantic poet would let it flow. Stanzas 6 to 9 provide a good example of this. In particular, the flow and enjambment from the end of stanza 6 to 7 conjure up the fright of the owls:

... We saw the pair

*of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.*

But this moment of intensity is broken up by a change in the metre from tetrameter to irregular three-, four- or five-stress lines. We also find single-unit end-stopped lines, which break the flow:

The ancient owls' nest must have burned.

The poet now focuses on the detailed description of the animals – the armadillo and the baby rabbit. We are caught up in this and brought back to reality.





SESTINA

Background

Four poems from *Questions of Travel* – ‘Manners’, ‘Sunday 4 a.m.’, ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’ and ‘Sestina’ – deal with Bishop’s return to her origins. ‘Sestina’ (originally entitled ‘Early Sorrow’) works on all the significant elements of her childhood. The poem probably evokes the time and atmosphere after her mother’s last departure from Great Village to the mental hospital. It also reflects a great deal of thinking and reading about child psychology. In reality, despite the privations and tensions reflected in the poem, Elizabeth Bishop always maintained that she was happy in Great Village.

The sestina form

A sestina is a poem of six stanzas of six lines each, in which the line endings of the first stanza are repeated, but in a different order, in the other five. The poem concludes with an envoy, which is a short address to the reader (or the person to whom the poem is addressed). So the elements here are house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac and tears and they are rearranged in the other stanzas like a sort of moving collage.

Some of the elements carry greater symbolic weight, such as the almanac, which has been construed as representing the poet’s lifelong anxiety about the passing of time. The house is a pictorial representation of her childhood and the little Marvel stove seems to provide a counterbalance of domesticity, heat and comfort.

A psychological reading of the poem

The poem deals with memories of childhood uncertainty, loss and a pervasive sense of sorrow. Interesting psychological readings of the poem have been offered by Helen Vendler (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom), among others. Her reading focuses on tears as the strange and crucial component of this childhood collage. The grandmother hides her tears. The child senses the unshed tears and displaces them elsewhere: in the kettle, the rain, the teacup. The child must translate the tears she has felt, so she transfers them to the ‘man with buttons like tears’.

The absence of parents is the cause of all these tears. By the end of the poem, in the tercet that draws together all the essential elements, tears are planted, or sorrow implanted, in the child’s life cycle.

The drawing of the house also attracts the interest of psychologists. Its rigid form is taken to represent the insecurity of the young child’s makeshift home, her path and flowerbed seen as an attempt to domesticate and put her own stamp on it and so give her some tenuous grasp on security. Helen Vendler asserts, ‘The blank center stands for the definitive presence of the unnatural in the child’s domestic experience.’ Of all things, one’s house should not be inscrutable, otherwise there is a great void at the centre of one’s life. This becomes one of Elizabeth Bishop’s recurring themes: that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene.





The tercet achieves a resolution of sorts, offering a more balanced view of the human condition. It asserts that grief, song, the marvellous and the inscrutable are present together, perhaps necessarily, in life. But we are left with the impression that the inscrutable, the strange, is the most powerful element in human development.





FIRST DEATH IN NOVA SCOTIA

Background

Apart from her short story 'In the Village', this poem is one of the few published memoirs of Bishop's childhood. It is also the only time her mother is featured in a published poem. The elegy is based on an actual funeral, probably in 1914, of a cousin named Frank. 'First Death in Nova Scotia' was published in the *New Yorker* on 10 March 1962.

A reading of the poem

This is another of Bishop's poems in which she attempts to recover her childhood. With an astute and sensitive psychological understanding, she is very successful at recreating the consciousness of a child and establishing the point of view of the very young.

She manages to suggest the feelings of confusion through the blurring of colour distinctions. Red and white, the national colours, seem to permeate the entire scene, or at least colour the meaning of it. As well as being the colours of the national flag, they become the colours of little Arthur, of the dead bird, of the royal robes and even of the coffin timbers. The child has held on to just one set of familiar colours.

Also, the child's memory seizes and holds objects (the chromographs, the stuffed loon, the lily of the valley). The child's memory recalls desires, desires for objects ('His breast ... caressable', 'his eyes were red glass,/much to be desired').

The child has difficulty coping with the difference of death, so the 'reality hold' slips. The familiar becomes unreal, the bird is alive again, just uncommunicative (he 'kept his own counsel/on his white, frozen lake'). There is an effort to make the unfamiliar – death – real in the child's terms, with surreal consequences:

*Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake.*

The adults also cope with death by participating in a sort of fantasy:

*'Come,' said my mother,
'Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur.'*

The child fantasises that the 'cold, cold parlor' is the territory of Jack Frost and that the royal couple have 'invited Arthur to be/the smallest page at court'. The child has created a fantasy world in which reality and fantasy, present, past and future, and the national colours all fuse together. But the strain of credibility is too great and doubt begins to enter her head. The doubt is not an adult doubt about Arthur's ultimate destiny, but, in typical child fashion, a doubt about the means of transport:

*But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?*

The use of the child's point of view has allowed a very dispassionate treatment of death. Emotion does not get in the





way and the entire focus is on the unknowable strangeness of death.

Themes and issues

- Memories of childhood: If this poem can be taken to reflect Bishop's recollections of childhood as a whole, then it is a bleak view. It encompasses death, both of people and creatures; a confused inability to comprehend the reality of the world; a world lacking in warmth or the normal human comforts of childhood ('cold, cold parlor', 'marble-topped table'); a world devoid of emotion; and a shadowy mother figure who is associated with the rituals of death rather than any maternal comfort.
- A child's first exposure to death and her attempts to comprehend it ('domesticate' it, in Bishop's terms).
- Death – its unknowable strangeness. A secular view of death (Arthur goes to court rather than Heaven!) – yet not completely secular, as it recognises another reality beyond this.
- The frailty of life ('he was all white, like a doll/that hadn't been painted yet').





FILLING STATION

A reading of the poem

A celebration of the ordinary

Many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems show a fascination with the exotic – with travel, with the mysterious forces in nature and with the extremes of human experience – but she is also a poet of the ordinary, the everyday, the mundane and banal. She is interested in both the extraordinary and the ordinary.

The scene we are introduced to at the beginning of this poem is not just the antithesis of beauty, it is unmitigated grot: 'oil-soaked, oil-permeated', 'crushed and grease/impregnated wickerwork', 'a dirty dog', etc. What Bishop does is focus her well-known curiosity on this everyday dull scene and probe its uniqueness and mystery. She finds its meaning through her usual poetic method: accumulation of detail and a probing beneath the surface of the seen.

The domestic gives meaning to life

What is revealed as the details pile up is evidence of domesticity, even in this greasy, grimy world of oil and toil: the flower, the 'taboret/(part of the set)', the embroidered doily; even the dirty dog is 'quite comfy'. In a parody of metaphysical questioning,

Why the extraneous plant?

Why the taboret?

Why, oh why, the doily?

The poem searches for answers, for reasons why things are so, for some harmony or coherence at the heart of this grimy scene. The answer appears in the last stanza, where there are indications of an anonymous domestic presence:

Somebody embroidered the doily.

Somebody waters the plant

For Bishop, domesticity is the greatest good, and establishing domestic tranquillity is what gives meaning to life. She has elevated this into a philosophy of life in place of a religious outlook. Indeed, this last stanza has been read as a parody of the great theological Argument from Design, used as an indication of the existence of God.

In Bishop's 'theology', is the Great Designer feminine? Certainly we could argue that the world of work described here operates on the male principle. The 'several quick and saucy/and greasy sons' and even the 'big hirsute begonia' all evoke a male world of inelegant, rude and crude health. In contrast, the domesticity is achieved mainly through the female principle ('Embroidered in daisy stitch/with marguerites, I think') and it is this principle that provides order and coherence and meaning ('arranges the rows of cans') and is a proof of love ('Somebody loves us all').

Tone

There are some complicated and subtle shifts of tone throughout this poem. From the somewhat offhand tone of the opening line ('Oh, but it is dirty!'), the poet first takes refuge in descriptive detail. Some critics have read the beginning of the poem as condescending





(‘little filling station’, ‘all quite thoroughly dirty’). The flashes of wit may give some credence to that interpretation (‘Be careful with that match!’ and the comic books ‘of certain color’).

But the poet is gradually drawn into the scene and becomes involved. The stance of detached observer no longer provides complete protection for her. She is engaged intellectually at first (‘Why, oh why, the doily?’), and as she uncovers what gives coherence and meaning to the scene, an emotional empathy is revealed (‘Somebody loves us all’). Perhaps this is as much a *cri de coeur* of personal need as it is an observation. But the wit saves the poem from any hint of sentimentality:

*Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe.*

Could we describe the tone of the poem as wryly affectionate? Or do you read the tone of the ending as bemused, as the poet is left contemplating the final irony that love is a row of oil cans?





IN THE WAITING ROOM

A reading of the poem

This poem depicts a traumatic moment of awareness in the child's development. It occurs when the young girl first experiences the separateness of her own identity and simultaneously becomes aware of the strangeness of the world of which she is a part. She fails to find a satisfactory, intelligible relationship between her now conscious 'self' and this 'other' world, a failure so emotional for her that it causes a momentary loss of consciousness, a temporary retreat into that black abyss.

At the beginning of the poem the child sees the world as safe, domestic, familiar: the world of her aunt, a waiting room, overcoats, lamps and magazines. But the magazines expose her to the primal power of the earth, volcanic passion erupting out of control, the primitive destructive urges of humans (cannibalism) and the barbarous decorations of the naked women. Clearly this newly revealed primitive and exotic world is frighteningly 'other' to the child and she can comprehend it only by domesticating it through a household simile:

*black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.*

The unfamiliarity of this broader world is shocking to the child ('Their breasts were horrifying'), yet it is a world she shares, as she empathises with her aunt's cry of pain:

*... What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.*

The conflicting claims of self and of the world are cleverly conveyed by Bishop through a constantly changing inside–outside perspective maintained throughout the poem. At first we are in Worcester but outside the room, then inside the room ('sat') while it grows dark outside. Next we are back in the waiting room while the aunt is further inside. The child looks inside a volcano but outside the cannibals and the naked women. The cry ('from inside,/came an *oh!* of pain') first drives the child inside herself ('my voice, in my mouth'). This sends her into a fainting dive ('I – we – were falling, falling'), until she is driven right off the world, and the perspective changes radically to a view from space ('cold, blue-black space').

These radical changes in perspective – from the people in the waiting room to inside herself, to the African women, from inside to outside the waiting room and the world, from 'I' to 'them' and back again – convey the child's confused apprehension of this widening world and bring on the fainting spell.

It is in this atmosphere of shifting perspectives that she asserts her individuality, naming herself for the first time in a poem ('you are an *I*,/you are an *Elizabeth*'), yet immediately the claims of the 'other' world are manifest ('you are one of *them*'). She has great difficulty integrating the recently discovered elements of this world, unifying the exotic and the familiar, the naked women





with the aunt and the people in the waiting room in the familiar trousers and skirts and boots. She has even greater difficulty accepting any kind of personal unity with this other world, particularly at a time when she feels most alone, having just discovered herself:

*What similarities –
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts –
held us all together
or made us all just one?*

Even though the fainting spell passes, the moment of visionary insight fades and the child is relocated in actual time and place and the issue is not resolved ('The War was on'). This war is both political and personal for the child. Outside, the world is hostile ('night and slush and cold') and her uneasy relationship with it continues.

These twin realisations of being an individual and yet somehow being uneasily connected to this strange and varied world form the central wisdom of this poem, what her biographer Brett Millier has described as 'the simultaneous realisation of selfhood and the awful otherness of the inevitable world'. It is interesting that Bishop chooses the age of seven to mark this onset of adult awareness, an age traditionally seen as initiating moral responsibility. She herself has dated the onset of many of her own most important attitudes from the age of six or seven, including a

feeling of strangeness or alienation from the world. She also dates the beginnings of her feminist philosophy from that age.

Consciousness of sex roles

'In the Waiting Room' describes the poet's first encounter with consciousness of sex roles. Through the magazine the child learns, though perhaps at a sub-rational level, that women practise mutilations on themselves and their babies to make them more sexually attractive. They themselves perpetuate their role as sex objects, encourage this vanity, accept this type of slavery. Aunt Consuelo's 'oh! of pain' suggests the weakness and vulnerability of women. Bishop identifies with women's pain, yet her attitude to women is somewhat ambivalent. While she identifies with the cry, she is disparaging about the woman's weakness:

*even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't.*

She recoils in horror from female sexuality, from 'those awful hanging breasts'. This ambivalence about the value of femininity affected her view of herself and her sexual orientation and gave rise to a complicated treatment of questions of sex roles in her poetry.

Poetic Style

A private poem

'In the Waiting Room' is somewhat unusual in that it is such a self-contained poem. Usually in Bishop's poems the private





experience described mushrooms into a universal truth. While we might draw some universal conclusions about childhood and the development of self-awareness, the truths this poem essentially convey reflect idiosyncratic Bishop attitudes to life: the estrangement, the pain, the confusions of life, the view of woman, etc.

Descriptive accuracy

The fabled truth of Bishop's descriptions lets her down here. Research has shown that there are no naked people in the *National Geographic* of February 1918 and Osa and Martin Johnson had not yet become famous at that time. For once, her realism is a product of poetic licence.

Use of metre

The poem is written in very short, sometimes two-stress but more often three-stress lines. Trimeters are quite a limiting line formation, not often used for the communication of complicated ideas or deep emotions (though Yeats manages to convey deep irony and anger through the regular thumping trimeter beat of 'The Fisherman'). Bishop's use of trimeters here is probably deliberate, to limit the reader's emotional engagement with the poem. Not that the poem is devoid of emotional impact: the moments of revelation are intensely felt. But as the critic Penelope Laurans (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom) demonstrates in her scanning of some passages, Bishop deliberately varies the metre to prevent a lyrical build-up that might invite an emotional investment by the reader. Instead, the reader is forced to think and reflect, in this example

on the word 'stranger', which is stressed both by its placement and by the metre:

˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘

I knew/that nothing/stranger

˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘

had ever/happened,/that nothing

- ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘

stranger/could ever/happen.

The less usual amphibrach foot (˘ - ˘) creates a certain ponderousness, which forces the reader to reflect on, rather than be caught up in, the experience.

At another key moment, the variation of feet is used to create the effect of puzzlement:

- ˘ - ˘ - ˘

How -/I didn't/know any

- ˘ ˘ - ˘ - ˘

word for it/- how 'un/likely' ...

˘ - ˘ - ˘ ˘ -

How had I/come to/be here

Again, the effect is to limit the emotional appeal. Bishop uses her technical skills to keep the reader at bay, at a safe distance.





OVERVIEW OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

Note: Use the following material as a series of ‘thinking points’ in helping you to form your own opinions on Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry. Reread the poems to reflect, reassess and find supporting quotations. Then, alter, add to or delete points as you make your own notes and form your own opinions.

Themes

Childhood

- Many of Bishop’s poems have their roots in childhood memories, and indeed are based on her own childhood (‘Sestina’, ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’, ‘In the Waiting Room’).
- The perspective is mostly that of adult reminiscence (‘Sestina’, ‘In the Waiting Room’), but occasionally the child’s viewpoint is used (‘First Death in Nova Scotia’).
- The lessons of childhood are chiefly about pain and loss (‘Sestina’, ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’, ‘In the Waiting Room’) and about alienation from the world (‘In the Waiting Room’), but there is also the comfort of grandparents (‘Sestina’).
- There is a strong tension between the need to return to childhood and the need to escape from that childhood (‘In the Waiting Room’, ‘At the Fishhouses’); she even returns in dreams in a poem called ‘The Moose’. Perhaps this is based on the notion of childhood as the completion of the self and the poems are a search for the self?
- We know that Bishop attended counselling to find the origins of her alcoholism and depression, yet her reconstructions

of childhood do not seem to function as Freudian psychoanalytical therapy. She doesn’t seem to alter her direction or attitudes as a result of drawing her past into the conscious, though she does seem to find a deal of comfort and a greater acceptance in a later poem, ‘The Moose’. In general she seems neutral and detached (‘First Death in Nova Scotia’, ‘Sestina’).

- She also deals with the end of childhood and the awakening to adulthood (‘In the Waiting Room’).

Her life as the subject matter

Bishop was ‘a poet of deep subjectivity’, as Harold Bloom said. She wrote out of her own experience, dealing with such topics as:

- Her incompleteness (‘Sestina’, ‘In the Waiting Room’)
- Her disordered life and depression (‘The Bight’)
- Alcoholism (‘The Prodigal’)
- Her childhood – of loss, sorrow and tears (‘Sestina’)
- Absence of parents (‘Sestina’), balanced by grandparents’ sympathy and support (‘Sestina’)
- Achieving adulthood and the confusion of that (‘In the Waiting Room’)
- Travel, her wanderlust (‘Questions of Travel’)
- Her favourite places (‘At the Fishhouses’)
- Even her hobbies, such as fishing (‘The Fish’)

Travel

- As her own wanderings show, she was a restless spirit,





constantly on the move: Nova Scotia, Florida, Brazil, Europe, New York, San Francisco, Harvard.

- Many of the places she visited (Nova Scotia, the Straits of Magellan, the Amazon Estuary, Key West, Florida) stand at the boundary between land and sea. There is a tension between land and sea in her poems ('At the Fishhouses', 'Questions of Travel'), with the sea viewed as a strange, indifferent, encircling power ('At the Fishhouses'). Perhaps this is a metaphor for the conflict between the artist and life. Quite a few of her poems are set at this juncture between land and sea ('The Fish', 'The Bight', 'At the Fishhouses').
- She seemed to be fascinated by geographical extremities: straits, peninsulas, wharves; mountains, jungle, outback ('Questions of Travel', 'The Armadillo', 'At the Fishhouses', 'The Bight'). Perhaps she was attracted to the near-isolation of these places. They are almost isolated in her poems. One critic viewed these as the sensual organs of a living earth, 'fingers of water or land that are the sensory receptors of a large mass'. The poet is seen as making sensuous contact with the living earth.
- Bishop has an eye for the exotic and the unusual ('Questions of Travel', 'The Armadillo'), but also for the ordinary ('Filling Station').
- She dwells on the difficulty of ever really knowing another culture ('Questions of Travel'), but this did not prevent her from trying.
- Travel and journeying can be seen as a metaphor for the discovery of truth in some poems ('Questions of Travel').

- Could this preoccupation with travel be seen as exile from the self?

The natural world

- Nature is central to her poetry, either as an active element central to the experience of the poem or by making an intrusion into the domestic scene (in a minority of poems such as 'Filling Station', 'Sestina', 'First Death in Nova Scotia', 'In the Waiting Room').
- An ecological world view is at the core of her philosophy – replacing religion, some would say ('The Armadillo'). Her view of humankind's relationship with nature involves a dialectical process of interdependence rather than humankind dominating or subjugating nature. We see both extremes in the poems: humankind's destructiveness ('The Armadillo') but also the achievement of a comfortable domesticity with nature, even at the primitive animal level ('The Prodigal').
- The experience of really looking at and encountering the natural is central to her poetic process ('The Fish', 'Questions of Travel').
- Our ability to understand the natural is sometimes limited, yet there are great moments of awe and insight in our encounters with the otherworldly spirit of nature ('The Fish').
- Bishop is always aware of the sheer beauty of nature ('The Bight', 'Questions of Travel', 'The Armadillo').
- This is tied in with her fascination with travel and her interest in the exotic ('The Armadillo', 'Questions of Travel').





- She attempts to domesticate the strangeness of nature through language and description.
- Consider some points already discussed, such as how geographical extremes fascinate her, her beloved places and the significance of journeys for her.

The domestic and the strange

- The importance of the domestic is also a central ground in Bishop's poetry. Domesticity is one of the unifying principles of life. It gives meaning to our existence ('Filling Station').
- The comfort of people, of domestic affections, is important ('Filling Station', 'Sestina').
- Yet the heart of the domestic scene can sometimes be enigmatic. This strangeness, even at the centre of the domestic, is a powerful element in human life ('Sestina', 'First Death in Nova Scotia', 'In the Waiting Room'). One can be ambushed by the strange at any time, even in the security of the domestic scene ('In the Waiting Room').
- The process of domesticating is a central activity of humanity: domesticating the land, domesticating affections, domesticating the non-human world.

Bishop's philosophy as revealed in the poems

- Bishop's is a secular (non-religious) world view: there is no sense of ultimate purpose, and in this she relates to modernist American poets like Frost and Stevens.
- Hers is very much a here-and-now, existential philosophy: the experience is everything. There is some sense of tradition

or linear movement in her life view, but tradition is just an accumulation of experience. The transience of knowledge ('At the Fishhouses') and the limits to our knowing ('Questions of Travel') contribute to this outlook.

- Her ecological outlook is at the basis of her philosophy, as we have seen: humankind in dialectical action with nature, discovering, encountering, not domineering ('The Fish').
- She demonstrates the importance of the domestic ('Filling Station').
- Her view of the human being is fractured and incomplete ('Chemin de Fer'). This duality has been described by Anne Newman (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom) as follows: 'She sees the ideal and the real, permanence and decay, affirmation and denial in both man and nature'; a sort of 'fractured but balanced' view of humanity. ('Filling Station' and 'In the Waiting Room')
- A person may not always be entirely free to choose her location ('Questions of Travel'), yet she can make a choice about how her life is spent. Life is not totally determined ('The Prodigal').
- The bleaker side of life is often stressed – the pain, loss and trauma ('The Prodigal', 'Sestina', 'First Death in Nova Scotia', 'In the Waiting Room') – yet she is not without humour ('At the Fishhouses', 'Filling Station').
- She believes we need to experience our dreams ('Questions of Travel').
- Is the overall view of humankind that of the eternal traveller,





journeying? And is the journey all? Would you agree with Jerome Mazzaro's view (in *Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom): 'Like Baudelaire's voyagers she seems instead to be accepting the conditions of voyaging as the process of a life which itself will arrive meaninglessly at death with perhaps a few poems as a dividend'?

- She expresses the unknowable strangeness of death ('First Death in Nova Scotia').
- Yet there is a sort of heroism evident in her poems. Many of the poems feature a crisis or conflict of some sort, with which the narrator deals courageously, often learning in the process ('The Fish', 'In the Waiting Room').

Bishop and women's writing

Are you conscious of the femininity of the speaker in Bishop's poems? Some critics have argued that the importance of the domestic principle in her philosophy ('Filling Station') and the attitudes of care and sympathy in the poems (for the fish, the prodigal, the animals and birds) and even the occupational metaphors, for example of housemaking ('Filling Station', 'Sestina') and dressmaking and map colouring in other poems, all indicate a strong feminine point of view in her poetry. Other critics have argued that her rhetoric is completely asexual, that the poet's persona is neutral, that the Bishop 'I' is the eye of the traveller or the child recapturing an innocence that avoids sex roles altogether, an asexual self that frees her from any sex-determined role. Examine 'Questions of Travel' and 'First Death in Nova Scotia' in this regard.

We have already encountered something of her treatment of her own sexuality and her attitude as a child to female sexuality ('In the Waiting Room'). She also deals with sexuality in other poems, such as 'Crusoe in England', 'Santarém', 'Exchanging Hats' and 'Pink Dog'.

Bishop's links to the Romantics

The following are some of the distinguishing features of Romanticism. Consider Elizabeth Bishop's poetry in light of some or all of these statements.

- Romanticism stressed the importance of the solitary individual voice, often in rebellion against tradition and social conventions.
- The subjective vision is of great value in society.
- In place of orthodox religious values, the individual looks for value and guidance in intense private experience.
- Nature often provides such intense experience, hence the notion of nature as the great teacher and moral guide.
- Romanticism can show a divided view of the individual. The individual is often pulled in opposite directions – for example, solitariness versus sociability, lonely pursuit of an ideal versus community fellowship.
- It is anti-rational. Feelings, instinctive responses, unconscious wisdom and passionate living are valued more than rational thought.
- Dreams and drug-enhanced experiences are especially valued. Children, primitive people, outcasts, even the odd eccentric figure are regarded as having special insight and wisdom.





- 'Bishop explored typical Romantic themes, such as problems of isolation, loss and the desire for union beyond the self.' Explore her poetry in light of this statement.
- It has been said that Bishop's practice of poetry follows Wordsworth's advice that poetry should embody controlled passion, should deal with powerful feelings but with the restraint of hindsight: 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Would you agree?
- Examine 'At the Fishhouses' as a great Romantic poem.

Style and technique

Variety of verse forms

- Though she was not often attracted to formal patterns, a variety of verse forms is found in Bishop's poetry: sonnet, sestina, villanelle, etc. ('The Prodigal', 'Sestina').
- She used a variety of metres, but often favoured trimeter lines ('The Armadillo'). This sometimes resulted in long, thin poems.
- She was happiest using free verse ('Questions of Travel', 'The Bight', 'At the Fishhouses', etc.).

Her descriptions

- The surface of a Bishop poem is often deceptively simple.
- A favourite technique is 'making the familiar strange' ('The Bight', 'Questions of Travel').
- Her detailed descriptions function as repossession or domestication of the object by the artist. This is how she

gradually apprehends her subject: through the accumulation of detail ('The Fish').

- Bishop often insisted on the truth of her descriptions, but the reality is more complex than that. Her descriptions are both recreation and creation, creating veracity but also using poetic licence ('The Armadillo'; also 'In the Waiting Room').
- Her similes and metaphors are often surprising, like conceits. They can be both exciting and exact.

Control of feeling

- Many of her poems deal with emotive subjects ('In the Waiting Room').
- There is an element of spontaneity and naturalness in the tone. Consider the opening of 'In the Waiting Room' and 'Filling Station'. 'The sense of the mind actively encountering reality, giving off the impression of involved immediate discovery, is one of Bishop's links to the Romantics,' as the critic Penelope Laurans put it.
- Yet spontaneity and feelings are firmly controlled by technique, in particular by variation of metre (see the critical commentary on 'The Armadillo', among others). 'It is sometimes assumed that the cool surfaces of Bishop's poems reveal their lack of emotional depth; in fact Bishop often uses such reticence as a strategy to make a deeper, more complex emotional appeal to the reader' (Penelope Laurans). (Examine 'The Armadillo' and 'In the Waiting Room' and their critical commentaries.)





- The matter-of-fact tone avoids sentimentality. The use of understatement controls feeling ('In the Waiting Room').

Absence of moralising

Her dislike of didacticism is well documented. She disliked 'modern religiosity and moral superiority' and so she avoids overt moralising in her poems. The scenes offer up their wisdom gradually, as the descriptions help us to understand the object or place ('At the Fishhouses', 'Questions of Travel').

Bishop as a dramatic poet

Consider:

- Scenes of conflict or danger
- Moments of dramatic encounter
- Dramatic monologue structure in many of the poems.





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

1. Which poems made the deepest impression on you? Why?
 2. Which passages would you wish to read and reread? Why?
 3. In the selection you have read, what were the principal issues that preoccupied the poet? What did you like or dislike about the way she treated these issues?
 4. Did you find that reading Bishop gave you any insights into human beings or the world? What did you discover?
 5. From your reading of the poems, what impression did you form about the personality of the poet herself? What do you think made her happy or sad? What did she enjoy or fear? What values or beliefs did she have? Or is it difficult to answer these questions? If so, what does that tell you about the voice of the poet in these poems?
 6. Think about the landscapes and places that attracted her. What do they suggest about the poet and poetry?
 7. Think about the people featured in her poetry. What do you notice about them?
 8. Describe your overall response to reading her poetry: did you find her voice disturbing, frightening, challenging, enlightening, comforting, or something else? Refer to particular poems or passages to illustrate your conclusions.
 9. What do you like or dislike about the style of her poetry?
 10. Do you find her poetry different in any way from other poetry you have read? Explain.
11. Why should we read Bishop? Attempt to convince another pupil of the importance of her poetry in a letter, speech or other form.
 12. What questions would you like to ask her about her poetry?





QUESTIONS

1. 'The human being at a moment of crisis is the central concern of much of Bishop's poetry.' Discuss this statement with reference to two or more poems you have read.
2. The child's relationship with the world is a major theme in Bishop's poetry. What aspects of this theme do you find developed in the poems?
3. 'Bishop's poems may be set in particular places, but the discoveries made are universal.' Discuss this statement with reference to any two poems.
4. 'The real focus of Bishop's poetry is inside herself. Her poems are primarily psychological explorations.' Discuss.
5. 'The view of the poet that comes across from these poems is of an isolated eccentric who nevertheless has a keen interest in human beings.' Discuss.
6. 'A keen eye for detail and a fascination with the ordinary are distinguishing features of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry.' Discuss.
7. 'A deep sense of interior anguish lies at the heart of many of her poems.' Discuss this view with reference to at least four of the poems you have read.
8. 'She is a poet who lives in a painter's world in which shapes and colours are enormously significant' (Anne Stevenson). Discuss with reference to a selection of Bishop's poems.
9. 'For all the unhappiness of the themes she deals with, we often find a note of humour, even of fun, in Bishop's poems.' Discuss.
10. 'Bishop has the oddest way of describing things; she sometimes makes the ordinary appear strange.' Explore the effects of this technique in at least two of the poems you have studied.
11. 'We find a distinct lack of emotion in Bishop's poetry.' (a) How does she achieve this? (b) Is it always true of her poetry? Explain.
12. 'Man, for her, appears as a figure in a landscape, flawed, helpless, tragic, but capable also of love and even of happiness' (Anne Stevenson). Discuss this aspect of Bishop's poetry with reference to the poems you have studied.





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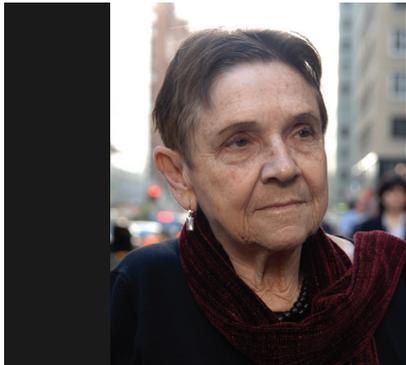
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ADRIENNE RICH

Notes and Explorations: Carole Scully

HL 2020

OL 2020

HL 2022

OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room

Power

Storm Warnings

Living in Sin

The Roofwalker

Our Whole Life

Trying to Talk with a Man

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From a Survivor

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INTRODUCTION

Early life

My own luck was being born white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged me to read and write.

(Adrienne Rich, When We Dead Awaken: Writing a Re-Vision)

This brief description by Adrienne Rich of her childhood suggests that her formative years were spent in a secure and solid home where she was intellectually stimulated by a supportive parent. Indeed, there is a truth in this interpretation, but equally truthful is the fact that, in later years, Rich had to struggle to come to terms with certain features of her early life.

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, USA, on 16 May 1929, in the hospital where her father, Arnold, worked as a doctor. He was also a teacher and a researcher in the Department of Pathology in Johns Hopkins Medical School. It was only as she grew older that Rich fully appreciated just how unique her father was in the academic world of Baltimore. Arnold was one of a very small number of Jews who taught in the Medical School and, as such, he had to endure a lengthy delay in his appointment to the Professorship of Pathology at Johns Hopkins simply because no Jew had ever held the chair before.

Arnold's attitude to his Jewish heritage was a complex one that proved to be one aspect of her childhood that Rich struggled to reconcile in later years. Arnold did not hide the fact that he

was a Jew, once commenting to Adrienne, 'You know that I have never denied that I am a Jew ... I am a scientist ... I have no use for organized religion...I am a person, not simply a Jew.' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*).

However, it is clear that Arnold deliberately created a family and social environment where Jewishness, although not denied, was certainly avoided in favour of Christian values. He married a Protestant woman and his two daughters were sent to an Episcopalian school. He and his family mixed with people who considered it impolite to mention such words as 'Negro' and 'Jew'.

Arnold expected his wife and daughters to behave 'correctly' at all times in the belief that, as Rich put it, 'With enough excellence, you could presumably make it stop mattering you were Jewish ...' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*).

Rich's mother, Helen, was ideally suited to such a lifestyle. From a once wealthy southern family, Helen had been reared in a world where the Christian ethos was the foundation of good social behaviour and where the old-fashioned, genteel values of white, middle-class good breeding were prized above all else. To be seen as 'common' was the greatest sin of all for any woman. Rich's mother diligently attempted to pass on these values to Adrienne and her sister, advising them, that in relationships with men, 'It was in the woman's interest to cultivate 'mystery', conceal her actual feelings.' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*). This was another aspect of her early years that Adrienne Rich would later struggle to reconcile.





Yet, Helen was more than simply a 'southern belle'. Prior to her wedding, she had been a gifted pianist and composer. At one point, she had even considered becoming a concert pianist, but had decided against it because of the predominantly male nature of the classical-music world at that time. Once she met Arnold Rich, Helen gave up any career ambitions and devoted herself to caring for her husband and daughters. She did continue to play the piano and taught both of her children to play, but her exceptional musical talent was only ever expressed in private. Rich's experience of the way in which marriage had forced her mother to abandon the open expression of her ability proved to be another feature of her childhood that would affect her adult life.

Adrienne's parents instilled a respect for education in their daughters. Indeed, both girls were educated at home for some time before joining the school system. Adrienne was particularly close to her father. He gave her access to his large library of books and continually encouraged her to develop her intellect and to write poetry. Adrienne was a bright child who enjoyed such pursuits. She worked hard to impress her father and to produce the type of views and the style of poetry that would gain his approval. However, Arnold's approval was not gained easily. In later years, Rich vividly described the rigours that he put her through as a young girl: 'He prowled and pounced over my school papers, insisting I use 'grown-up' sources; he criticized my poems for faulty techniques ... '(Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*).

Adrienne more than fulfilled her father's hopes with her brilliant academic career. In 1947, she went from high school to the all-female Radcliffe College, part of the prestigious Harvard

University. Yet, ironically, it was here that she began to encounter ideas that would challenge her to reassess her childhood experiences, ideas that would ultimately lead her to a prolonged and bitter break from her parents.

Rich's Jewish heritage

At Radcliffe, Rich met with young Jewish women who were not only her equals intellectually and academically, but who were also fiercely proud of their Jewish culture and religion. In Rich's own words, 'They took me on.' They taught her 'the names of holidays and foods, which surnames are Jewish and which are 'changed names'; about girls who had their noses fixed ...'. Although she knew that she would be unacceptable as a Jew to strict Jewish families because her mother was non-Jewish, Rich found something within her that responded to these revelations. She knew that she was 'testing a forbidden current', because she was deliberately going against her father's wishes. But even more dangerously, Rich was aware that she 'was flirting with identity' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*).

Up until this point in Rich's life, because of the efforts of her father and mother, her Jewish heritage had not really impinged on her existence. During her childhood, she had the view that 'Jews were in the Bible and mentioned in English literature ... but they seemed not to exist in everyday life.' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*). In 1946, at the age of sixteen, she had gone to a cinema to watch films showing the Allied liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, but when she had told her parents what she had seen they were 'not pleased. I felt accused of being morbidly





curious, not healthy, sniffing around death for the thrill of it.' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*). The confusion and guilt that Rich felt as a result of this experience restrained her from engaging in any such similar incidents for a long time.

Now, however, the more independent Rich would not be so easily diverted. She did struggle to reconcile her own desires with her wish to please her parents but, finally, she decided to address the unresolved issue of Jewishness that had lingered from her childhood years. Gradually, she came to see her father's lack of concern for his Jewish heritage as a veneer that covered an ambivalent mixture of 'self-hatred' and 'Jewish pride'. He 'lived in an increasingly withdrawn world, in his house up on a hill in a neighbourhood where Jews were not supposed to buy property.' (Adrienne Rich, *Split at the Root*). Her determination to embrace her Jewish roots marked the beginning of her separation from her parents and from the social and cultural mores and conventions that they had worked so hard to instil in her. In 1953, she married Alfred H. Conrad, a Jewish economist who was teaching at Harvard. Her parents did not attend the wedding. It was to be several years before she would communicate with them again.

Domesticity and Rich's poetry

This separation, particularly from her father, caused Rich not only to reassess her relationship with him but also his influence on her writing. It is undeniable that Arnold Rich had a profound effect on his daughter's early intellectual and creative development; he pushed her to achieve academically and he drove her to refine her writing skills. He had given her books dealing with the technical

aspects of poetry, such as metre and rhyme, in order to guide her writing towards a style that he regarded as being 'correct'. In Arnold Rich's view, 'correct' poetry was poetry that demonstrated a knowledge and mastery of traditionally accepted poetic forms.

Indeed, when Rich's first book of poetry was published in 1951, in her final year at Radcliffe, it was widely praised for its technical quality. The poet W. H. Auden, who chose the book for the Yale Younger Poets Award, wrote of it:

Craftsmanship includes, of course, not only a talent for versification, but also ... an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the matching of these with the subject at hand; Miss Rich's poems rarely fail on any of those counts.

In later years, Rich was to view such poems as 'Storm Warnings', 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' and 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' as having a 'conscious craft' about them. Each of them was 'an arrangement of ideas and feelings, pre-determined, and it said what I had already decided it would say.' (Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*). Indeed, there is an undeniable elegance of form and a gracefulness of expression about such lines as:

*And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
(Storm Warnings)*

*When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
(Aunt Jennifer's Tigers)*





*Some have talked in bitter tones,
Some have held and fingered stones.
(‘The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room’)*

However, the radical alterations that took place in Rich’s life following the publication of her first anthology began to change her approach to her writing. After the acrimonious and bitter split from her parents, she struggled to escape from her intense desire to please her father both in her life and her writing. Freed from the constraints and preconceptions of her father’s view of poetry, Rich began to explore other ways of expressing her thoughts and feelings, so that she was not simply recreating a ‘male’ style of poetry, but finding a way of expressing her own ‘female’ experience in poetic terms.

In addition, she began to think about the way that her relationship with her father had been influenced by the fact that he was male and she female:

*In my separation from him, in my realization at what price
that once-intoxicating approval had been bought, I was
learning in concrete ways a great deal about patriarchy, in
particular how the ‘special’ woman, the favoured daughter,
is controlled and rewarded.
(Adrienne Rich, Split at the Root)*

Thus, once again, her early childhood experiences – in particular her relationship with her father – affected her later development. She began to examine the patriarchal nature of her society where, she believed, the hierarchical form of relations between men and women ensured that men were allocated the dominant, powerful

role in family and society, while women were kept in a subservient and powerless position.

However, it was not only Rich’s childhood experiences that influenced her at this point in her life. Her marriage to Alfred opened up a new world to her, one that would profoundly change not only her writing but also her whole way of living. As with many modern poets, Adrienne Rich has coupled her writing of poetry with extensive prose writings describing her intellectual and emotional development, thereby enabling her readers to directly connect her poetic development to her life. Consequently, she has written openly and honestly about the early years of her marriage, tracing the emotional confusion and the ambivalence that she felt about her role as a wife and mother.

From her childhood experiences, Rich already had some doubts about the effects that becoming a wife had on a woman’s position in the world. She had witnessed her mother’s surrendering of her career as a pianist and her submission to the role of dutiful wife. It is clear from her writing that Rich did love her husband, Alfred, but there was a very deliberate aspect to her decision to marry him. She saw it as a way of enabling her to participate in the Jewish culture of home and family, that culture that had been denied to her by her parents: ‘I longed to embrace that family, that new and mysterious Jewish world.’ Furthermore, she regarded her marriage as a statement about her position as a female poet:

*Because I was determined to prove that as a woman poet
I could have what was then defined as a ‘full’ woman’s life,
I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three
children before I was thirty.
(Adrienne Rich, Split at the Root)*





It may seem a rather confusing choice for her to make, given her growing questioning of the patriarchal nature of society, but, at that point in her life, marriage seemed to answer many of the questions that Rich was facing. Yet there was still a sense of uneasiness about her situation that haunted Rich, an uneasiness that she felt unable to express openly in her writing:

In those years, formalism ... like asbestos gloves ... allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded.
(Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*)

Thus, the image of the storm in her poem 'Storm Warnings' and the disenchantment felt by the female character in 'Living in Sin' are Rich's veiled references to the increasing turmoil that she felt within herself. Another device that Rich used to mask her expression of her confusion was the use of a male character, as in 'The Roofwalker'.

She considered this uneasiness as somehow unnatural, an act of disloyalty to her husband and, as her family grew, to her three sons. She struggled on with her writing in the context of her roles of wife and mother. Her second book of poetry was published in the same month that she gave birth to her first son. Again, it was received positively, and her poetry was judged to have a 'gracefulness' about it. Rich, however, was not satisfied with these poems. On the one hand, she recognised the positives in her life: a well-received second book of poems; a loving husband and a new son. On the other, she had times when she felt 'doubts', 'mild depression' and 'active despairing'.

By the time her third son was born, Rich's writing had almost ground to a halt. She experienced a terrible weariness, 'that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being'. She found that her daily routine of housewifely and motherly duties left her little or no time to actually write. Above all, she felt a terrible sense of failure: failure as a wife and mother, and failure as a poet. She came to the conclusion that she either had to accept 'failure' as her lot in life and continue on with the way things were, or to find some way of making sense of what she was experiencing and what she was feeling. She decided that she would have to find 'some synthesis by which to understand what was happening to me' (Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing a Re-Vision*).

Finding a synthesis

The 1950s and 1960s were a time of great political upheaval in America. During this time a number of movements developed with the aim of bringing about greater freedom for particular sections of American society. Along with many other academics and intellectuals, Adrienne Rich and her husband became actively involved in civil rights groups. Later in her life, Rich expressed the view that the impetus for this involvement grew out of her early experiences of 'a social and familial world in which there was a great deal of splitting'. (Adrienne Rich: *An Interview with David Montenegro*). In other words, she felt that she had lived her formative years in a family split between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) cultural roots and in a society split between black and white. For her, the civil rights-based movements seemed to offer





some way of uniting all of the split parts of her identity.

One such movement was founded to coordinate the struggle of American blacks to bring about an end to segregation and to achieve full rights of citizenship. For a time, Dr Martin Luther King was its leader.

The film entitled *The Rosa Parks Story* shows the types of social restriction that black people endured at the time and the methods that they used to change their position in American society. It tells of Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955 in Alabama. At the time, such an action was considered to be a violation of the segregation laws. Rosa Parks was arrested and, as a protest against this action, Dr Martin Luther King led a boycott of the bus system. Finally, in 1956, the buses were desegregated.

Rich found herself responding to this movement because it gave black people the opportunity to voice how they felt about their position in American society. It was this development of a language to express a sense of oppression that struck a chord with Rich. As she said in her interview with David Montenegro, 'That was the first place where I heard a language to name oppression. And it was an enormous relief ...'. For Rich, this marked the beginnings of her open acknowledgement of her own sense of oppression and her awareness that language and power are inextricably linked.

At the same time, the anti-war movement was steadily growing following the involvement of United States troops in Vietnam. Many American universities, such as Berkeley, witnessed large student demonstrations where intellectuals and musicians expressed the deep dissatisfaction that a large number of

Americans felt at the time. One such musician was Joan Baez, whose rendition of the song 'We shall not be moved' became a popular anthem. The film *Born on the Fourth of July* also gives us an insight into the atmosphere of these times. In this film, Tom Cruise portrays the life of Ron Kovic, who was paralysed fighting in Vietnam and subsequently became an anti-war activist.

As with the civil rights movement, Rich found that the anti-war movement also challenged accepted forms of expression, because they were seen as conveying only the views of the pro-war political establishment. Consequently, a new language gradually arose out of anti-war protests, one that expressed a rejection of America's position in Vietnam and questioned the balance of political power in the world.

However, it was Rich's involvement with one group in particular that was to have the most profound effect on her life and her work: that of the women's liberation movement. The concept of women's liberation, or feminism, developed in the United States alongside the other civil rights movements. It challenged the traditional roles allowed to women in American society. As the film *Mona Lisa Smile* with Julia Roberts illustrates, in 1950s America a college education for women was available only to well-off, white women. However, even among these women, the roles of wife and mother were generally considered to be far more important than any career. Consequently, as had happened with Rich's own mother, marriage usually meant that a woman focused on supporting her husband, running her home and caring for her children, and abandoned any career aspirations.





Until she encountered the women's liberation movement, Adrienne Rich had thought of herself as isolated and alone in her feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. Now, she met women who felt the same as she did. She threw herself into the movement. She revelled in the debates and the conversations with women who, like her, had experienced a profound despair arising out of the boundaries and expectations that society placed upon them because they were women. She found that not only did she relate to women on an intellectual level, but she also responded to them physically and sexually: 'The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs ...' (Adrienne Rich: *An Interview with David Montenegro*). After seventeen years of marriage, Rich left her husband and then fell in love with a Jewish woman. At last, she had found the connection, that synthesis, that which would reconcile and unite all the 'split' elements that she had absorbed in her childhood.

Language and power

As we have seen, Rich's involvement with civil rights movements had awakened her to the intimate relationship that exists between language and power. She realised that the language that we use in everyday life is more than simply a means of communication enabling each one of us to survive and function. Humans are, in general, social animals who live with other human beings. Clearly then, on one level language is used to ensure that our individual basic survival needs are met within a group situation: we each communicate in order to obtain the food, clothing, shelter and any other objects that are needed for day-to-day living. But there is more to human life than this. We are highly complex creatures,

both emotionally and psychologically. To live fully we need to be able to express our thoughts and our feelings successfully and satisfactorily.

However, it has long been recognised that individual expression is potentially a disruptive element to the continuing good order of the group or society in which humans live. Therefore, human societies have tended to institute some form of social hierarchy where there is an ultimate governing power whose role is to ensure that the society continues to function successfully, even if this means that the needs of individuals or groups within that society are not always met. In practice this means that those who hold the governing power in a society decide what is socially acceptable (what is good for the continuance of that society); and what is socially unacceptable (what is damaging to the continuance of that society).

The language that is used by the people who govern and the people who live in a society reflects and supports what is socially acceptable in that society, while also expressing rejection and disapproval for that which is deemed to be unacceptable. The governing power will frequently take steps to suppress or eliminate language that expresses views running counter to acceptable thinking, since this represents a threat. This suppression or elimination can be conducted subtly or overtly. History provides us with many examples of such overt actions, for instance, the book burnings conducted by the Nazis.

Indeed, our own recent Irish history is a perfect illustration of the connection between language and power: English control





of Ireland meant that a social situation was constructed where the ability to speak English was considered to be an advantage. In 1831, the Irish National School System was established, with English as the only acceptable 'school' language even in totally Irish-speaking areas. Conversely, when it came to constructing a Constitution for the new Irish Free State, one of its very first articles, Article 4, emphasised the connection between language and power when it stated: 'The national language of the Irish Free State (*Saorstát Éireann*) is the Irish language ...'.

For the civil rights movements in America, the language that was used in their society did not reflect either their beliefs or values; rather, it embodied the beliefs and values of those in power. In this way, each word that they spoke in their everyday lives served to emphasise their lack of power and to represent their submission to those governing. At that time, those who were governing were stereotypically and overwhelmingly white, financially secure, heterosexual males. Thus non-white people, poor people, workers, pacifists, homosexuals and women decided that part of their movement towards gaining power had to be the development of a language that did truly reflect what they regarded as important.

Adrienne Rich's participation in feminism, and her lesbianism, led her to view the very language that she had used so 'gracefully' and with such 'craftsmanship' as representing both the chains that held women in captivity in a male-controlled, patriarchal society, and the rope that they could use to climb to power and liberty. She understood 'how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore start

afresh.' (Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing a Re-Vision*). Together with other feminist writers, Rich set about finding words to express their new identities; to dismantle a language that they felt echoed with the message that men held all the power in society; to allow women to access power and to revolutionise the very structures of society:

Women are speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration ... The creative energy of patriarchy is fast running out ...

(Adrienne Rich, When We Dead Awaken: Writing a Re-Vision)

Thus, from the late 1950s on, Rich began to recognise that not only should her writing have a political dimension to it, but also that her very life should embrace a political stance. For her, politics was 'not something 'out there', but something 'in here' and of the essence of my condition'. Rich believed that the time had come for women to focus on the role that they had played in previous societies, their role in the present society, and the role that they could play in the society of the future.

Nor was this going to be an easy task, either for women or men. On the one hand, women had no models on which to base their vision of a new 'woman-driven' world. So, there were bound to be feelings of fear and confusion in some women, when faced with the sufferings of women in the past and the uncertainty surrounding women's roles in the future. Thus in 'Power', about Marie Curie's denial of the cause of her dreadful physical condition, can be seen a representation of the reluctance of some women to acknowledge





the truth of the female/male relationship. On the other hand, men would also experience fear and confusion, as they had to confront this challenge to the traditional, patriarchal society that had served them so well for so many centuries.

Most difficult of all, however, was the fact that women and men were now beginning to speak a different language, because women were no longer content to use the words that had been formed by and for a male-centred society. Her later poems, such as 'Our Whole Life', 'Trying to Talk with a Man' and 'Diving into the Wreck' express many of those concerns.

Rich's later life and poetry

Although Rich had finally found the 'synthesis' that she had been looking for to draw together the 'split' elements of her life into an understandable whole, she still had to endure some very difficult times. In 1968 her father died, and in 1970 her husband Alfred committed suicide. Rich was deeply upset and her poem 'From a Survivor' communicates her profound sense of loss with an uncompromising honesty. In addition, she has had to undergo a series of operations for arthritis and in 1992 she had spinal surgery.

However, Rich has also had happier times. In 1976, she began living with another writer, Michelle Cliff. She continued to write both poetry and prose while lecturing in a number of American universities, including Columbia, Cornell and Stanford. The quality of her work has been frequently acknowledged, ranging from the National Book Award in 1974, through two Guggenheim Fellowships and the Brandeis Creative Arts Medal in Poetry, to the Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000. In

1997 her principles led her to decline a National Medal for the Arts from the then President of the United States, Bill Clinton, commenting, 'I do know that art ... means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power that holds it hostage. The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate. A president cannot meaningfully honour certain token artists while the people at large are so dishonoured.'

Rich's later poetry is clearly very different from her earlier work in appearance, structure, expression and content. The tight elegance of 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' is strikingly opposed to the cluster of words and spaces used in 'Power'. The refined clarity of language in 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' contrasts with the challenging connection of words found in 'Trying to Talk with a Man'. The hesitant, careful expression of uneasiness in 'Storm Warning' gives way to the confident heroism of 'Diving into the Wreck'.

The manner in which Rich continually and uncompromisingly wrestled with the poetic form reflects the way in which she wrestled with the experiences of her life. Initially, she learned her poetic craft from men: her father and the male poets that she studied. She strove to write in a way that had 'occasional surprises ... but control, technical mastery and intellectual clarity were the real goals' (Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*). In doing so, she received great praise for her ability from such distinguished male writers as W. H. Auden, but she also had to suppress aspects of her identity, of her womanhood.

It was this act of suppression that caused Rich to feel a terrible sense of confusion and, for a time, the ordered formality of her





poems provided her with a comforting means of escape from this confusion. Inevitably, she was driven to face the reality of the conflict inherent in her life and the lie of the order that she had so frantically tried to make a truth. As her life experiences expanded, so too did her poetry. She began to re-form her writing, so that there was still that refinement in her choice of words and phrases but there was also an openness to 'let the unconscious offer its materials', to allow her imagination to work experience. She no longer hid behind her writing; instead she used it to engage directly with her life. Thus her poems became 'experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life' (Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*). It is notable that she characteristically wrote in the present tense, so that her poems appear as processes in action.

With immense bravery and an unbroken determination to be truthful, Adrienne Rich opened up the process of her act of living to us, her readers – not to provide answers, nor to supply solutions, but simply to share and acknowledge the value of a life experience, in the hope that we too will move towards a greater sharing and acknowledgment of the value of all life experiences: '... in the more recent poems something is happening, something has happened to me and, if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it' (Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*).

There is, indeed, a heroic quality about the role that she assigned for herself and the task that she undertook, but there is also an underlying sense of unremitting solitariness. For, like 'Aunt Jennifer', like the woman 'Living in Sin', like the 'naked man fleeing'

and like 'the Algerian', Rich wrote as a figure on her own. Although occasionally she may, like the diver in 'Diving into the Wreck', feel a sense of wholeness or she may celebrate the fact that she is a 'Survivor', the wholeness and the celebration never totally nullify the image of Rich standing alone with her fists raised against the society that surrounds her. And yet she fought on, encouraging her readers to witness her struggle to find a language that will have the power to change the world that she inhabited. She is driven to do this in the hope that each of us will be impelled to seek words for our worlds and, in so doing, empower ourselves to revolutionise society so that humanity can enter into a new age, where all have the power to speak and the right to be heard.





AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS

Background

Along with 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' and 'Storm Warnings', 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' comes from Rich's first collection of poetry, published in 1951 while she was in her final year at Radcliffe College. At this time, Rich was writing in a way that was influenced by her father's opinions on poetry and the work of the male poets that she had studied. These poems are notable for their ordered appearance on the page, their tight structure, their elegance of expression and their management of tone.

In later years, Rich saw this mastery of the technical aspects of writing poetry as providing her with a way of subtly expressing her sense of unease about the world that she inhabited because, at that time in her life, she felt unable to declare it openly. Thus, her poems should be seen as multi-layered. They often appear on the page as vivid descriptions of a dramatic moment or situation. However, a careful reading of these descriptions reveals the intricate connections that Rich has built into her images, so that the reader gradually comes to understand the issues and themes that lie at the heart of her pieces. Thus, in spite of the control that she exerted on the poems, they do have an emotional resonance that vibrates within each word, so that the feelings expressed in these pieces linger hauntingly.

Technical quality

'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' is made up of three stanzas, each of four lines. The rhyme scheme is tight and regular: *aabb ccdd eeff*. However, Rich has mastered these structural elements to such a degree that they do not interfere with either the reading or the meaning of the poem. Rather they control the pace, so that the reader is encouraged to take time over reading the poem. Indeed, Rich's skilful use of her vocabulary merits careful reading, as she invests a considerable depth of meaning and implication into her use of colour, nouns and verbs. Rich also uses the sounds of her words most effectively, to reinforce the images that she creates. So, the alliteration (where two or more words close together begin with the same letter) in the words '**f**ingers **f**luttering' (line 5) emphasises the nervous anxiety of Aunt Jennifer. Similarly, the alliteration of '**p**rancing, **p**rroud' (line 12) conveys the assured certainty of the tigers.

A reading of the poem

The opening image of this poem bursts off the page, filled with colour and excitement. Rich describes an embroidered scene of golden tigers moving confidently through their natural environment. They gleam like gems against the lush, green vegetation. There is a wonderful feeling of life and energy about this opening image: the strong, beautiful animals surrounded by the growing, flourishing jungle. The verbs that Rich uses to describe the tigers, 'prance' and 'pace', indicate that these creatures are totally free in their surroundings. They are masters of their territory who fear nothing, and because of this freedom





and power, they have a dignity and confidence that is in marked contrast to the behaviour of the men, who huddle under a tree.

Thus, in the four lines of her opening stanza, Rich has effectively established a number of key elements that will reappear again in the poem: the colour gold, the concepts of freedom and power and the image of the male figure.

In the second stanza, Rich shifts the focus of the poem away from the wonderful tigers and the cowering men, and onto the hands of the person who created them, Aunt Jennifer. It quickly becomes clear that Aunt Jennifer is very different from the tigers. Her movements suggest anxiety and nervousness. Her hands 'flutter' like panic-stricken little birds. They are so delicate, so lacking in physical strength, that her fingers have difficulty with the ivory needle that she is using to embroider the picture. Unlike the tigers, Aunt Jennifer is struggling to cope with her environment. The creamy white of the ivory conjures up an image of the pale, almost bloodless, skin of Aunt Jennifer's fingers, as if her struggle is sucking all life out of her. The fact that the needle is made of ivory is significant, since man obtains ivory by killing elephants. So, the ivory of the needle represents man's triumph over the strength and freedom of the elephant and the power of life and death that he holds over this wild animal.

But the ivory needle is not the only object that is causing difficulties for Aunt Jennifer's hands. What is really weighing them down is her golden wedding ring. In the first stanza, gold was associated with the beautiful, powerful, free tigers; in the second stanza, gold is linked with a cold, heavy piece of metal

that drags down the light, agitated movements of Aunt Jennifer's fingers. Interestingly, the Latin word 'oppressare', meaning 'to weigh down', gave rise to the word oppression. For although Aunt Jennifer wears it, this is very definitely 'Uncle's' ring – a means of oppression. Like a harness or a yoke, the ring symbolises the control and power that Uncle obtained over Aunt Jennifer by marrying her. Just as the ivory needle indicated the subjection of the elephant, so the ring testifies to the enslavement of Aunt Jennifer by a male figure. The fearful male figures in the first stanza are no more. The male figure in the second stanza brings death, uses creatures for his own ends and exerts a powerful control over his female partner. It is notable that the Uncle has no name. It is his oppressive bulk and presence that loom not only over fragile Aunt Jennifer, but also over the second and third stanzas.

The image of the golden wedding ring reappears again in the first line of the third stanza, along with Aunt Jennifer's fingers. In direct contrast to the first stanza, where energy and life filled every word, the third stanza evokes death. Aunt Jennifer is motionless, her creamy-white fingers, now finally drained of the blood of life, have been stilled by death – but the ring is still upon them. So, even in death, Aunt Jennifer still carries the emblem that signifies her lack of power and freedom. Rich's use of the words 'ordeals' and 'mastered', in connection with the ring, link back to the image of the ring in the second stanza. In Rich's view, Aunt Jennifer's marriage to the 'Uncle' committed her to a life of oppression and subjection to the power of her husband. For Aunt Jennifer, marriage forced her to yield up her own power, to surrender her control of her life and to suppress her own feelings and wishes.





For Rich, the wedding ring is not a symbol of love or mutual commitment, but of male oppression and female repression.

In the final two lines of the poem, Rich returns again to the tigers that Aunt Jennifer struggled in life to embroider. They are still free and powerful. They are everything that Aunt Jennifer gave up once she entered into marriage with the Uncle. They celebrate their living, while Aunt Jennifer simply endured hers. Yet what we must not forget is the fact that it was Aunt Jennifer who created the tigers. It was she who chose the coloured wool and worked it through the screen. Do the tigers represent a small act of rebellion by Aunt Jennifer against the control and mastery of her husband? Are they the symbols of a tiny flame of freedom and power that endured deep within this anxious, delicate, birdlike woman? Could the small and rather cowardly male figures in the first stanza represent the apparently submissive Aunt Jennifer's real opinion about her husband? It would be wonderful to think that Aunt Jennifer was, indeed, a rebel with a needle, that her embroidered screen was a gesture of her defiance.

But perhaps there is not such a positive ending to the poem. Aunt Jennifer's tigers are splendid in their freedom and power. However, they are not truly alive. They are creatures woven in thread and fabric, stretched within the frame of a screen; like captured and preserved butterflies they are stuck on a panel. Perhaps this is the true tragedy that Rich sees in Aunt Jennifer's life: marriage to the domineering, male Uncle broke her spirit to such an extent that even if some small flame of freedom and power did survive within her, it was neither flickering nor active but static and unmoving,

frozen and fixed by her own powerlessness in the face of the Uncle's all-consuming, all-powerful oppression.

Imagery and themes

The following are simply suggested relationships between images and themes in this poem; you may find others in your reading:

Aunt Jennifer:

- Female
- An oppressed figure
- Unable to express herself openly
- Timid and lacking in confidence

The tigers:

- Free
- Powerful
- Confident figures

Uncle:

- Male
- The oppressor

The wedding band:

- An instrument of oppression





THE UNCLE SPEAKS IN THE DRAWING ROOM

Technical quality

This poem exhibits the same skilful mastery of the technical features of poetry as is displayed in 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'. It is made up of four stanzas, each consisting of six lines. The rhyme scheme of *abbacc* provides an ordered substructure to the poem, while not interrupting the natural arrangement or the sense of the everyday language. Therefore, the piece reads naturally, as if we are simply engaged in a conversation. However, this simplicity and naturalness should not be mistaken for a lack of craft on Rich's part. A closer analysis indicates that she has combined everyday words into a series of stunningly dramatic images reinforced by appropriate musical phrases. So, in the first stanza, she brings the mob to life with their 'sullen stare', their 'bitter tones' and, most disturbingly of all, their 'stones'. Rich uses alliteration to strengthen the vividness of this image. Her use of 's' sounds and repetition in the phrases '**S**tanding **s**ullen' and '**s**ullen **s**tare' evoke the rebellious whispering and murmuring of the hostile crowd. Similarly, the assonance (where two or more words close together have the same vowel sound) and rhyme in lines 17–18 '**r**uby/**t**hunder' and '**o**wl/**o**ll' effectively convey the vibrations that threaten the grandfather's precious bowl.

A reading of the poem

The title of this poem, 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room', establishes the tone of the piece. Rich's use of a nameless persona (an assumed character), known only by his title of Uncle, makes this male character seem distant and unapproachable, someone who is aware of his position and proud of his status. Similarly, the setting of the 'Drawing Room' gives the whole scene a formal, rather ceremonial quality, since this room was traditionally reserved for entertaining guests to the house. Consider how different our expectations would be if the title read 'Uncle John Speaks in the Kitchen'. This title is an excellent example of the way in which Rich uses apparently simple, everyday words to imply a multitude of suggestions to her readers. That is why, with Rich's poetry, we should read and reread in order to capture and appreciate the fullness of her work.

In the first stanza we hear the Uncle speaking about the 'mob'. He describes their simmering discontent in a calm, rather detached manner. It is clear that, as befits his venerable position as 'Uncle', he is determined to maintain a 'stiff upper lip', to provide a steady influence over the rest of the family. He is a man who lives in a comfortable world where houses are arranged around squares and have the architectural luxuries of balconies and gates. He recognises that it is this world that the mob resents and, given the courage, would like to destroy. However, he remains steadfastly unperturbed, even in the face of their stones.





His dismissive attitude continues into the second stanza, where he describes the behaviour of the mob as ‘follies that subside’. He deliberately reduces their concerns and actions down to nothing more than foolishness that will soon pass away. Up until this point, Rich has managed the tone of the Uncle’s speech very skilfully, so that it is consistently controlled and steadily dignified. However, in line 8, the Uncle’s confident assurance seems to slip a little. He begins to undercut his speech with phrases that suggest some doubt on his part, as with ‘none the less’. His use of ‘us’ indicates that he still regards himself as a leading figure in a particular group, but there is a growing disquiet in the tone of his voice. He even uses the word ‘fear’ in line 11. But the ‘fear’ that he feels does not arise out of a concern for himself or the others who belong to his group; rather, he is fearful for the elegant objects that fill his prosperous world: the delicate, glass vases and chandeliers. The threat of the mob’s stones to such breakable items cannot be ignored.

Hastily, the Uncle recovers himself in the first two lines of the third stanza. He seeks to reassure his listeners that nothing will be thrown, no violent acts will occur. However, once again, his underlying disquiet seeps through his words. Almost in spite of himself, he is drawn to remember an incident where the ‘grandsire’ of the group ‘stood aghast’. Clearly, Rich’s use of ‘grandsire’ is a deliberate one on her part, conveying a male person who is both respected and held in high esteem. The image of such a figure standing transfixed by dismay must be a disturbing one both for the Uncle and for those others who have descended from such a man. Once again, it is an object that has led to such a shocking

reaction – a red glass bowl vibrating in a thunderstorm. This is a particularly effective image that conveys the depth of the Uncle’s anxiety. The ruby-red colour of the bowl conjures up images of blood; while a thunderstorm is an unstoppable, uncontrollable force that sweeps away man’s power in an instant. In spite of all his efforts, the Uncle’s ‘stiff upper lip’ is quivering and he reveals his worst fears.

With the fourth stanza, the Uncle tries to recover his position. He gives up his attempts to dismiss the potential threat of the mob and, instead, seeks to urge his listeners to stand together in the face of the threat. Rather like a military leader in wartime, such as Sir Winston Churchill during World War II, the Uncle exhorts his group to remember the ties that bind them. He reminds them of the special ‘treasures’ that they have inherited from their shared past: a past when mobs did not gather and murmur threateningly against the order of society. These ‘treasures’ which surround them are not only the beautiful objects from a ‘calmer age’, but also their genetic inheritance from their ancestors who lived in the ‘calmer age’ that enables them to appreciate fully the beauty and worth of these objects. For they, along with the Uncle, are of a ‘kind’ that is better than the mob, because they value the elegance of objects such as the balconies and gates, glass bowls and chandeliers.

The final two lines of the poem vibrate with a confusion of emotions. We could interpret the Uncle’s image of his ‘kind’ positioning themselves between the beautiful glass objects and the mob as a positive and inspirational one, revealing his supreme confidence that his ‘kind’ will survive. Indeed, his attitude has





validity in that many feel that beautiful works of art should be above political upheaval and ought to be protected no matter who is in power. However, his confidence does seem to be rather brittle. In line 13, the Uncle had categorically stated that the mob would not throw ‘missiles’. Tellingly, in the final line of the poem he describes the mob as ‘missile-throwers’. Could these lines be simply the hysterical ravings of a man who knows that, in spite of all the bravado of his ‘stiff upper lip’, the end has come for his ‘kind’?

Imagery and themes

The following are simply suggested relationships between images and themes in this poem; you may find others in your reading:

The Uncle:

- Male
- The oppressor
- A member of the ruling section of society
- At the top of the hierarchy
- Has the power to express views/opinions
- Desires to maintain the status quo

The mob:

- The oppressed
- At the bottom of the hierarchy
- No power to express views/opinions
- Violence the only means of expression
- Figures of revolution

- A threat to the established social order
- Desires to change the status quo

Balcony

Gate

Crystal vase

Chandelier

Ruby bowl

Objects that represent the values of the dominant, oppressive section of society





POWER

Background

Adrienne Rich frequently writes about individual successful women from history, such as the poet Emily Dickinson. However, although these women did achieve success, it was often accompanied by a lonely lifestyle. This poem deals with one such woman: Marie Curie.

Marie Curie (1867–1934), along with her husband Pierre, worked on isolating radioactive elements from a type of uranium ore known as pitchblende. At the time, it was most unusual for a woman to be a scientist and to engage in scientific research. The Curies isolated two radioactive elements from the pitchblende: polonium and radium. The couple were awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903. Later, in 1911, Marie was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, making her the first person ever to win two Nobel Prizes. Unfortunately, owing to her constant exposure to high levels of radiation, Marie developed leukaemia and died in 1934.

Structure

The structure of this poem makes it a rather challenging one to get to grips with on a first reading. Rich again uses the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique. Therefore, we see a varied arrangement of the lines of poetry, ranging from a single line to clusters of lines and images that do not immediately appear to be connected.

However, there is a further structural development evident in this poem. Rich not only surrounds her lines with space, but she also inserts space into the very lines of poetry themselves. In this

way, she deconstructs the traditional compact poetic line as used in ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’, for example, and turns it into a loosely connected grouping of phrases. This, allied with her minimal use of punctuation, can make it difficult to understand, on a first reading, what Rich is expressing.

A reading of the poem

Rich’s reference to history in the first line suggests that the present and the past are very closely linked. It seems as if there is only a thin skin of soil that separates them from each other. Rich sees the soil as a kind of storage space for our past history. This image calls up pictures of archaeologists digging down and finding artefacts that have survived from previous ages. It is interesting to note that Rich has conveyed all of this meaning in just eight words.

The next image, of the digger digging up an old bottle, follows on from the first line in that the bottle is an example of one such item that has been stored in the soil. However, it is not an archaeologist who finds it but a large mechanical digger. Rich’s use of the word ‘flank’ to describe the bank of earth where the discovery takes place connects back to the first word of the poem, ‘Living’. She sees the mound of soil as a living thing, like a huge figure lying on its side. The present and past meet, as the modern mechanical digger lifts the old medicine bottle out of the earth. In doing so, the digger has punctured the thin skin that separates the present from the past. The bottle is still intact, even after one hundred years, and contains a liquid that promises to cure everything from a high temperature to depression. It is clearly not possible to develop a medicine that could do all those things: therefore





the bottle obviously came from one of the many ‘quack doctors’, unqualified medical practitioners or con-men, who used to travel around America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries selling fake medicines.

There is a sudden shift of focus in the next section of the poem, lines 6–17, where Rich explains that she has been reading about Marie Curie. Along with her husband, Curie worked extensively with radioactive substances. As a result of her exposure to these radioactive elements she began to suffer physically. Rich refers to Curie’s ‘radiation sickness’ causing her eyes to be blinded by cataracts and the skin on her hands to crack and ooze pus.

However, the main focus of Rich’s attention does not fall on Curie’s wonderful discoveries that earned her two Nobel Prizes, nor on the fact that Marie Curie was one of the few female scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, as such, was treated with suspicion by the predominantly male world of science. Rich is much more concerned with Curie’s reaction to her ‘radiation sickness’: her denial that it was the radioactive substances that had made her sick. Rich is amazed by Curie’s refusal to acknowledge the truth and is certain that Curie ‘must have known’ that it was ‘radiation sickness’.

The final four lines of the poem, lines 14–17, can be interpreted in a number of ways. This ambiguity arises out of Rich’s use of spaces between the words and her lack of punctuation.

One interpretation sees these lines as a reference to Marie Curie’s steadfast denial, right up to her death from leukaemia, that the radioactive substances that had made her famous had also

doomed her to death. In this way, she refused to accept that her physical injuries were caused by ‘the same source as her power’: that is, by her position of fame in society.

An alternative interpretation sees these lines as being related to Rich’s belief that women have long been prevented from gaining any meaningful power by the traditional, patriarchal society that has been dominant for much of history. The image of the bottle containing the fake medicine that helps with ‘living on this earth’ refers to the way that this traditional social structure has fooled women into thinking that they do have some power. Thus, the final four lines can be seen as expressing Rich’s view that Curie, as a woman, was unable to cope with the power that she gained because she came from a gender unused to dealing with ‘real’ power and, as a result, she was destroyed by it.

A third interpretation suggests that the emphasis should be placed on the act of denial. For women to gain ‘real’ power, they have to deny the identity that has been forced on them by the traditional, patriarchal society. In other words, they have to stop behaving according to the male view of how a woman should behave, and they have to stop using words about themselves that have been formed by men. In Rich’s opinion, this behaviour and language have done nothing for women but cause them to feel wounded and damaged because they have been imposed on them by a completely different gender. So women have to sacrifice this identity, this selfhood, and struggle to find their own behaviour and words. In this context, Curie’s denial that her ‘wounds’ were caused by ‘the same source as her power’ means that Curie refused to accept that she, as a woman, had been deeply injured,





and ultimately would be destroyed, by the same male-dominated world that had also made her famous by giving her awards.

The final interpretation to be considered here rests on Rich's ongoing analysis of the differences between men and women. In 'Power' the female figure, Marie Curie, gains power through hard work and the sacrifice of her health. In contrast, the male figure, represented by the bottle containing the fake medicine developed by 'quack doctors', tries to gain power through deception and trickery.

In the final analysis, it is up to you, as the reader, to choose whether you agree or disagree with these interpretations. Indeed, you may choose to develop an interpretation of your own for this poem. Adrienne Rich sees the power of choice as a fundamental element in becoming an empowered human being. The power of choice is also part of the pleasure that comes from being a reader of poetry.





STORM WARNINGS

Technical quality

Initially this poem appears to be very similar to 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' and 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room'. It has the same regularity of appearance, with four stanzas, each made up of seven lines. However, on closer inspection we begin to notice an important structural difference: rhyme is not a feature of this poem. Whereas 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' and 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' both had strong, regular rhyme schemes, this poem has not. Instead, Rich relies on metre and rhythm, along with assonance and alliteration, to give her writing a technical elegance and grace.

An excellent example of her technical mastery of these elements is line 6: 'And walk from window to closed window, watching'. To appreciate the metre of the line read the following highlighted letters slightly louder: 'And **walk** from **wi**n*ndow* **to** closed **wi**n*ndow*, **wa**tch*ing*'. There are five stressed syllables (the highlighted letters). This gives the line a rhythm that conjures up the sound of the wind buffeting against the windows. Her use of alliteration, with the repeated 'w', creates a similar effect of wind blowing in gusts: 'And **walk** from **wi**n*ndow* to closed **wi**n*ndow*, **wa**tch*ing*'.

Rich employs assonance to further reinforce the impact of this line. She interweaves 'a', 'o' and 'i' sounds to convey the impression of the ever-changing cadence of the gusts: '**A**nd **w**alk from **wi**n*ndow* **t**o **c**losed **wi**n*ndow*, **w**atch*ing*'.

You might like to compare and contrast Rich's approach to conveying the movement of the wind with that of John Montague in his poem 'Windharp', also in this anthology.

The dramatic lyric

This poem is written as a dramatic lyric. A lyric poem has a strong personal element in that it communicates the feelings or state of mind of an individual. The individual who is speaking can be either the poet, engaging in a direct communication with the reader, or an imaginary individual, a persona created by the poet who expresses certain thoughts or feelings. A lyric poem is not concerned with telling a story. However, some poets do create a context or setting for the individual, as Rich does in this poem, and this approach is known as a dramatic lyric.

A reading of the poem

The first stanza of the poem creates an image that sweeps from an instrument that measures pressure, a barometer, held inside the windows and walls of the house, out into a sky filled with 'gray unrest' and 'walking winds' hauling at the trees. The effect of this image is to convey the smallness of the house that is protecting the barometer and the speaker, and the uncontrollable vastness of the sky and wind. The apparent tranquillity that is contained within the house, where the speaker is reading a book while sitting on 'a pillowed chair', seems to be very vulnerable and fragile. The walls and windows offer some protection against the violence of the wind. Unlike the trees, the speaker, her book and her chair are not being physically pulled about by the wind. Nevertheless, the wind does have an effect on them in that the speaker abandons the





book and the chair and is drawn, it seems irresistibly, to look out at the turmoil.

The second stanza is an important one. Up until this point, it seems as if Rich is simply writing a description of an approaching storm. However, as we know from her other poems, Rich uses dramatic situations and concrete images to give expression to abstract and complex thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Thus, in the second stanza, the focus of the piece shifts away from the weather elements signalling change in the physical world, and on to the idea that emotions are also subject to such changes. Just as a calm, blue sky can become a turbulent grey, so a calm heart can become troubled. In both cases, we humans are largely unable to foretell exactly when this alteration will occur. In the first stanza, the barometer had indicated a fall in pressure 'all the afternoon', but it did not give a precise time for the storm's arrival. The air currents that carry the weather move invisibly, uncontrollably and unpredictably in the skies above us, swirling into calm areas. So it is with emotions. They too move invisibly, uncontrollably and unpredictably into hearts that were once quiet. Yet, there is a suggestion that the speaker's heart may not have been completely calm. Rich establishes a connection between the image of the 'silent core of waiting', in line 9, and the heart, in line 13. Is she suggesting that this heart too was a 'silent core of waiting'?

In the third stanza, Rich again returns to the image of the barometer used in the first stanza. She links it to the image of a clock. Both are man-made instruments that seek to give us some feeling of control in the world. A clock indicates how time is passing; a barometer indicates how the weather is altering. But

they can only indicate. Neither of them has any control over the elements that they are linked to: the clock cannot stop time passing; the barometer cannot stop the weather changing, nor stop the wind from shattering it into fragments. In the final image of the third stanza Rich creates an image of futility in the face of inevitability. The closing of window shutters, nothing more than strips of wood joined together, is essentially a pointless action when set against the uncontrollable, destructive power of the wind. Clearly, she is suggesting that it is the same with emotions. We may run around closing our emotional 'shutters', attempting to suppress emotional alterations, but we are simply wasting our time. The emotional change will occur inevitably.

The fourth and final stanza of the poem returns to where the poem began: inside the house with the wind raging outside. The speaker sets about shutting out the storm as it increases in its intensity. She pulls the curtains and lights a candle. Again we have frailty set against overwhelming power, futility set against inevitability. The curtains are nothing more than thin fabric; the candle, despite apparently being protected by glass, can be extinguished in an instant. These instruments of 'sole defense' are pathetic. Despite all the speaker's actions, the turbulent wind still manages to penetrate into the tranquillity of the house. It squeezes in through the gaps that exist in this seemingly solid structure: the 'keyhole' and 'the unsealed aperture'.

The final two lines of the poem are stunning. The simplicity of the words contains a wealth of expression that is breathtaking. The 'I' of the speaker becomes 'we', releasing the poem from the limitations of individual expression into the communication





of a political position. Rich swings the impact of the poem away from the single 'heart' and onto the concepts of power and powerlessness. The speaker stands with others who have had to learn to suppress their desire for change, to reject their awareness that change is necessary. This suppression and rejection may well have come partly from their own fear as well as from external forces, but they indicate a powerlessness about the group. However, for all the power of the factors that force this group to put up a 'sole defense against the season', there is an ominous inevitability about the phrase 'troubled regions'. The calm that the learned defensive actions bring about is a limited one. The actions do not calm the 'troubled regions'; they simply temporarily resist the trouble. The clear implication is that just as the wind infiltrates its way into a house, just as emotional change creeps into the heart, so groups who behave in a 'learned' way finally, and inevitably, break free to gain the power to behave as they want to behave.

Imagery and themes

The following are simply suggested relationships between images and themes in this poem; you may find others in your reading:

The storm:

- Change/alteration
- Emotional change
- Social change

The wind:

- The force of change

The House:

- A construction that appears to contain calm tranquillity
- It appears to offer protection against the turbulence of change

Weatherglasses

Clocks

Curtains

Objects within the house that appear to offer control and power, but in reality offer only an illusion of control and power





LIVING IN SIN

Background

During the 1950s Adrienne Rich began to change the way that she wrote poetry. She moved away from the more formal style evident in 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' and 'Storm Warnings'. Rich saw this progression as developing out of her growing understanding that her poetry and her life experiences were intimately bound together. She felt that the demands of formal poetry restricted her expression, noting in later years, 'Experience itself had become too much for that.' (Adrienne Rich: *An Interview with David Montenegro*).

Thus, she began to write poetry where she allowed her readers to witness the ways in which her imagination acted on her life experiences. Rich has characterised her early poems, as represented by 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', 'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' and 'Storm Warnings', as poems that were written with precision 'about experiences' (Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading*); while her later poems, as represented by the remaining seven poems in this selection, were actual experiences, written in the present tense, where a process was happening.

Structure

It is immediately evident that the structure of this poem is radically different from Rich's earlier pieces. The ordered appearance created by regular stanzas has been abandoned in favour of twenty-six uninterrupted lines of varying lengths.

Similarly, rhyme is no longer a feature of her writing. The punctuation is much looser, with sentences spilling over a number of lines and the use of dashes and dots. This approach gives the piece an unresolved, open quality and a sense of immediacy. Whereas her earlier poems sought to put some sort of form on experience, Rich is now comfortable simply allowing experience to stand on its own. It is important to note, however, that this does not imply less effort on Rich's part. In many ways the abandonment of the rules of formal poetic writing demands more effort from the writer, since the language used must be shaped, not according to a series of accepted rules, but by a sense of honesty and integrity.

A reading of the poem

Rich again uses the device of situating her poem within a dramatic situation. We are introduced to 'She' in the opening line of the poem. 'She' is clearly a woman who has decided to rebel against the accepted norms of social behaviour in 1950s America, as is indicated by the title of the poem, 'Living in Sin'. This phrase was used to describe a couple cohabiting without being married. The couple live in a 'studio'. There are suggestions of an unconventional, artistic lifestyle about the word 'studio'. It is just the sort of place where two people would 'live in sin'. But the second line of the poem introduces a note of emotional conflict. There is the rather romantic reference to 'the furniture of love', but 'She' no longer sees the romance: her main concern is with the dust that covers 'the furniture of love'. Her emotional conflict continues into lines 3 and 4, where we learn that dust is not the only difficulty that 'She' faces: the taps in the 'studio' are noisy and





the windows are dirty. 'She' feels guilty about her disenchantment. After all, the decision to 'live in sin' was a brave one at that time, and required great faith that the love that was shared would conquer all. In this way, her irritation at these less-than-perfect objects seems to her to be an act of disbelief in their love.

Lines 4–7 present the reader with a description of how 'She' imagined 'Living in Sin'. It is a vision of perfection, with perfect pears on a perfect plate, a perfect piano draped in an exotically perfect shawl, and a perfect cat chasing a perfectly 'amusing' mouse.

The contrast between this idealised perfection and the grubby reality of the 'studio' is evident in lines 8–14. It echoes to the heavy footsteps of the milkman in the early morning; it is chilly and it is untidy, with bits of cheese and empty bottles left lying around. Rich's use of the word 'sepulchral' conveys the gloominess that 'She' feels. As if all of this were not depressing enough, we encounter a beetle on one of the kitchen shelves, evidently only one of many that scuttle around the flat. The three dots convey a sense that 'She' is plunging downwards on a waterfall of depression.

However, line 15 interrupts these gloomy thoughts: 'he' is getting up. This is the 'he' with whom 'She' chose to 'live in sin'. Unfortunately, the reality of the situation that 'She' finds herself in is embodied in the description of 'her man'. He does not look at her and smile, nor enfold her in a loving embrace. On the contrary, he does not even seem to notice her. He yawns, fiddles about on the piano, scratches his chin and goes out to buy cigarettes. This is hardly the stuff of a great Romantic Love.

Unable to withstand the irritation of the untidiness of the flat, 'She' embarks on a frenzy of housework: making the bed and dusting. Unfortunately, the objects in the flat seem determined to thwart her efforts to impose something of the perfection that she imagined onto them. Annoyingly, she is so intent on her cleaning that she forgets to watch the coffee-pot and it boils over, causing more mess for her to clean up. Perfection seems to be slipping further and further away.

In line 23, the tone becomes slightly more hopeful, as we learn that during the day 'She' regains her love. Perhaps 'he' brought her back some flowers, or wrote a song for her on the piano, or held her close. Whatever happened, 'She' manages to escape from the harshness of the reality of their situation and to immerse herself once more in their love. But, sadly, this escape is only temporary. Her feelings of disenchantment never really go away. Although the darkness of the night hides the grubbiness of their flat, her sleep is disturbed by her awareness that the light of day will once more reveal it in all its depressing untidiness.

The theme

By simply referring to the couple as 'She' and 'he' Rich enables the theme of the poem to develop from a single situation into the expression of her political viewpoint. Thus, the theme of this poem addresses the fundamental differences that Rich sees as existing between men and women because of the radically different roles that they are allocated by the social structure of the traditional, patriarchal society. Love may draw them together, but these profound differences prevent them from





communicating on a meaningful level and, consequently, prevent the couple from developing their love.

Coupled with this, Rich acknowledges that women are in many ways their own worst enemies when it comes to breaking free from the traditional roles allowed to them by a patriarchal society. Rich takes the view that women are programmed from birth to behave in certain ways that reinforce their own subservience and the dominance of males in society. So the 'he' in the poem is totally unmoved by the condition of the flat, because his traditional training does not involve anything to do with housekeeping. On the other hand, the 'She' cannot resist her learned responsibility for housekeeping and she succumbs to the urge to clean the flat. However, it is significant that these actions do not provide her with any lasting sense of fulfilment. Nor, indeed, does the love that drew her to the man. The final image of the poem conveys the recurring disquiet and disenchantment that she feels about her role.

Perhaps within the context of Rich's political viewpoint, the title of the poem 'Living in Sin' might be more concerned with the endless compromises and disappointments that she feels women are forced to endure in a male-dominated society, rather than the sexual connotation that this phrase normally suggests.





THE ROOFWALKER

Style and structure

With 'The Roofwalker', Rich continues to push back the poetic, intellectual and emotional boundaries that she had struggled with for so long.

In poetic terms, 'The Roofwalker' is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a further loosening of punctuation. In this respect, Rich was influenced by the work of Emily Dickinson. Here, she uses dashes in lines 16–21 and in line 32. Whereas full stops and commas give a sense of definite structure and composition, the use of dashes conveys the immediacy and openness of developing thoughts. Rich writes in a 'stream of consciousness'. This means that the poet tries to retain the immediacy and the energy of the way that personal thoughts and feelings blend and merge, rather like an intellectual 'lava lamp'. Rich's dedication of this poem to the poet Denise Levertov is significant, since Levertov focused on the development of such a style where the thinking process was reflected in line and image.

Secondly, Rich's use of the 'stream of consciousness' technique is connected to her belief that poetry should be a process, in that it empowers both the poet and the reader to engage in the act of becoming, to be changed. The dashes reinforce the sense of process that underlies the poem, since they appear to be more open, more transitional, than the closure and finality of full stops.

Despite this loosening of style, Rich maintains a strong sense of coherence in the poem. Much of this coherence stems from the

comparison she establishes between herself and the builders. This metaphor acts most successfully as a structural support for the piece.

A reading of the poem

Although this poem is significantly different from Rich's earlier poems, it does contain familiar features. It is a dramatic lyric, so we have the piece located in a dramatic context, with an individual figure expressing thoughts and feelings. In this respect Rich's poems often seem to be like condensed plays, or scenes extracted from a film.

Lines 1–12 are a masterpiece of descriptive writing. As readers, we see the gathering gloom of night with the last streaks of daylight silhouetting the figures of the builders and illuminating the roof. We hear the stillness now that their work is finished: the hammers lie still and the pulleys rest. Rich's comparison of the builders on the roof to sailors on board a ship effectively communicates her emotional response to these men. She is impressed by them, as they move about high above the ground with the same confident balance that experienced sailors have on board ship. She sees them as 'Giants' in that they seem to be greater, more heroic, than normal human men. A 'wave' hovers above their heads; they walk on a 'burning deck', but they do not panic. For these men, danger is to be embraced and conquered, rather than feared and avoided. And yet, the presence of the 'wave' and the 'burning deck' could be indicative of a threat to the builders and their world. They may not be aware of it – indeed, they may be 'indifferent' to it – but the threat is still there.





The space that is placed at this point, between the first and second section, is important, since it acts as a bridge drawing the reader across from one context to another. Lines 13–15 mark a movement away from the external setting of the poem to the internal world of thought and emotion. Rich establishes a connection between herself and the builders in that she, too, is exposing herself to danger. Like the builders, she is ‘up there’, but, unlike them, there is a feeling of isolation and vulnerability about Rich’s position.

The second space, between the second and third sections, again acts as a bridge to the final section of the poem. We are drawn further into Rich’s ‘stream of consciousness’ as she reflects on the reality of her position. Continuing to make references to the ‘builder’ metaphor, Rich sees her life as being one of great effort that has achieved very little. Having struggled to make a ‘roof’ she finds that she ‘can’t live under’ it, unlike the builders who stride about confidently on top of it. The ‘roof’ is seen as an object that oppresses Rich, while, conversely, it supports the male builders in all their assured confidence. Furthermore, her hard work of calculating and adjusting to create a good, strong structure appears to have been fruitless. For the problem lies not with her effort, nor indeed with what she was attempting to construct, but with her lack of choice.

Rich regarded the ability to choose as being an essential aspect of living as a human being with power. To be denied choice is to have the rights of one’s humanity denied. Therefore, the fact that ‘A life’ chose the speaker in this poem, rather than her choosing it, doomed her efforts to failure. Rather like an electrician being

forced to fix a burst water-pipe, Rich recognises that she has skills, she has abilities, but she is being obliged to use them in a situation where they are not suitable. Unlike the builders on the roof, who are perfectly ‘at home’ in their situation, Rich feels exposed and terrified.

Her use of the ‘naked man fleeing’ image to express her feelings may seem rather surprising in view of the way that she portrays male figures in her earlier poems. Indeed, her use of this image is open to a variety of interpretations. At times in her writing, Rich employs a male character to mask her expression of her own confusion. Thus, the ‘naked man fleeing’ is a ‘safe’ way for her to write about her innermost thoughts and feelings, because they are linked to a male figure who is clearly very different from the female Adrienne Rich. At other times, the male figure is a way of representing her intellectual experimentation with alternative ways of being. So she presents us with the image of the ‘naked man fleeing’, who could be engaged in the alternative existence of sitting in a peaceful room reading. The implication is that it could be just so with Rich’s own life, if things were very slightly different. Such a slight difference would mean that instead of experiencing deep unhappiness with her life, she could be happy with it.

Rich establishes a pointed connection between the words ‘difference’ (line 29) and ‘indifference’ (line 32). Difference is suggestive of the recognition of the need for, and the ability to initiate, change. Indifference suggests unwillingness and a lack of the ability to change. Rich is aware of the need for change in her life, the need for things to be different in the world. But, as yet, she is unable to initiate this change. She is powerless and





panicking, trapped within a way of living that she has tried so hard to make successful. Rich may long for the calm quietness of being comfortable with her life, but the fact that she once again returns to the image of the 'naked man fleeing' in the final two lines of the poem is significant. Her final use of the 'naked man fleeing' image suggests that Rich knows, only too well, that such comfort will never be found in her present way of living.

Imagery and themes

The following are simply suggested relationships between images and themes in this poem; you may find others in your reading:

The builders:

- Male
- Powerful
- Confident
- In control

The roof:

- An object that oppresses and represses Rich
- An object that supports and empowers the builders

The 'naked man fleeing':

- Male
- Powerless
- Vulnerable
- Afraid
- Representing Adrienne Rich?





OUR WHOLE LIFE

Background

By the early 1970s Adrienne Rich was very much involved in civil rights movements. She felt increasingly drawn to groups who, because of the social structures at the time, were powerless to give expression to their beliefs and values. Such groups as non-white people, pacifists, homosexuals and women joined together in order to challenge the dominance of white, financially secure, heterosexual males.

As a result of her experiences with these groups, Rich developed the view that language and power are inextricably linked. She felt that as most human societies are traditionally male-dominated, with men holding power, then the words that are developed and accepted into everyday use by all those who live in those societies must also be male-dominated, in that they reflect male-centred values and beliefs. Rich saw this male-dominated language as a method of preventing other groups both from injecting their values and beliefs into the language of their society, and from having access to power. Therefore, she advocated that for disempowered groups to gain access to power, so that they could bring about a societal acknowledgment of their rights and needs, they had to develop an alternative language that was not male-dominated.

Structure and style

The appearance of this poem is very different from the ordered compactness of, for example, 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'. Instead there

is an apparently loose grouping of phrases, sometimes with three or two or even just one line.

The absence of punctuation gives the passage a continuous, unbroken feeling that effectively creates the 'stream of consciousness' technique. This, along with her use of conversational language, gives the impression that we, as readers, are actually inside Rich's head, witnessing her thoughts connecting and interconnecting. However, this connecting and interconnecting does not take place in a haphazard or disordered manner. In spite of the rather loose appearance of the poem, Rich creates a strong sense of coherence by carefully placing words in a sequence of meaning, as with 'translations', 'fibs' and 'lies', and by using an intricate web of echoed images based on 'eating' and 'burning'.

A reading of the poem

The main thrust of this poem is evident from the first four lines, where Rich connects three words that are of fundamental importance to her theme: 'translation', 'fibs' and 'lies'. There is a deliberate and significant progression in the meanings of these words. Translation means that a word in one language is interpreted into another language. A fib is a trivial or unimportant lie. Lies, however, are deliberately untrue statements. Thus we move from a straightforward act of changing one word into another language without any alteration in its 'truth' of meaning, through a slight adjustment to its 'truth' of meaning: until, finally, the word loses all of its 'truth' of meaning. Rich's imagery of the 'knot' of lies, self-destructing in its attempted 'eating' through its own tangle, indicates that when a word loses its truth, when it





becomes a lie, it becomes fossilised, because it is no longer able to communicate meaningfully. Clearly, for Rich, the lifeblood of a word lies in its ‘truth’ and honesty of expression. Indeed, Rich’s revulsion for words that are lies is effectively conveyed by the rather nightmarish image of something ‘eating’ itself.

The image of ‘eating’ is carried forward into line 5, where we have the word ‘bitten’. Here Rich suggests a tremendous feeling of tense repression, where words are not spoken through an open mouth but come out through clenched teeth. Her use of the ‘blowtorch’ image introduces the concept of ‘burning’, suggesting that words may form inside the mind and the mouth, but somewhere between this and actually saying them aloud, some force burns off their original meaning and shapes them into completely different words with completely different meanings. Thus the words, like ‘dead letters’, never get to deliver their original meaning. Instead, they are burned and remoulded into words that are lies, words that express the values and beliefs of those who hold power: of the oppressors.

The group represented by Rich’s use of the term ‘Our’ may struggle to resist such a force. But, irresistibly, they will find themselves lured by it: initially by the apparently innocent act of ‘translation’; then by the seemingly harmless use of ‘fibs’, until they find that they are engaged in telling lies, using the ‘oppressor’s language’. In this way the group has no language of its own, and therefore it has no power.

In lines 10–15 Rich introduces an image that is both vivid and disturbing: that of ‘the Algerian’. This unfortunate man is ‘burning’ with pain. Yet he is powerless to express his incredible suffering because he cannot use the language of the man in power, the doctor. The ‘Algerian’ can do no more than simply stand wordless, displaying his terrible wounds. In these five lines and with this final image, Rich draws together the sequence of meaning and webs of imagery that hold this poem together. Thus the progression from ‘translation’, to ‘fib’, to ‘lies’ that cause injury leads to ‘a cloud of pain’; the ‘eating’ and biting become the guttural sounds emanating from the dried mouth of the ‘Algerian’ and the burning of paint mutates into the burning of a human body.

Most horrifying of all, Rich links the mutilated body of the ‘Algerian’ with those whom she writes for, the ‘Our’ in the opening line of the poem. Her message is clear: both she and this group have spent their collective life trying to communicate what they honestly thought and felt to their oppressors. Their lack of success has not only increased their powerlessness, but it has also caused them to suffer intensely. They stand alongside the ‘Algerian’, mute with pain.

Imagery and themes

The following are simply suggested relationships between images and themes in this poem; you may find others in your reading:

Translation

Fibs

Lies

A sequence representing the steady erosion of the ‘true’ meaning of a word so that it loses its ‘honesty’ of expression





The Algerian:

- Male
- Trying to communicate but unable to be understood
- Powerless
- Suffering
- Representing a powerless social group

The doctor:

- Male
- Unable to understand
- Powerful – can heal and banish pain
- Representing a powerful social group





TRYING TO TALK WITH A MAN

Background

Between 1939 and 1945, the United States of America spent some \$2 billion on developing the atomic bomb, in a project known as 'The Manhattan Project'. This research was carried out in a laboratory specially constructed by the government in the geographically isolated Los Alamos, New Mexico. Scientists engaged in the project, along with their families, were obliged to move close to the laboratory and to live in temporary housing. Their work culminated with the explosion of an atomic bomb on the morning of 16 July, 1945.

Structure and style

Rich employs a rather loose clustering of lines, a conversational style of language and the lyric form to give this poem a wonderful sense of immediacy.

Her arrangement of the lines of this poem into groups of varying lengths might at first appear to be almost accidental. However, on closer reading it becomes evident that each group pivots around a central concept that contributes to developing the theme of the poem.

Similarly, her use of conversational language is deceptively natural. This natural quality is underpinned by Rich's masterful use of punctuation. It is significant that some groups of lines in the poem have little or no punctuation, while others are peppered with a variety of punctuation marks. In this way, Rich successfully captures the variety of pace that is evident in everyday speech,

while at the same time skilfully using punctuation to control the speed at which this poem is read, so that key words are emphasised as in the line 'they reflect lights that spell out: EXIT'.

Finally, this poem is written as a dramatic lyric. For a discussion of this literary technique, read the note on 'The Dramatic Lyric' accompanying the analysis of 'Storm Warnings'.

A reading of the poem

The opening two lines of this poem create a dramatic environment that immediately captures the reader's interest. Rich seems to be writing about scientists experimenting with bombs out in the desert. The references to the United States' development of the atomic bomb are evident.

Initially, the second group of lines, 3–7, seem to be no more than a description of the geography of the desert with 'an underground river' moving around 'deformed cliffs'. Rich suggests the free-flowing nature of the river by her omission of punctuation, resulting in this section being read without interruption. Significantly, Rich shifts the overall meaning slightly by introducing the concept of 'understanding' in line 5. This linking of the river with 'understanding' presents the reader with a challenge, since at this point in the poem the connection between the two is not clear.

Lines 8–14 do little to help the reader to resolve this challenge. Instead, we encounter a list of apparently unconnected items. However, on closer examination we see that this list is a collection of snapshots, images that express aspects of the type of society left behind by those who came to the desert. So, there are 'LP collections' alongside 'the language of love-letters'. The insertion





of the 'suicide notes' in the middle of the list creates a jarring effect, rather like a wrong note in the middle of a phrase of music. It carries an unsettling implication: this society may not have been quite as pleasant as the other items on the list suggest.

The fourth section, lines 15–19, is also undercut with a sense of unease. The image of the 'ghost town' and the sound of the 'silence' give the desert an overwhelming feeling of desolation. There is no sign of growth or development here. The 'dull green succulents' appear as jagged forms that simply endure. The once busy town is empty and silent. In spite of the speaker's declaration that they intended to 'change the face' of the desert, it is evident that change will never come about in such a place as this.

Disturbing as the expansive silence of the desert is, Rich introduces an even more frightening type of silence in lines 20–25. The speaker reveals that the vast silence that filled lines 15–19 did not actually come from the desert, but from within the speaker and her companion. This silence exists between them. Try as the couple might to cover up this silence by talking, it remains ever-present: a continual reminder of how they are unable to communicate in any honest, true or meaningful sense.

It is at this point that the reader solves the challenge that Rich had presented with her use of 'understanding' in line 5 of the poem. The setting for this poem may appear to be two people, who have moved to the area to test bombs, out walking in the silent desert. However, it now becomes clear that the silent desert is simply an image, a metaphor, to express the terrible lack of communication that lies between the couple.

The implication of the poem's title becomes clear: the couple are a woman – the speaker – and a man. At times, these two people may almost arrive at a point of understanding, just like the underground river forces its way around cliffs. At times, they have each given up aspects of their lives in an effort to be united as a couple. But in the present moment of the poem, this woman and man are caught in incomprehension: like the cactuses, they simply endure. There is nothing flourishing or developing between them. Their relationship is nothing more than a 'ghost' of what it might have been.

This is the tragedy that Rich explores in the final two sections of this poem: the possibilities, the potential of their relationship that the woman and man are unable to seize. In lines 26–36 we learn how their inability to communicate denies them the joy of being a 'true' couple. There is no mutual support, no shared caring. Instead, they say words that speak of support and caring, but mean nothing. The speaker notes her companion's uneasiness. Like a caged animal he paces about restlessly and his eyes are haunted by the desire for escape, to find the 'EXIT'. He is simply unable, or even perhaps unwilling, to respond to her.

In the final three lines of the poem, Rich draws the piece together. As she had opened it with the concept of testing, she now returns to this concept again. In line 1, the speaker had referred to 'testing bombs'. In line 39, the testing is now of 'ourselves'. The speaker watches and listens helplessly as the man talks of the 'danger' in a frantic attempt to avoid confronting it. In the face of his avoidance, her use of 'we' in the final line has a hollow ring to it. For this couple 'we' is a lost possibility. They are each doomed by their





inability to communicate with the other on any meaningful level. In a brilliantly damning phrase, we learn that the woman feels 'more helpless' when she is with her male partner than when she is apart from him. Equally, he regards her with panic as a bringer of danger. Try as she might to 'Talk with a Man' the speaker is, most definitely, not with the man, and nor is he with her.

Theme

Rich deliberately avoids personalising the characters in this poem. We learn very little about them other than that one is female and the other male. In this way, the two become representatives for all women and all men. In a similar way, her list of aspects of the world that they had left behind stands for society as a whole rather than one local society.

Thus, she uses the confrontation between the two to represent the political confrontation that she sees as existing between all women and all men. As her woman speaker seeks to talk on a meaningful level to the man, so Rich regards this as reflecting the efforts of feminists to engage with men, the holders of power in society. Equally, the man's reluctance, and indeed panic, when faced with what he sees as the 'danger' inherent in the woman's attempts to talk with him meaningfully, represents the reluctance of men in power to consider an alternative social structure to the traditional patriarchal hierarchy.





DIVING INTO THE WRECK

Structure and style

This poem is surprising because of its length, and there is no doubt that, initially, the 94 lines can be quite off-putting for the reader. However, Rich's mastery of the technical aspects of writing poetry enable her to provide a strong sense of sequence and coherence that serve to maintain the focus of the piece throughout the 94 lines.

The sense of sequence partially arises out of her moving the action of the poem in a logical and natural manner from the solid deck of the schooner, above water, down to the fantastical depths of the wreck under water. Thus, the narrative element in the poem, the story that it tells of diving into the sea, adds to the establishment of a sense of sequence.

Rich's careful arrangement of the different sections of the poem also contributes to the sense of sequence. The first five sections begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop. This reflects the way in which each of these sections deals with a specific action and experience. Although Rich loosens this capital letter – full stop arrangement in the sixth to the tenth sections, where it is extended over two and three sections, the sense of sequence is successfully maintained.

The coherence is established by Rich's linking and repetition of images and words. For example, the first section of the poem describes the preparations that the diver makes. Once again, there is a logical link between the items that she puts on (the wet-suit,

the flippers, the face-mask) that gives this section a coherence, a sense of unity. Similarly, her repetition of the words 'came' and 'wreck', in the opening lines of the sixth and seventh stanzas, forms a clear connection between the two, as does her use of the image of the wreck as a body with the linked parts of a 'flank', a 'face' and 'ribs'.

It is this careful attention to such technical details on Rich's part that enables her to maintain the focus of this extended piece. She never allows her reader to forget that we are indeed 'Diving into the Wreck'. However, this poem is more than simply the story of a dive under the sea. It is far more complex, in that the story of the dive tries to represent, or illustrate in a concrete way, the process of Rich's search for alternatives to the hierarchical society that will enable her to more fully understand the true nature of its traditionally accepted social and political rules.

A reading of the poem

In an effort to unravel the complexity of this poem we will look first at the narrative, concrete aspect of each section in the poem, followed by a consideration (in italics), of what political messages are represented by the narrative.

Adrienne Rich has frequently observed that her later poems are concerned with 'process' and 'Diving into the Wreck' is a wonderful illustration of this, since it focuses on the process of an exploratory dive into the sea. The connection that Rich establishes in the first line between this dive and myth is a significant one, in that it alerts her readers to the fact that this poem is more than simply a narrative telling a story of a diver diving down to a wreck.





In section 1, lines 1–12, Rich outlines the preparations that the diver has made for the dive. She has done her reading; put film into her camera; made sure that her knife is sharp. All these preparations have taken her some time. She then ‘dresses’ herself for her journey into an alien environment. With all the deliberate care of a warrior preparing to go into battle, the diver puts on her wet-suit, flippers and mask. Again, this all takes time. As readers, we can’t help but wonder what it is that drives the diver to go through all this. We then learn that she must undertake this exploratory dive alone. One of the main rules in sub-aqua diving is that, for safety reasons, divers should never dive alone. The fact that the diver is unable to adhere to this rule introduces an unmistakable feeling of danger into this section. If we look again at all the diver’s preparations we see that there are hints of danger there, too. Worryingly, we learn that the book that the diver read is a ‘book of myths’ and myths have a large element of fiction about them. Surely the diver should be reading books filled with facts. The images of the knife and the ‘body-armour’ also suggest that there is some threat to her safety.

Section 1 can be interpreted as illustrating the way in which Rich felt compelled to undertake the task of exploring alternatives to our traditional social structures, in order to see more clearly the true nature of our society. Careful preparations were necessary before this task because it was potentially dangerous, not so much physically but psychologically and emotionally, since it would lead to the destruction of what had long been accepted as the ‘right’ way for human beings to live as a group. Bravely, Rich undertakes this task alone. This section conveys her determination even in the face of the loneliness of her role.

The second section, lines 13–21, begins innocently enough with the image of a ladder. This ladder seems to be something that will help the diver to enter the water as safely as possible, and in this way it appears as a positive object. However, Rich makes the point that the ladder is useful only if the user knows how it should be used: without that knowledge, the ladder becomes no more than a gathering of rope and wood. Rather like ‘the book of myths’ in the first section, the ladder offers a form of help to the diver that is not entirely reliable or trustworthy.

Section 2 introduces the ‘ladder’ in order to represent Rich’s awareness that there are ways to investigate alternative social and political structures to the one that we use. There is a sense of confidence and assurance arising out of the knowledge acquired by those who have set about such an investigation.

The third section, lines 22–33, is an excellent example of the technical mastery in Rich’s writing. Her repetition of the short phrase ‘I go down’ conveys not only the depth, but also the distance of the diver’s journey down the ladder. Her progress is slow and difficult: her fingers become disabled and she is reduced to crawling. These vivid images capture the tremendous effort that the diver has to make, and the suffering that she has to endure, in order to go into this other environment. Once again, the loneliness of her exploration is emphasised in lines 31–33. The diver forces herself onwards, not knowing when she will break through from her familiar environment into the new one. It is a dangerous situation for her as she is clearly tiring, and yet she is unwilling to give up.





Section 3 illustrates the tremendous effort required to explore these social and political alternatives to the traditional, hierarchical society. The 'ladder' that had appeared to offer help is not really of any help at all: this process of exploration is still hard and difficult. Again, Rich feels that she is undertaking this task on her own. This section expresses feelings of exhaustion, frustration and loneliness, balanced by the determination and courage to continue with the task.

At first the opening lines of the fourth section, lines 34–43, seem to suggest that the danger has vanished, as the diver finally enters the water. She is enveloped by a wonderful mixture of blue and green far more vivid than the air that she has left behind. But suddenly, the feeling of danger returns when the diver begins to black out. Her body is finding it hard to cope with this watery environment. Still, rather than giving up, the diver reassures herself about the safety of her equipment and decides that she will learn how to deal with this new world.

Section 4 depicts the way in which Rich initially feels overwhelmed by her engagement with social and political alternatives to her society. Her feeling of panic and her near-blackening out represent the challenge that she faces when she decides to abandon the traditionally accepted social and political rules of living. Nevertheless, this section once again ends on a note of determination: she will learn to cope.

In fact, her efforts to learn how to cope are so successful that in the fifth section, lines 44–51, she admits that she has almost forgotten the reason why she is diving. She is filled with such wonder by the beauty around her that her determination to engage in a process of exploration weakens.

Section 5 once again portrays the difficulties Rich faces in her task. She is so fascinated by these alternative ways of living, and those who actually live according to them, that she begins to lose her determination to explore the true nature of our traditional society.

In the sixth section, lines 52–70, the diver forces herself to put into words the purpose that drives her: 'I came to explore the wreck.' This sentence is more than a simple collection of words: it expresses both the reason for her process of exploration and the aim that she hopes to achieve. In this way, the six words 'I came to explore the wreck' are indeed 'purposes' and 'maps' that both drive and direct her. The diver tells us that she wants to see the truth of the wreck, both bad and good, the 'damage' that it has suffered, and 'the treasures'. She is no longer satisfied by 'the book of myths'; she wants to see the 'real' thing. Rich very carefully employs a series of images to suggest the ambivalent feelings that the diver has towards the wreck. On the one hand, she feels respect for it and is careful to 'stroke' it with her lamp. Similarly, she feels sympathy for it trapped beneath the water, separated from the warmth of the sunlight. She regards it as having a 'threadbare beauty'. On the other hand, she recognises that the wreck was a 'disaster'.

Section 6 introduces the problematic image of the wreck, which has been interpreted in a number of ways. However, if we set it within the context of our overall interpretation of the political messages that lie behind this poem then the wreck, logically, stands for our traditional form of society. Although Rich feels some affection for this traditional society, since she is familiar with it, her determination to confront the true nature of this society returns.





The final section of the poem, lines 71–94, begins on a note of triumph: ‘This is the place’. The diver has achieved her goal of exploring the wreck. She has survived the dangers that faced her and she has done so alone. It is at this point that Rich introduces the rather perplexing image of the androgynous, male/female figure. This image seems to suggest that, because of her success, the diver is transformed into an alternative way of existing, one that is not restricted by narrow definitions, one that banishes her sense of being alone. She is no longer ‘I’ or ‘she’ or ‘he’, but ‘we’. In this androgynous body the diver is empowered to explore and analyse the true nature of the wreck, in order to work past the glittering surface and confront the ‘rot’ that lies underneath. Suddenly, the realisation is grasped: the diver, and all of those others who are like her, are connected to the wreck because it has played a part in their formation, and they have played a part in its ‘course’. Although they may reject and abandon the wreck, they will return to it frequently, carrying the same objects that featured in the first section of the poem: a knife, a camera and a book of myths. Thus the poem does not really end by offering a definite alternative to the traditional social structure. Instead it emphasises the importance of the process of exploration of those alternatives, in order to understand fully the true nature of our existing society.

Section 7 brings together the representations that we have encountered earlier in the poem. The arrival at the wreck and the exploration of it suggest the success of feminists and other civil rights movements in highlighting the terrible inadequacies and the unjust distribution of power that lie at the base of the traditional, male-dominated, patriarchal society. This section also expresses one of the major difficulties facing all those who reject the traditional

society. Try as they might, they will never fully erase the influence of that traditional society. Rich proposes that there are two ways to view this indestructible link to a despised society: it could be born out of ‘cowardice’, a reluctance to totally sever all connections; or, alternatively, it might indicate ‘courage’, a willingness to confront the past. The androgynous figure is the direct opposite to the lonely diver in the earlier six sections: ‘I’ has become ‘we’; restrictive definitions such as ‘she’ and ‘he’ do not apply to it. The underlying sense of danger and the need to learn how to cope with this alternative environment have been transformed into feelings of empowerment and understanding.

Themes

The themes addressed in this poem are open to a variety of interpretations. The following is one of the more widely accepted interpretations. However, you may wish to consider alternatives.

- The diver is determined to dive into an alternative environment, indicating that Rich considers the exploration of alternative social structures as being politically vital.
- The dive itself is a dangerous undertaking, suggesting that this social exploration is also difficult and dangerous, because it threatens the stability of the existing, traditional social structure.
- The diver manages to conquer fear and becomes transformed into a different form of being, an androgynous figure. This implies that Rich believes that if this social exploration is undertaken with courage and determination, then it will open up new ways of living where there is greater freedom and power for all.





- The wreck has a superficial beauty but underneath, in the ship's hold, there is decay. Rich uses this image to convey her political stance regarding the society that she lives in: on the surface it appears to be good and fair but, in reality, this traditional social structure keeps power in the hands of a few and denies power to groups who disagree with aspects of the society.
- The poem ends with an image of the wreck being revisited time and time again by those whose 'names do not appear' in the 'book of myths'. This illustrates Rich's awareness that, although she and others like her may seek to abandon this traditional social structure and to create an alternative one, they will never be able to escape completely from its influences. Nevertheless, it is politically vital that the exploration of alternative social structures continues.
- Rich does not offer any concrete alternative to the wreck, implying that once again it is the exploration process that is of political importance. She believes that we should not be diverted from this simply because we are uncertain about the exact form of these alternatives to the existing, traditional social structures, since such an exploration will lead to a better understanding of our existing society.





FROM A SURVIVOR

Background

In 1953, Adrienne Rich married Alfred H. Conrad, a Jewish economist who was teaching at Harvard. The couple went on to have three sons. Along with Adrienne, Alfred became actively involved in many of the civil rights that emerged in America in the 1960s. After seventeen years of marriage, Rich separated from her husband. Soon after, Alfred committed suicide. This poem is a reflection on their marriage and Rich's feelings for her late husband.

Style and structure

The poignancy of this poem lies in Rich's use of straightforward, everyday, conversational language to express her reaction to her husband's suicide. She makes no attempt to soften the emotional impact by the use of such technical devices as clever rhymes, beautiful imagery or musical language. Instead, she simply uses 'the stream of consciousness' technique, allowing her thoughts to develop and connect on the page. (For an explanation of 'the stream of consciousness' technique, see the 'Style and structure' notes for 'The Roofwalker'.)

The appearance of the poem, with one, two, three and more lines interrupted by spaces, reinforces the sense that we are reading her thoughts and experiencing her feelings as they are actually occurring. However, this approach to structure does not represent a lack of effort on Rich's part. Her careful use of highly significant words to communicate a wealth of implications and suggestions

indicates that a considerable amount of time and thought went into this piece.

A reading of the poem

Rich opens the poem with a reference to their marriage, calling it an 'ordinary pact'. Her use of the word 'pact' is significant since it suggests that, in Rich's view, the ceremony of marriage is like a treaty between two opposing forces. The two opposing forces are, of course, a man and a woman.

In an incredibly immediate and natural style of writing in lines 3–5, she expresses her amazement at the fact that when they married, both she and Alfred actually believed that they could make a success of it. However, Rich does not suggest that any lack, or fault, on their parts caused the failure of their marriage. Instead, she states that the marriage was doomed because of 'the failures of the race'. In other words, their marriage failed because of the society in which they lived. As we have seen previously, Rich came to see the traditional, male-dominated, patriarchal society as an oppressive one that sought to eliminate and reject any person or group who did not believe in the values of that society.

In lines 6–9, we learn that both she and Alfred simply did not know that their marriage would be destroyed by the social structure within which they lived. Her comment that this ignorance on their part could be seen as either 'Lucky or unlucky' indicates the ambivalence of her feelings about her marriage. It could have been 'lucky' in the sense that if they had known that their marriage would be destroyed by their society, then they would never have married. Clearly, Rich feels that there was something of value in





the time that they spent together. Their lack of knowledge could also be seen as being 'unlucky', because when their marriage ended they had the dreadful emotional upset and heartbreak that occurs with the failure of a relationship.

With the benefit of hindsight, Rich looks back at her young self and the young Alfred and is amazed at their innocent and naïve belief that they were 'special', that they were different from all the other men and women who also tried to make a 'pact' and were equally unsuccessful.

Line 10 marks a change in the tone of the writing. Up until this point, the tone has been one of slightly puzzled amazement that she and Alfred could have actually believed that a marriage between a man and woman might be successful. With line 10 the tone becomes much more intense. The shorter lines indicate the strength of Rich's feelings. She remembers her husband's body and the way that her feelings towards both him and his physical presence changed over the years. Initially, she accepted the traditional male/female roles dictated by the patriarchal society. Thus Alfred was the dominant figure, 'a god' who had 'power' over Rich's life. But as time passed she began to see that both the body and the man were, in fact, limited and vulnerable. Indeed, it is fair to say that we all have the tendency to idealise our partner in the first exciting days of a new love affair. It is only as the excitement and novelty wears off that we begin to see that this person is just as human as we are.

Rich uses simple words and phrases, in lines 17–20, to give a vivid and moving description of her relationship with Alfred. Their

lives had been connected for almost twenty years. The fact that Rich remembers the exact number of years indicates the level of importance that she attaches to their time together. We can almost hear the sob in her voice when she talks of Alfred being 'wastefully dead'. Once again her use of one word, 'wastefully', proves to be deeply significant. It is evident that Rich valued her late husband's existence. His death represents the 'waste' of the contribution that she clearly believes he would have made to the development of a new and better way for all men and all women to live together. The closeness of their relationship is revealed in her reference to the conversations that they had about making a 'leap' into this other way of living.

The final four lines introduce a more positive tone into the poem. Rich still feels a sense of loss because Alfred is dead, but she can acknowledge the fact that she, herself, has succeeded in embarking on the process of finding a new way of living. This process is much slower and happens in 'brief, amazing moments' rather than in the dramatic and sudden 'leap' that she and Alfred had spoken about. Nevertheless, the process is still immensely valuable and worthwhile because it is ongoing. It is these lines that reveal the reason why Rich entitled the poem 'From a Survivor' – for she is the survivor. Unlike Alfred and unlike their marriage, both regarded by Rich as casualties of the repressive and destructive forces of the traditional, patriarchal society, Rich has managed to survive. Even more importantly, her survival is not based on her resigned acceptance of that traditional, patriarchal society. Instead, her survival is driven by the determination to explore alternative social structures that will fill the lives of both women and men





with ‘amazing moments’ that promise the freedom of endless possibilities.

Punctuation and meaning

Rich’s use of punctuation plays a very important part in the successful communication of meaning in this poem. It is noticeable that she uses very little punctuation in the poem in order to reflect her use of ‘the stream of consciousness’ technique. Here Rich’s thoughts and feelings, largely uninterrupted by punctuation, have such immediacy and honesty that her words are filled with a great depth and intensity of meaning. As readers, we know that she is speaking to us from the heart.

It is highly significant that this poem, ending as it does with a celebration of the joy and freedom that comes from living a life filled with ‘amazing moments’ of possibilities, does not have a full stop after the final word. In this way, Rich reinforces the sense of endless possibilities that lead on in a never-ending and empowering process.





OVERVIEW OF ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY

Rich's portrayal of the female role in society

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Living in Sin
- The Roofwalker
- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor
- Power

Rich's portrayal of the male role in society

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room
- Living in Sin
- The Roofwalker
- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- From a Survivor

Rich's portrayal of the relationship between men and women

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Living in Sin
- Our Whole Life

- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor

Power and language

- The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room
- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man

Power and women

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Living in Sin
- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor
- Power

Impending revolution and change

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room
- Storm Warnings
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor





Rich's use of the dramatic lyric form

- Storm Warnings
- The Roofwalker
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor
- Power

Rich's use of the 'stream of consciousness' technique

- The Roofwalker
- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor
- Power

Rich's early 'male-influenced' poems 'about experiences'

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room
- Storm Warnings

Rich's later 'female-centred' poems that 'are experiences'

- Living in Sin
- The Roofwalker

- Our Whole Life
- Trying to Talk with a Man
- Diving into the Wreck
- From a Survivor
- Power





QUESTIONS

1. With reference to **at least six** poems by Adrienne Rich that you have studied:
 - (a) Outline her portrayal of the position in society held by **either** women **or** men.
 - (b) Do you agree or disagree with this portrayal?
2. 'Power is a central concept in the poetry of Adrienne Rich.' Respond to this statement, referring to the poetry by Rich on your course.
3. 'Adrienne Rich's poetry consistently reveals her mastery of the technical aspects of writing poetry.' Discuss this statement, with reference to **at least six** poems by Rich.
4. 'Rich's view of the world is firmly based in 1960s America, and has little to say to present-day Irish readers.' Write an essay in response to this statement, quoting from or referring to the poems on your course.
5. 'An Introduction to Adrienne Rich.' Write out the text of a public talk that you might give on the poetry of Adrienne Rich. Your talk should make reference to the poetry on your course.
6. *Dear Adrienne Rich ...* Write a letter to Adrienne Rich, telling her how you responded to some of her poems on your course. Support the points you make by detailed reference to the poems you choose to write about.
7. 'Why read the poetry of Adrienne Rich?' Write out the text of an article that you would submit to a journal in response to the above title. Support your response by quoting from, or referring to, the poetry on your course.

'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'

1. Read 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' and answer the following questions:
 - (a) What picture do you get of Aunt Jennifer from the poem?
 - (b) 'Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen'. Describe in your own words how you imagine the screen that Aunt Jennifer embroidered.
 - (c) Based on your reading of the poem, what impression do you get of the nature of Aunt Jennifer's relationship with Uncle?
2. Answer **ONE** of the following:
 - (i) Why do you think Aunt Jennifer embroidered the screen? Refer to the poem in your answer.

OR

 - (ii) Imagine that you have been asked to make a short film of this poem. Outline the overall atmosphere that you would like to achieve and the images, sound effects and music that you would use to create this atmosphere.

OR

 - (iii) 'The tigers in the panel that she made/Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.' What do you understand these last two lines of the poem to mean?





'Storm Warnings'

1. Read 'Storm Warnings' and answer the following questions:
 - (a) How, in the first stanza of the poem, does Rich help us to imagine the stormy weather? Refer to the poem in your answer.
 - (b) How does the person in the poem react to the oncoming storm?
 - (c) '... Weather abroad/And weather in the heart alike come on/Regardless of prediction.' What is Rich saying about emotions in these lines?
2. Answer **ONE** of the following:
 - (i) What does this poem tell you about Rich's state of mind? Refer to the poem in your answer.

OR
 - (ii) 'I draw the curtains as the sky goes black.' Do you think that the person in the poem will be successful in her attempts to keep the storm out of the house? Give reasons for your answer.

OR
 - (iii) Can you suggest another title for this poem? Support your suggestion by reference to the poem.

'Power'

1. Read 'Power' and answer the following questions:
 - (a) Which **ONE** of the following phrases do you feel best suggests Rich's reaction to the digging up of the old bottle?
 - She is not interested in it
 - She is fascinated by it
 - She is frightened by it.Support your choice by reference to the poem.
 - (b) What impression do you get of Marie Curie's life from your reading of the poem?
2. Answer **ONE** of the following:
 - (i) What does this poem tell you about Rich's attitude to Marie Curie? Refer to the poem in your answer.

OR
 - (ii) 'her wounds came from the same source as her power'
What do you understand this last line of the poem to mean?

OR
 - (iii) Write a paragraph in which you outline the similarities **and/or** differences between 'Power' and 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'.





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SYLVIA PLATH

Notes and Explorations: Ann Hyland

HL 2019

OL 2019

HL 2021

OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Black Rook in Rainy Weather

The Times Are Tidy

Morning Song

Finisterre

Mirror

Pheasant

Elm

Poppies in July

The Arrival of the Bee Box

Child

Overview of Sylvia Plath's poetry

Developing a personal response to the poetry of Sylvia Plath

Questions





INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 27 October 1932 to Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Plath. Shortly after his son Warren's birth in 1935, Otto Plath fell ill. His condition was treatable, but he refused to consult a doctor. In 1940, following an operation, he died. Neither of the children attended the funeral. These events had a huge effect on Sylvia's life. Her father's illness deprived her of both parents' attention for much of her early life. His death, which she sometimes saw as suicide because of his refusal to seek medical help, left her feeling bereft. She never came to terms with her grief and anger at his loss, and these feelings resurfaced in her last poems.

Sylvia's childhood taught her the value of being a 'good girl'. Her mother's approval was gained by being quiet, not disturbing her invalid father, reading and writing, and doing well in school. This she achieved with little difficulty: remarkably intelligent and very ambitious, she always earned high grades. Her writing life began early – her first poem was published when she was only eight. She was a brilliant pupil in secondary school, consistently earning A grades.

Attractive, vivacious and active in school clubs, she led a busy social life. She worked hard but loved clothes, dancing, music and dating. One problem that she refers to in her letters to her mother and in her journals was her anxiety to conceal her academic ability from the boys she dated: she felt (probably rightly) that her popularity would suffer if she upstaged them academically. In the conservative 1940s and 50s, girls were meant to be 'nice', that is,

genteel, polite and above all, feminine – certainly not ambitious and intellectual, publicly questioning the status quo. There was an all-pervasive pressure to conform to society's expectations. By the end of her secondary school career she had achieved some success as a writer and artist. A number of her stories had appeared in *Seventeen*, a popular teenage magazine, while some poems and drawings were published in the *Christian Science Monitor*. She had also been introduced to the works of authors who were important influences on her writing: D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas and W. B. Yeats.

In 1950 she entered Smith College, Massachusetts, a prestigious women's university where her academic and writing success continued. At the end of her third year, in June 1953, she won a guest editorship with a magazine for young women, *Mademoiselle*. This involved living in New York for the month. Her work schedule there was demanding and she was also expected to fulfil endless social engagements. The whole experience was exhausting. On her return home to Wellesley she became severely depressed. She was treated with electro-convulsive shock therapy, which seems to have been disastrous: far from curing her, it propelled her into a serious suicide attempt. Her life was saved only because her brother discovered her hidden in the cellar three days after she disappeared. She entered a psychiatric hospital, where she recovered with the help of a sympathetic psychiatrist. This experience formed the basis for her novel *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963.

She resumed her studies in Smith College in January 1954, graduating with first-class honours the following year. She won a





Fulbright Scholarship to study literature in Cambridge, England, where she met Ted Hughes, a young English poet ('that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me'). They fell in love and married in June 1956. On completing her studies in Cambridge she accepted a teaching job in her old university, Smith College, and moved to America with her husband for two years. 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' and 'The Times Are Tidy' date from this period. Shortly after the couple returned to London in December 1959, her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, was published. Their daughter, Frieda, was born in April. The following year they moved to Devon, a move that increased her workload. She devoted much energy to turning their old manor house into a home and to working the extensive garden that surrounded it in addition to acting as her own and her husband's literary agent and caring for Frieda.

Her son, Nicholas, was born in January 1962. During this time, despite her many domestic tasks and the work involved in looking after two small children, she was writing. Poems from this period include 'Morning Song', 'Finisterre', 'Mirror', 'Pheasant', 'Elm' and 'Poppies in July'. She also completed *The Bell Jar*.

Sylvia and Ted's relationship had been troubled for some time and they separated in August 1962. She remained in Devon, caring for the children and writing, but suffered poor health and recurring depression. Yet this period saw the flood of creativity that produced the poems that made up her second book, *Ariel*, including 'The Arrival of the Bee Box'. She herself was amazed at what she was writing:

I am ... writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me.
(*Letters Home*, 12 October 1962)

In December she moved to London with her children. To her great joy she succeeded in renting a flat where W. B. Yeats had once lived. The winter of 1962–63 was one of the coldest on record in England, which added to the trauma of setting up a new home alone. She had problems with heating, power failures and getting a telephone. She and the children suffered from severe colds and she had trouble finding a reliable childminder. These difficulties exacerbated her depression. Despite this, she continued writing; 'Child' dates from January 1963.

However, her difficult circumstances eventually overwhelmed her. Early on the morning of 11 February she left some milk and food by the children's beds and sealed the door to their room to ensure their safety. She then took an overdose of sleeping pills, sealed herself in the kitchen and gassed herself.

Sylvia Plath's fame has grown steadily since her death. At first this was mainly because of the dramatic circumstances of her suicide: the fame she had always longed for became hers for the wrong reasons. However, the publication of *Ariel* and the *Complete Poems* showed that she was indeed a poet of genius, whose work deserved recognition for its own sake. The facts of Sylvia Plath's life are easily told. Less simple to assess is the mass of material that has been written about her since (and because of) her suicide. She is variously seen as:





- A brilliant but fragile genius
- An ungrateful daughter who hated her mother
- A loving daughter whose loyalty and affection are reflected in her letters home
- An over-ambitious manic depressive
- A controlling and jealous wife who pushed her husband into a love affair
- A loving wife and mother whose life was destroyed by her husband's betrayal
- A virulent feminist whose marriage break-up and suicide expressed her outrage at the ties of domesticity

In fact, it seems that those who write about Sylvia Plath can use her life story to prove almost anything. One reason for this is that she was married to, and had just separated from, a famous poet who went on to become poet laureate. Another is the quantity of material she wrote. Apart from the poems there are many short stories, essays and articles for magazines. She also did radio broadcasts and was the subject of a number of interviews. But perhaps most widely quoted – to support points of view that can be utterly contradictory – are the journals she kept from her earliest days almost to the time of her death, and her thousands of letters to family and friends.

And indeed, these *Letters Home* (published in 1975) and the *Journals* (1982) tell a lot about her. They reflect her 'exaggerated, high-voltage, bigger-than-life personality and imagination'. They

show a young woman who thought about everything and longed to live life to its fullest. Here is a tiny sample of her opinions:

- **On writing:**
'It is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh.'
'And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.'
- **On herself:**
'I want, I think, to be omniscient ... I think I would like to call myself "the girl who wanted to be God".'
- **On life:**
'God is this all it is, the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? of self-worship and self-loathing? of glory and disgust?'
- **On depression:**
'I have been and am battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it.'
- **On children:**
'Graduate school and travel abroad are not going to be stymied by any squealing, breast-fed brats.'
- **On being a woman:**
'Learning of the limitations of a woman's sphere is no fun at all.'





- **On marriage:**

‘I plan not to step into a part on marrying – but to go on living as an intelligent mature human being, growing and learning as I always have.’

‘I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day – spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free.’

- **On having children:**

‘Children might humanise me. But I must rely on them for nothing. Fable of children changing existence and character as absurd as fable of marriage doing it.’

- **On poetry:**

‘A poem can’t take the place of a plum or an apple. But just as painting can re-create, by illusion ... so a poem, by its own system of illusions, can set up a rich and apparently living world within its particular limits.’

‘Technically I like it to be extremely musical and lyrical, with a singing sound.’

- **On the issues that mattered to her:**

‘The hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms – children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places.’

- **On politics:**

‘I do believe I can counteract McCarthy ... by living a life of honesty and love ... it is in a way serving my religion, which is that of humanism, and a belief in the potential of each man to learn and love and grow.’

Regardless of where people stand on her personality and life, all are agreed on Sylvia Plath’s unique and distinctive voice and on the impact she has had on the poetry of the end of the twentieth century. The inscription on her headstone could be read as a metaphor for her life: *Even in the midst of fierce flames, the golden lotus may be planted.*





BLACK ROOK IN RAINY WEATHER

Background

'If only something would happen!' Something being the revelation that transfigures existence; works a miraculous presto-chango upon the mundane mortal world – turning the toads and cockroaches back into handsome fairy princes. (Journals, April 1953)

Sylvia Plath was always aware of the need for inspiration to trigger her creative impulse: she hoped for a moment of insight, a 'miracle', to work a change on the 'mundane mortal world', enabling her to create. She wrote 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' at a time when she was finding it a struggle to write, despite her conviction that writing was her life's work.

A reading of the poem

The growing acceptance of identity as a writer is one theme. The year is at the 'stubborn' 'season/Of fatigue' – late autumn or winter. The speaker is warily walking, 'Trekking' in the rain, when her eye is caught by a black rook hunched above her on a twig. Everything around is dull and low key: bird, rain, 'spotted leaves', 'mute sky', 'ruinous landscape'. Despite this, the speaker is vaguely expectant: a miracle may occur, a trick of light may 'hallow' (make sacred) something as ordinary as a kitchen table or chair, causing it to glow with heavenly radiance. The muse or inspiration may appear as a 'miracle', a 'celestial burning', transforming what might otherwise be an uneventful life, giving 'A brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality'.

She doesn't know what inspiration may surprise her or 'flare/ Suddenly at my elbow'. The black rook in the rain may even shine and force her to give it her full attention – 'seize my senses'. Therefore, she is watchful: such a miracle has happened before.

One such miracle would be the inspiration to create something extraordinary from her dull surroundings, to 'Patch together a content/Of sorts'. She might write, create something wonderful. The 'mute sky' may not grant the desired 'backtalk', but the speaker knows that 'Miracles occur'. Waiting for the muse is like

*The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.*

She is prepared to wait.

Landscape

Plath's poetry is often highly subjective, focusing on her inner self, feelings and thoughts – even when she appears to be writing about the outside world. She uses her immediate surroundings as a metaphor for her feelings and ideas. This is evident in her treatment of landscape. One critic has described how her poetic landscapes embody associations between scene and mood; she calls them 'psychic landscapes'. She notes Plath's 'ability to transform realistic objects and scenes into consistent sets of metaphors for her thoughts and emotions'. These concrete objects, however, are clearly realised (made real) by Plath's skilful use of language and imagery.

'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' creates a clear picture: the speaker is out walking doggedly on a wet day when she sees a black rook





hunched on a bare tree. Everything around is dull and lifeless: sodden fallen leaves, the dark, rainy day, the 'ruinous landscape'. Having set the scene, the speaker quickly moves to her own fears and limited expectations. She is hopeful that (with luck, maybe, perhaps) even such a dull scene may be transformed. The cause of this transformation – miracle, descent of an angel – would seem to be something that might fire her imagination.

Essentially, the bleak place is a metaphor for the speaker's own bleakness. Her mood, like the scene, might be suddenly transformed by a sudden radiance, a miracle, a flash of inspiration. The mute sky may grant her the 'backtalk' she desires.

Themes

- Hope – the expectation of a sudden change for the better
- Despondency – the grim dullness of 'neutrality'
- Creativity – the miracle of a sudden inspiration
- Miracles – the rareness and randomness of life-enhancing moments of brilliance

Technique

Use of contrast

There is a strong contrast between the dullness of the landscape and the radiant miracle that may occur. The speaker knows that the most 'obtuse object' – black rook, bleak day, dullness, kitchen chair – can be transformed by a miracle, a 'celestial burning', the descent of an angel.

The difference between actual dullness and possible radiance is strongly marked. Plath underlines the blackness by her choice of adjectives: wet, black, desultory, mute, sceptical, minor, obtuse, wary, dull, ruinous. The verbs, too, convey dispiritedness: hunches, fall, complain, trek, haul, wait. The repetition of the sound 'rain' in line 3 adds to the general bleakness. In complete contrast to this, the hoped-for change is conveyed in terms of brightness: light, fire, incandescence, radiance, flare, shine. It is linked with the divine: miracle, hallowed, angel.

Language

The language of 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' includes a mixture of the colloquial and the formal. Almost slang expressions are used side by side with archaic words (words that have fallen out of use). Particularly striking are the semi-biblical words: 'hallowing', 'bestowing largesse', 'portent'. These contrast strongly with the everyday sound of 'I can't honestly complain', 'With luck', 'Of sorts'. In your opinion, what is the effect of this? How convincing do you find the possibility of this miracle? Do you feel that the speaker has already experienced such a moment? Look at her description of the moment – the words used to describe it. Be aware of the many parenthetical statements: 'Although', 'I admit', 'may', 'it could happen', 'With luck', 'Of sorts', 'If you care to call'. There is certainly no doubt of her wariness.

Throughout Plath's career she worked painstakingly on technique, rewriting and reworking her poems until they were as close to perfect as she could make them. In earlier poems her attention to technique is sometimes too obvious, almost overshadowing the subject matter or the theme. 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather',





one of her earlier poems, is carefully crafted. Before reading the comments below, reread it, paying attention to rhyme (end-rhyme, half-rhyme), consonance (rhyming consonants), assonance, alliteration and rhythm. Note down any patterns you observe.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this poem is the carefully patterned rhyming scheme. There are five end-rhymes, repeated in each stanza: in other words, the rhyming scheme is *abcde, abcde, abcde*. In every stanza there is also internal rhyme: stiff – twig; arranging – rearranging – rain; desultory – design; table – chair.

The rhythm is also skilfully worked out. Mostly the poet uses three-beat lines, but in each stanza this is broken by a four-beat or (occasionally) a five-beat line. The variation avoids monotony and also gives some interesting effects. Look at the opening lines and notice the effect of the pattern:

˘ ˘ – – ˘ –

On the stiff twig up there

– ˘ – – – –

Hunches a wet black rook

˘ – ˘ ˘ – ˘ – ˘ ˘ – ˘ ˘ ˘ –

Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain

The grouping of stresses slows down the voice, drawing attention to the rigidity of the bird and emphasising the bleakness of the scene. Commenting on ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’ in a letter to her mother, Plath criticised its ‘glassy brittleness’. What do you think she might have meant?





THE TIMES ARE TIDY

Background

'The Times Are Tidy' was written in 1958, at the height of the socially, politically and materially self-satisfied era of President Eisenhower. It was a time of complacency, when any challenge to the status quo (the way things are) was quickly silenced. The 'establishment' – the powerful elite – viewed change as unnecessary and as a threat to its survival. The smug satisfaction of this decade in the United States was all-pervasive. Artists in general suffered under the oppression of a culture that saw anything that differed from the norm as a threat. This was the McCarthy decade, when those suspected of socialist or communist sympathies were blacklisted. According to one commentator, in 'The Times Are Tidy', Plath uses irony and humour to:

deflate ... behaviour she finds questionable. The poem focuses on the collapse of moral standards and the all-pervasive addiction to comfort and conformity that so strongly characterised the 1950s.

Imagery

The 1950s – the 'tidy times' – are contrasted with the very 'untidy' times of the world of legend, an era when heroes fought dragons and witches cast spells and brewed magic potions, risking being burned at the stake for their practices.

The 'stuck record' of stanza 1 suggests the tendency of the needle on a worn record to go 'ruh-ruh-ruh' when it sticks. It may

symbolise the social boredom and monotony of the time. The 'watchful cooks' were probably the critics of corrupt political values, who were often dismissed and blacklisted. The corruption or (at best) damaging inactivity of politicians could therefore continue without being too closely observed, allowing the 'mayor's rôtisserie' to turn around 'of its own accord': there was no interference in the continuous political graft and favour-giving.

Humour and irony

Plath used humour in all her writings – sometimes light and amusing, bringing a smile to the reader's face, but more often black and biting. She particularly ridiculed what she found self-important or pompous. Her humour is seen in her use of wordplay, entertaining images and sound effects that sometimes echo nursery rhymes or popular jingles. Very often her humour underlined a serious message.

In 'The Times are Tidy', the decade of smug comfort ('cream an inch thick') and boredom ('stuck record') in which she lived is described ironically. No self-respecting hero would want to live in it: there is 'no career' in adventure; dragons have 'withered ... To leaf-size'. Witches, with their magic herbs, love potions and talking cats, have been burnt up. Plath sets the present age against the world of legend, of fabulous creatures and mythical heroes.

The final lines are deeply ironic: the very elements that have thrilled children of all ages have disappeared or been forced out. And yet they 'are better for it'. Life may be flat, boring, uneventful, 'a stuck record', but it is suggested that the 'cream an inch thick' is more than compensation for the lost excitement. The imagination





is starved and adventure is dead, but life is rich and comfortable, predictable and safe. Plath seems to suggest the ironic question: what else could children (or even adults) want?

Think of the connotations of 'cream'; note down some of the phrases in which it is used. What point is the poet making here? Do you consider it an apt image with which to conclude this poem?

Themes

- The political corruption of an era that sees material gain as all that counts
- The collapse of moral standards in public life, where self-seeking, greed and corruption dominate
- Self-righteousness – the justification of the status quo because it benefits the elite
- The death of the spirit of adventure, the failure to challenge the 'dragon' of political smugness and corruption, which threaten to suffocate society.





MORNING SONG

Background

Plath wrote 'Morning Song' ten months after the birth of her first child, Frieda, on 1 April 1960. She intended it to be the opening poem of a new collection called *Ariel*. The first word of the poem, and therefore of the book, is 'Love', setting a warm, positive tone for the collection. It is one of a number of poems she wrote about children or motherhood. Her attitude towards performing the duties of motherhood was often ambivalent. She was aware of the repetitiveness of the work involved in caring for babies and the inroads it would make on her time; however, this was the negative side of being a mother: it did not cloud her deep love for her children, which is always clear and unequivocal.

A reading of the poem

The opening image creates a warm, loving mood. The speaker addresses the child directly, affirming that she was conceived in love, set in motion 'like a fat gold watch'. The tone is tender and humorous. The mother then recalls the infant's birth, her first cry establishing her 'place among the elements'.

The new parents talk of her arrival, magnifying it, but they also feel threatened by it. The world is a 'drafty museum' and this 'statue' in its 'nakedness' is vulnerable, making them aware of their own vulnerability: 'Shadows our safety'. The 'bald cry' brings a change of scene, from the intimacy of lines 1–2 to the chilly world of the 'museum' where the parents feel their safety is shadowed. The mother feels displaced, unimportant. Even though her love

helped to create this child, she now feels that she is no longer necessary. She compares herself to the cloud that brings rain, creating a pool of water – the cloud is momentarily reflected in the pool before the wind slowly blows it on: 'slow/Effacement at the wind's hand'. This seems to suggest that she is briefly reflected in her child but is then displaced, effaced. It is as if the mother has nothing more to give: the child is autonomous.

However, this troubling idea gives way to the present reality of the child's need of its mother and the mother's attentiveness to the child. The child's 'moth-breath' is almost imperceptible, but the mother hears it. At the first cry she 'stumbles' from bed, heavy and cow-like in her flowery pink nightdress – a note of self-mockery here. She moves towards the child, whose open mouth is 'clean as a cat's'. This startling image suggests the delicate pinkness of the child's mouth.

As morning breaks, the single cry changes to a 'handful of notes', echoing the 'bald cry' of the first stanza. The image of the 'vowels [rising] like balloons' suggests the beauty of the sounds and adds a note of playfulness.

Imagery

Plath's images are remarkable for their clarity and unexpectedness. Highly concrete, often drawn from ordinary, everyday things, they catch the reader unawares. The 'fat gold watch' of stanza 1 is simple but vivid, witty and unusual. Its marked rhythm is emphatic:

- ~ - - -

like a fat gold watch.





The description of the world as a 'drafty museum' and new babies as naked statues is a most unusual image, one that makes the reader think. It is an image she has used before: it suggests a world that has held on to its past, storing events, people, everything that makes up our life – not a very comfortable place, but perhaps not unsafe for the 'New statue'. Imagery is effective in contrasting the infant's lightness and delicacy and the mother's clumsiness and heaviness: the baby's 'moth-breath/Flickers' (notice the lightness of the sounds as well as the delicacy of the image), her 'clear vowels rise like balloons'. The mother, however, is portrayed as homely and a little clumsy: she stumbles 'cow-heavy', swathed in a 'floral ... Victorian nightgown'.

Imagery is also central to the contrast between the first three stanzas and the last three. There is a conscious development in animation: watch, statue, walls, mirror and even cloud are inanimate objects, just things, incapable of independent activity; moth, cat, singer (child) and cow (mother) are living creatures, capable of acting alone. Can you suggest a reason for the change from inanimate to animate? What is the effect on the reader?

Feelings

'Morning Song' evokes a number of moods. There seems to be a placid acceptance in stanza 1 ('fat gold watch', the midwife's matter-of-fact action, the 'bald cry/[Taking] its place among the elements'). However, this changes in stanza 2: the world is now cold – 'a drafty museum' – and the adults seem dwarfed by the place. Their 'voices echo', they are blank as walls and their safety is threatened. Why? Does the baby's 'nakedness' make them feel

more vulnerable? Or perhaps the new arrival reminds them that they are now an older generation, facing death?

The sense of unease becomes even stronger in stanza 3. The speaker seems to feel that she has nothing to offer the infant: she is mirrored in the child for a while before being slowly effaced by the passage of time.

These feelings of dislocation, unimportance and impermanence are quickly dispelled by the present moment, evoked vividly in stanza 4. The baby's gentle breath, the rose-patterned room and the watchful mother in her old-fashioned nightdress create a scene of warmth and intimacy.

The remaining stanzas reflect the growing feeling of connectedness between mother and child: one cry brings her to the child, whose mouth is wide open.

The dawn breaks to the baby's clear 'handful of notes'. Intimacy, love, joy and pleasure dominate these stanzas. What do you think Plath may be saying here about motherhood? What is your final impression of this morning song?





FINISTERRE

Background

'Finisterre' (Finistère) is the French name for a region in the west of Brittany. It means 'land's end' – the point where land gives way to sea.

Plath and nature

Plath wrote many poems that describe a scene or a place (landscape poems). In these she creates a vivid picture of the place described, conveying a strong sense of the atmosphere and mood of the place at a particular time. She also frequently uses the scene described to draw the reader into the mood of the speaker. A number of critics have used the term 'psychic landscapes' to describe such poems.

In 'Finisterre', a seemingly ordinary – though wild and remote – place is described in graphic terms that reflect fear, hopelessness and death. The scene actually becomes secondary to the feelings, despite the speaker's detailed, realistic descriptions. The rugged black cliffs extend into the sea, which pounds them with explosive force. The comparison with 'knuckled and rheumatic' hands 'Cramped on nothing' is striking. This is quickly followed by a series of unusual metaphors for the rocks: 'faces of the drowned', 'Leftover soldiers', 'messy wars', hidden 'grudges'. The poet personifies them, creating a powerful metaphor for anger, destruction and death. The mood evoked is sinister and grim.

Stanza 2 opens with a lovely picture of the small, delicate flowers – 'trefoils, stars, and bells' – edging the cliff, almost like

embroidery. But the lightness is quickly dispelled: such flowers might have been embroidered by 'fingers ... close to death'. This strikes the note for the remainder of the stanza: death is omnipresent. The mists are described as:

Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea.

They bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them.

They go up without hope, like sighs.

The speaker walks through them and they almost suffocate her: 'they stuff my mouth with cotton' and leave her 'beaded with tears'. In 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather', Plath also used nature as a vehicle for feelings. Think about the impact of this approach.

The monument

'Our Lady of the Shipwrecked', as described in stanza 3, would certainly be one reason why the souls of stanza 2 go up without hope! She is aloof, self-important and self-absorbed, 'three times life size,/Her lips sweet with divinity'. She strides towards the horizon, in love with the sea. Far from ignoring those at her feet, she doesn't even appear to know of their presence. The marble sailor is distraught but gets no attention; the black-clad peasant woman appears to feel that directing her prayers to the praying sailor may be more effective than trying to establish contact with Our Lady of the Shipwrecked.

The monument described here is of a kind not uncommon in Brittany, once a deeply religious region: a kneeling figure looking up to an upright figure, which is looking up to heaven. (Think of the popular statues of Our Lady of Lourdes.) What impression do you form of Plath's response to this monument?





Irony

There is considerable irony in the description of 'Our Lady of the Shipwrecked'. The statue to whom people pray understands nothing. Her love is for the 'beautiful formlessness of the sea', the source of the shipwrecks she was erected to protect against. She dominates the scene, taking the narrator's – and therefore the reader's – attention away from the underlying horrors of the earlier stanzas.

Her pink-tipped cloak, her sweet appearance and her love for the sea seem wildly inappropriate when compared with the doom-laden bay. And how can she love something that has such hideous secrets and hides grudges? Plath is setting up an ironic contrast here. How effective do you think this is?

There is humorous irony in the final stanza in the contrast between the chatty peasants, with their commercial stalls, and the ancient grudging rocks of the first stanza. The only reference the stallholders make to the headland is rather offhand: 'the Bay of the Dead down there'. The name, however, alerts the reader to one possible explanation for the gloom of the opening stanzas. It also conveys how ordinary it is to those who make their living from tourists. The trinkets on the stall – flapping laces, postcards, necklaces, toy ladies – add to the feeling of ordinariness. It almost seems that in creating such a homely picture, the narrator is mocking her own over-reaction to the scene in stanza 1.

Another ironic – and humorous – contrast is that between the 'toy ladies' and 'Our Lady of the Shipwrecked'. They are miniature ladies, made from fragile shells – 'trinkets the sea hides' – with no

claim to anything other than prettiness. She, on the other hand, is gigantic, made from marble and is associated with God – 'lips sweet with divinity'. However, she offers no comfort to those who pray to her, whereas the shell ladies are pretty – and available to those who wish to buy them.

The conclusion seems to be deliberately jaunty: 'These are our crêpes. Eat them before they blow cold.' What is the impact of the tone here?

Imagery

The strong visual imagery that is a feature of Plath's poetry is evident in 'Finisterre'. Her ability to create 'startling, beautiful phrases and lines' (Ted Hughes) is rightly celebrated. Here, the promontories of rock are:

*... the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic,
Cramped on nothing. Black
Admonitory cliffs*

Dark underwater rocks 'hide their grudges under the water'. The notion that mists 'bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them' is a remarkable description of the effect of fog.

Can you identify images that you find particularly striking? What is their impact?

Rhythm and sound

The poem is written in nine-line stanzas, a heavy, formal structure that is particularly appropriate for conveying the weighty terrors of the opening stanzas. The language too is heavy and forceful,





with harsh sounds: 'admonitory', 'knuckled', 'gloomy', 'dump of rocks', 'sea cannons', 'budge', 'grudges'. Harsh k and g sounds echo through it, as do long vowel sounds: 'exploding', 'faces', 'drowned', 'gloomy', 'old'. The pounding rhythm of these lines echoes the pounding of the cannoning sea.

Contrast this with the lightness of stanza 4. The same nine-line stanza is used, but the effect is quite different. How does the writer achieve this? Look at colour, sound effects, rhythm, line length and use of dialogue.

Themes

- A rather grim seascape
- The failure of formal religion to answer people's needs
- Hidden unhappiness and hopelessness
- Fear of the unknown

Concluding note

In general, 'Finisterre' is a remarkable recreation of a scene and of a mood. The narrator's progress through the place is reflected in what she sees, hears and feels: sea, sounds, weather, rocks, flowers, monument, stallholders. All of it is coloured by Plath's unique imagination.





MIRROR

Commentaries on 'Mirror' are immensely varied. At one extreme it has been described as 'silly adolescent scribbling which simply informs the reader that Plath is like everyone else, searching the reaches for what she really is' – an unusually dismissive attitude. At the other extreme it is considered to be a wonderfully complex meditation on the conflict between woman as creative writer and woman in the socially acceptable role of wife, homemaker and mother. In between there is a wealth of opinions.

The variety of interpretations shows how 'Mirror' touches the life experience of many people. Ironically, the poem has become a mirror in which each reader sees his or her concerns reflected – making one wonder if this was Plath's intention.

Before you read the following notes it would help you if you were to arrive at your own understanding of what Plath is saying. It might be useful to make notes about your response to the poem as a whole or to individual images or ideas.

Background

In her personal life, Sylvia Plath frequently questioned who she was. Expectations for a young woman in the late 1950s were limiting: appearance was important, as was marrying suitably and being a good wife, homemaker and mother. For Plath, with her fierce ambition to be a successful writer, such a world was deeply threatening. She certainly loved to look well, enjoyed dating and wanted to marry, have a home and have children – but not at the cost of her writing. From early in her life she returns frequently in

her journals to her fear that marriage would oblige her to bury her creative genius in order to attend to the daily round of housework and baby-minding, which was the lot of most married women in that era:

*Will I be a secretary – a self-rationalising housewife,
secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow
intellectually & professionally while I am impeded – will I
submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse to
face myself, and go either mad or become neurotic?*

Women writers had an even harder struggle than most: their work was often seen as 'nice', a neat accomplishment – but not necessary. These concerns may have helped to inspire this poem.

A reading of the poem

The 'I' persona of stanza 1 is identified as a mirror only through the title and the named functions. Without the title, this stanza would read like a children's riddle poem. The reader, however, has little difficulty in guessing the identity of 'I'. How much of the poem would you need to read to identify it?

Having identified itself as a mirror, it then informs the reader in stanza 2 that it is a lake. The shift in meaning forces the reader to question the other elements of the poem. This duality (doubleness) is echoed in many places and adds to the difficulty of giving a definitive reading.

Stanza 1 seems clear and unambiguous at first reading. Short, simple statements set out the precision, truthfulness and objectivity of 'I'. However, these statements raise many questions





when examined closely. Why does a mirror need to explain that it is without preconceptions, ‘unmistaken by ... dislike’, ‘not cruel, only truthful’? If it is as objective and exact as it claims, why does it ‘think’ (an inexact statement) that a wall could be ‘part of [its] heart’? Can a mirror have a heart? How does this fit in with its own notion that it is exact?

Perhaps because of these contradictions and the almost childlike certainties, the tone of this stanza is light and breezy. The wittiness of the riddle format, the precise details, the simplicity and the fast rhythm all add a humorous note. Even the self-importance of the mirror – ‘a little god’ – is amusing, as is the wordplay on ‘I’ and ‘eye’.

The opening statement of the second stanza – ‘Now I am a lake’ – adds a new dimension, causing the reader to revise the first reading of stanza I. Is the mirror choosing an image to describe itself as it is in the mind of the woman who ‘bends over me’? This woman is not just looking at the superficial reflection: she is ‘Searching my reaches for what she really is’. A silver, exact, four-square mirror has no reaches: it is flat, two-dimensional. It can only reflect back the surface image: there is no depth, no murkiness, no darkness. Yet the woman sees something there that makes her turn away, escape what she sees or suspects by looking ‘to those liars, the candles or the moon’.

The ‘truth’ follows her – ‘I see her back, and reflect it faithfully’ – and her ‘tears’ and ‘agitation’ are the mirror’s reward. Despite this, she returns: the truth she finds in the mirror is important to her. ‘Each morning’ in the mirror she sees her face, sees that she has

*drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.*

One simple interpretation of this is that she sees her youth drowning and watches with horror the approach of old age, which she views as monstrous, ‘a terrible fish’.

This raises other questions. Why drowning? This implies suffocation, sudden loss, not the gradual fading of youth. The ‘old woman’ and the ‘terrible fish’ are terrifying – and certainly don’t come from the mirror. They rise up from the murky depths of the lake, the darkness, the reaches of the woman’s subconscious.

The frightening truths that rise from the depths are what the woman meets when she searches for ‘what she really is’ – her true identity. This is not the pretty, docile, smiling, youthful woman that society admires: it is something frightening, dark, ugly, terrible – and true.

Themes

- Knowing oneself
- Ageing
- Identity: the double self
- Fear
- The human condition
- Two-sidedness

A poem is not necessarily part of the life story of the poet, nor of those around her; the ‘I’ persona is not the poet narrating her life experiences. However, those experiences inform the poet’s





work; they are the raw material from which she shapes her poetry. Therefore, you may find it helpful when studying this poem to look back at Plath's life.

Of particular relevance to 'Mirror' is the fact that Plath spent many years striving to achieve high ambitions: a consistent 'alpha' (A grade) pupil through school and university, she always strove to give her best. It often appears, though, that she judged her best not just by her own very high standards, but also by the far more unpredictable standard of winning the recognition and approval of others. This was true of her work and of her life: she seemed to need constant affirmation of her worth. One consequence of this was a pleasant, smiling appearance, the 'all-American girl' image – 'a maddening docility', according to Robert Lowell, whose writing class she attended – which often concealed so-called negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, resentment, jealousy and hatred.

In several of Plath's poems she presents a double image, two sides of a person: in 'In Plaster' (1961), for example, the speaker – the body encased in plaster, a metaphor here for the inner self – talks about the plaster cast that she has had to wear and recognises its whiteness, its coldness and its utter dependence on what it encases. When the clean white plaster is removed this ugly, hairy, old, yellow person within will be revealed, but the speaker is determined to 'manage without' the plaster. In this way, what appears clean, bright and pleasant is in fact only cheap plaster; the true self may be ugly – but it is the real self.

*I used to think we might make a go of it together –
After all it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
She may be a saint and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that doesn't matter a bit.
(‘In Plaster’, 1961)*

What similarities do you see between this and 'Mirror'?

Revealing one's true identity

A committed poet, Plath knew the importance of speaking from the heart. But speaking from the heart means saying things others might not approve of or expressing socially unacceptable feelings. It means revealing one's true identity and risking rejection. 'Mirror' could be read as an expression of this conflict.

At this time in her life, Plath's style and subject matter were undergoing a change, which eventually gave birth to her most powerful and controversial poems, many of which voice sentiments that a lot of people experience but don't talk about.

The mirror could be seen as a metaphor for her 'golden girl' image – silver, exact, reflecting back what others projected, not creating any controversy. But the lake has hidden depths, and when these are searched, murkiness, darkness, terror and ugliness are revealed – and the demure young lady is drowned. This mirror therefore has a bright side and a dark side, like Plath herself – like all who share the human condition.





PHEASANT

Background

'Pheasant' is a wonderful evocation of the beauty and vitality of a bird that is under threat of death. Read it through a few times just for enjoyment. Get a sense of the speaker's attitude to the bird (note how this is conveyed). Her relationship with 'you' also colours the poem; the tension generated by the opening lines is sustained to the end and underlined by the closing plea. Pay particular attention to her use of clear images, precise detail, language, colour and contrast to paint a picture of what she sees now and remembers from last winter.

A reading of the poem

The opening line is the narrator's heartfelt plea to 'you' not to kill the pheasant this morning, as he had said he would. The pheasant is pictured in strong, visual language: the narrator is startled by

The jut of that odd, dark head, pacing

Through the uncut grass on the elm's hill.

She values it for its sheer beauty, its vitality. The bird seems to her to be at home on the hill: 'simply in its element'. It is kingly: visiting 'our court' (possibly a play on the name of Plath's home, Green Court). Last winter it had also visited during snowy weather, leaving its 'tail-track' and its large footprint, which differed from the 'crosshatch' of smaller birds.

Returning to the present, she captures its appearance in a few graphic words – 'green and red', 'a good shape', 'so vivid', 'a little

cornucopia', 'brown as a leaf' – as it 'unclaps' its wings and flies up into the elm, where it 'is easy'.

The narrator feels that she is the trespasser: she disturbed the pheasant as it sunned itself in the narcissi. She turns again to 'you', pleading once again for its life: 'Let be, let be.'

Personal voice

One strength of this poem lies in the personal voice of the narrator. It is as if the reader is looking in on a moment of her life – eavesdropping on her words to 'you'. The tone is intimate, immediate. Her plea is clear and unambiguous: 'Do not kill it.' Her response to the pheasant is equally immediate: it rings absolutely true; there is no doubting the sincerity of her admiration. Can you pinpoint how this effect is achieved?

The pheasant is described in a concrete, detailed manner. There is indeed nothing 'mystical' about it: it is so vivid, so alive that this alone should be reason enough to let it be. Plath captures the vividness in a few well-chosen details: movement (jut, pacing, unclaps), colour (dark, green, red, brown) and shape (print of its big foot, tail-track). Its very sense of being at home here 'gives it a kingliness': it paces the hill, 'in its element', visits them and settles in the elm where it 'is easy', making the narrator feel she trespasses 'stupidly'.

Her statement that 'it isn't/As if I thought it had a spirit' suggests the idea that it does indeed have a spirit, that she feels some mystical connection with it. Everything she says gives the impression that it has a superior claim to this place and a right to live.





Mood

The pleas that open and close the poem suggest tension between 'I' and 'you'. Her spirited defence of the pheasant is sparked by her recollection that 'You said you would kill it this morning'. The abruptness makes the statement sound like an accusation.

These words, and her defensiveness, suggest another scene not described here. Why has 'you' threatened to kill the bird? Why are they in conflict about it? Do the final words suggest defeat or victory? While there are no answers to these questions in the poem, looking at the possibilities can help you to determine the tone of the poem.

Themes

- Tension
- The rights of wild creatures
- The mystery of beauty

Technique

Verse form

The verse form of this poem is *terza rima*, a form that Plath used frequently. This is an Italian term meaning 'third rhyme' and it is based on three-line stanzas, where the first and third lines rhyme. Often the end-sound of the second line becomes the rhyme of lines 1 and 3 in the next stanza and so on, creating the sound pattern *aba, bcb, cdc*, etc. The stanzas are therefore interlaced.

This verse form is an effective one for building a narrative: it creates a series of short, interlaced vignettes. In this poem each stanza

traces some aspect of the pheasant's appearance or its actions, with the grammatical sentence often carrying the thought through the break into the next stanza. This creates an almost casual flow, despite the formal structure of the poem.

Rhyme

A glance through the poem will show that *terza rima* is used consistently, though the rhymes often depend on consonance (rhyming final consonants) rather than on the more traditional and more obvious end-rhyme. The effect of this muted rhyming pattern is a subtle music, an effect Plath strove to achieve in all her poetry. The singing quality of the poem is helped by her use of assonance and repetition. Again, a quick look at any stanza reveals examples. In stanza 1, for example, there is:

kill it this morning.
... kill it. It startles ... still

Can you find other examples?

Rhythm

Pay attention to the 'voice rhythm' of the lines: the way many lines echo the rhythm of normal speech. While this creates an impression of ease and simplicity, it is in fact a highly skilful achievement, requiring mastery of technique.

Style

While Plath's attention to technique is evident when one studies 'Pheasant' closely, it does not stand out or impose itself on the reader. Here, form serves the content: it draws attention to what





the poet is saying or adds to the beauty of the poem. It is not simply an end in itself.

Compare this with her technique in earlier poems, such as 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'. Can you explain the difference? A look at the poet's level of engagement with her topic might be a good starting point.





ELM

Background

Sylvia Plath dedicated 'Elm' to her friend Ruth Fainlight, an American poet.

This is one of the first poems in which the distinctive voice of Plath's later poetry is heard. She always drew on her own experiences for material for her poems, but these late poems reflect a level of intensity not found in 'Finisterre' or 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'. They also have a freedom, a lack of constraint and natural flow quite unlike the careful patterning of her earlier poems.

Some critics have linked the deep fear and rage expressed in 'Elm' with the growing tensions in Plath's marriage at the time of writing. These possibly triggered a renewal of the unresolved grief caused by the loss of her father at the age of eight and of the depression that had caused her to have a nervous breakdown at the age of 20. Part of the treatment for depression at that time was electric shock treatment, most probably the source of the image of scorching, burning filaments used here and in other poems.

But it is important to emphasise that while these factors clearly influenced Plath's choice of theme and style, she is not writing about her life. A poem is an artistic creation, a work of art, which may be inspired by external events but is not a documentary about those events.

'Elm' is a complex poem. It is perhaps best to listen attentively to it several times to tune in to its deeply felt emotions, its energy.

Try not to concentrate too much on understanding or interpreting individual lines or stanzas, but rather, respond to the general effect, the rich images, the sounds, the rhythm and above all, the feelings that infuse it.

A reading of the poem

The speaker seems to be quoting the words she imagines the elm is directing to her. The elm – speaking as 'I' throughout – taunts 'you', the speaker, the source of the fear released in the poem, for her fear of the unknown. 'I know the bottom ... I do not fear it', she claims – unlike 'you', who fears it. 'You' hear the sea – or perhaps the voice of nothingness, a voice she is familiar with since her madness.

'You' foolishly seeks love – a 'shadow' that has galloped away. The elm will mimic that galloping sound all night, driving you to near-death: 'Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf'.

The taunting voice of the elm then describes some of the nightmarish horrors she knows, horrors that suggest a nervy, exhausted state:

- The sound of poisons, rain, 'this big hush', and its fruit, 'tin-white, like arsenic'
- Sunsets – atrocities that scorch 'to the root', making its 'filaments burn and stand'
- The wind, a destructively violent force that leaves nothing unharmed, will 'tolerate no bystanding', causing the elm to 'shriek'





- The merciless moon, a symbol of barrenness, whose cruel radiance burns; when freed from the elm, this moon is flat – like a woman who has had ‘radical surgery’.

The frenzied violence of the verbs – scorch, burn, stand, break up, fly, shriek, drag, scathe – eases off in the next stanzas. The elm challenges ‘you’ for releasing the bad dreams that now ‘possess and endow me’. The distinction between ‘you’ and the elm – so clear at first – is blurred. ‘You’ now seems to inhabit the elm – perhaps it is the dark, fearful side of the elm.

The elm turns from external violence to inner terror – a ‘cry’ that

... flaps out

Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

She feels a terrifying ‘dark thing’, with its ‘soft, feathery turnings’, that sleeps in her, something that is also wicked, malignant. These ‘soft, feathery turnings’ sound even more sinister than the wild violence of the earlier stanzas.

Silent inward terror gives way to a less claustrophobic tone. Looking outwards again, the elm watches ‘Clouds pass and disperse’. They may be ‘the faces of love’, and – like the love that went off like a horse in stanza 3 – they are irretrievable, gone forever. The taunting voice that earlier mocked ‘you’ for her need for love has changed.

The elm too seems to feel bereft (or possibly angry?): ‘I agitate my heart’. She now changes from the confident, knowing, fearless voice of the early stanzas to a fearful, petrified being, ‘incapable of more knowledge’. This sounds as if she knows at some level what

she could learn (does, in fact, ‘know the bottom’) but does not want to truly understand.

The cry, the ‘dark thing’, is now a face, ‘So murderous in its strangle of branches’, a creature whose ‘snaky acids hiss’ and freeze the will. The elm is now struggling with ‘isolate, slow faults’, which are self-destructive and potentially fatal: ‘That kill, that kill, that kill’.

Language

Plath’s language in this poem is extraordinarily rich. The opening is simple and direct: ‘I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap-root’. Indeed, many lines in the poem are written in the same simple, unvarnished style:

Love is a shadow.

This is rain now, this big hush.

I let her go. I let her go

*I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;*

Its snaky acids hiss.

It is this directness that strikes the reader most forcibly on a first reading. The tactile quality that is so often noted in Plath’s poetry is evident here: words like ‘stone’, ‘turf’, ‘arsenic’, ‘burn and stand’, ‘scathes’ and ‘soft, feathery turnings’ evoke things we can feel or hear or touch or taste. Every line of the poem contains concrete language – words, phrases and images that pile up to create a





vibrant and powerful effect. It is as if each sensation, each feeling, each moment described is etched out. This has a powerful impact on the reader; the effect is cumulative, until the final

*... isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.*

Imagery

*While her experience is conveyed through metaphors, these are not used for their cleverness. The images used are powerful, conveying depth of feeling in richly evocative terms. Re-examine the images that you find most striking. Notice the sparseness of the language: many of the statements are simple and clear, depending on strong verbs and nouns for their impact. The central metaphor, the elm, is drawn from her immediate surroundings. The house in Devon was overshadowed by a giant wych-elm, flanked by two others in a single mass, growing on the shoulder of a moated prehistoric mound.
(Ted Hughes)*

The elm features in a number of her poems, including 'Pheasant' – the bird settled in it, 'easy'. In 'Elm', however, there is no ease. Indeed, the first draft of this poem opened with the lines 'She is not easy, she is not peaceful'.

Many of the images used here recur in other Plath poems: sea, horse, moon, scorching, clouds, acid, colours. By reusing the same images throughout her work, she has created a series of symbols that echo and link up with each other, gaining an additional force from repeated use.

Themes

Like 'Mirror', 'Elm' has been read and interpreted in innumerable ways. Some themes are:

- The 'stigma of selfhood' (Plath wrote these words at the top of the first draft of this poem) – the awful fear of being oneself
- Despair and frustration
- The paralysis of fear
- The loss of love
- Jealousy
- Dissatisfaction
- The threat of madness
- Exhaustion

Technique

Form

The close observance of writing rules – technique or form – sometimes made Plath's poems seem over-controlled. As her work developed she moved away from such tight control towards a freer style. 'Elm' is a good example of her success in overcoming what she herself called a 'clever, too brittle and glassy tone', a move that enabled her 'to speak straight out, and of real experience, not just in metaphorical conceits'. It is remarkably open and intense, reflecting feelings that come from the deepest self.





Rhythm and rhyme

Written in tercets (three-line stanzas), this poem flows with the poet's feelings. There is no attempt at a rhyming scheme. What difference do you think this makes? The lines are free-flowing and varied in length. Can you suggest why this is?

There is, however, consistent use of internal rhyme: assonance, alliteration, repetition. Even in its wildest moments, this poem sings. Commenting on her later poems, Plath said, 'I speak them to myself ... I say them aloud.' Can you find any evidence of this attention to sound effects in 'Elm'? Listen to it again and pay close attention to the impact of sound effects, sentence length, one-liners and direct speech.

Note

This poem benefits from repeated readings. Trying to make sense of each individual line or stanza will only confuse you. Listening to it and rereading it several times will enable you to tap into the energy and the powerful emotions that infuse it.





POPPIES IN JULY

A reading of the poem

The first part of 'Poppies in July' presents the physical appearance of the poppies: their intense red colour, the wrinkly petals, their light, flickering movement in the wind, their 'Little bloody skirts'. However, the metaphors used go well beyond simple description: the poet is indirectly telling a story rather than merely describing flowers.

First, the poppies are associated with fire – usually a metaphor for vitality or life force in Plath's poetry. Here, the fire is like 'hell flames', normally connected with intense pain. However, the speaker does not know whether they hurt her: 'Do you do no harm?' They do not burn the speaker – or if they do, she doesn't feel the pain. This suggests a state beyond pain, a sense of numbness. She is exhausted; this may be caused by the sheer vividness of the poppies.

They are fully alive, but she is apparently unable to experience life. They seem to plunge her into despair at something that is happening to her in her life. Her pain is underlined by the references to blood: they look like 'the skin of a mouth./A mouth just bloodied' or 'Little bloody skirts'.

The flowers are personified, given human characteristics. The 'I' persona can't be like the poppies, it seems: she can't feel their burning, share their vitality. She is not fired by any life force or vitality. She can't bleed: 'If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!'

Even her state of not feeling pain seems to distress her. It's not that she is not in pain: she just can't feel it, which brings its own anguish.

She turns from the appearance to the hidden properties of the poppies in the second part of the poem – their 'fumes', their 'opiates' (opium is extracted from the seeds of the white poppy), which can cause sleep, oblivion. She longs for the 'Dulling and stilling' state they could induce in her.

The red poppies, a symbol of life, colourful and vivid, could help the speaker to escape into the dull, colourless world of oblivion, away from the exhaustion caused by the intensity of life, by the agony of just being. She longs for non-being.

Tone

There is a strong contrast between the vividness and vitality of the poppies and the dull, lacklustre mood of the speaker. She watches them, sees their 'flames', but 'cannot touch' them; even though she puts her 'hands among the flames', 'Nothing burns'. She feels exhausted simply watching them: her mood seems directly opposite to the mood she attributes to the poppies.

She gives the impression that she can't participate in life – can't bleed, can't sleep, can't 'marry a hurt'. These lines suggest the feeling of desperation that leads her to yearn for oblivion:

Dulling and stilling.

But colorless. Colorless.





Background

'Poppies in July' is one of a series of poems in which the 'I' persona turns in on herself, dealing with some deep-seated grief; she does not disclose the source and nature of this, but the feeling is strongly conveyed. She longs for oblivion but does not explain why. However, on reading the poem we get the sense that life itself is too much for her.

A companion poem to this one, 'Poppies in October', written some months later, is quite different in tone. Here, the blazing red of the poppies – 'brighter than sunrise' –

*is a gift
A love gift
Utterly unasked for.*

This underlines the sense that it is not the poppies that generate the sense of grief and hopelessness, the desire for oblivion: it comes from within the speaker; but it is only temporary.

Comparing three poems

'Pheasant', 'Elm' and 'Poppies in July' were written around the same time (in April and July 1962). In each poem the speaker is engaging in a struggle with some threatening force beyond herself. Each seems to recreate or suggest a scene in the drama of tensions within her life – a scene involving suspicion, hurt, jealousy and anger.

Reread the three of them together and note how the mood of the speaker seems to progress:

- In 'Pheasant' the speaker is quite rational, though fearful for the pheasant. Her plea is logical and ordered and based on very ordinary claims: the beauty of the pheasant, its kingliness, colours, its right to be in this place. However, there is an air of her tension right through the poem and of the note of possible surrender in the final line: 'Let be, let be.'
- In 'Elm' the speaker has lost love; it has galloped away and is irretrievable. The anguish experienced is expressed in a series of harsh, brilliant metaphors conveying deep feelings of rage, terror, anguish and finally exhaustion.
- 'Poppies in July' reflects that same exhaustion: the vividness and movement of the flowers make the speaker feel exhausted. There is a sense of deep pain: 'hell flames', 'mouth just bloodied', 'bloody skirts'. She longs for oblivion, for non-being.





THE ARRIVAL OF THE BEE BOX

The bee poems

Over one week, in October 1962, Sylvia Plath wrote a cycle of five poems, generally called the 'bee poems', set in the world of beekeeping. All five are written in five-line stanzas and they form a unit in that they move logically through the various phases of beekeeping.

These poems grew from her own experience. Her father's speciality was bees: he studied them throughout his life and wrote two highly regarded books on the subject. Given her lifelong obsession with her father, it is not surprising that Plath should have found it an interesting topic. Indeed, one of her earlier poems was entitled 'The Bee-Keeper's Daughter'.

After the birth of her son, Plath decided to keep bees and she turned to the local beekeepers' society for help in setting up her hives. Each of the poems in the cycle deals with a practical element of beekeeping, drawing on the poet's initiation into this skill. But each one is also a metaphor for something in life: it is as if through these poems she found a way of defining her identity, coming to terms with elements of life.

The story of the poem

The story of 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' is straightforward: the narrator has taken delivery of a bee box ordered some time before. She describes its appearance and also the appalling noise that comes from it. She finds this threatening, but also fascinating:

she 'can't keep away from it'. Looking through the little grid, she sees only 'swarmy' darkness. She considers sending them back or possibly even starving them. These considerations don't sound very convincing, however; she quickly goes on to wonder how hungry they are and whether they will attack her when she unlocks the box. There are flowers in the garden that should attract them away from her when they fly out. She concludes by apparently deciding to free them tomorrow: 'The box is only temporary.'

Themes

- Freedom and repression
- Self-expression
- Being oneself
- Control

Metaphor

Metaphor is the use of a word or phrase that describes one thing with the purpose of explaining or giving an understanding of something else. In describing the arrival of the bee box and her reactions, Plath explores a number of themes through a series of rich metaphors.

The bee box

The bee box itself is presented as something solid, ordinary: a 'clean wood box', 'Square as a chair' and very heavy. The language here is direct and wholesome: even the rhyme of 'square' and 'chair' seems to underline its homely quality.





However, this ordinariness quickly changes. The next line brings in a sinister note, or possibly it is merely humorous: this could be the coffin of a midget or a square baby were it not for the noise coming from it.

The box clearly means more to the speaker than a practical way of transporting bees. It immediately suggests death ('coffin') and threat ('dangerous'). Discovering that a familiar object is sinister and threatening is truly frightening: it seems to remove the feeling of safety one has around everyday things. She is fascinated and frightened. It contains, locks in, something she wants to keep in but also wants to release.

The bee box can be seen as a metaphor for containment, imprisonment or repression. This repression could come from concern for outward appearances, from doing the right thing, trying to be what others expect, to behave in an acceptable way, saying the correct words, not being yourself, denying your true self. This is a form of repression, of boxing in something so that others will accept what they think you are. Remembering Plath's concerns about her life and her art, can you see why this seems an apt interpretation?

The bees

The sense of something sinister is heightened in stanza 2. The threat comes from the contents of the box – the bees, their noise, their clamour, their apparent anger.

Plath uses three metaphors to describe the hidden bees, each of them an image of power and oppression:

- They are like tiny shrunken 'African hands', packed 'for export': black, clambering – like slaves in a slave-ship. She has power over them: she could free them, but wonders how.
- They are like a Roman mob, safe individually but 'my god, together!' The exclamation mark (unusual in Plath's poems) suggests many possibilities. Not being an autocrat, 'a Caesar', she feels she can't control them.
- They are just 'maniacs' – thus also locked away, mad, a threat to others unless controlled by someone else.

Some critics see these as metaphors for the narrator's voice. If the box is external appearances, the bees may be seen as the speaker's inner life, feelings, real self or core of identity. This true self, her authentic voice, is locked in by convention. Her repressed words are 'a din', a 'noise that appalls', 'unintelligible syllables', 'furious Latin'. Suppressed by rigid outer form or convention, they are unintelligible, formless and fearsome.

Her dread of releasing these words and ideas is so great that she wonders about getting rid of them, starving them – 'I need feed them nothing' – but the idea is half-hearted. Can you see anything in the structure of this statement that might imply that she doesn't fully mean it?





She fears that she herself may suffer if she releases the bees (or words):

It is the noise that appalls me

I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.

I wonder if they would forget me

They might ignore me immediately

In what way do you think she would be hurt by her own words? By her own poetry? By releasing her imaginative powers?

Tree

The narrator then imagines herself turning into a tree to avoid their anger. The reference to Daphne connects her (the speaker) with other women – she is not alone in her fear. The references to the ‘blond’ flowers of the laburnum and the ‘petticoats of the cherry’ also connect her with women.

How might her silence, her repression of her real self, be echoed in the lives of other women at that time?

Interpreting the poem

This is only one interpretation of this rich metaphorical poem.

There are others: look back at ‘Mirror’ and ‘Elm’. Do you see anything that connects with them? Note the resemblances and the differences. As with many poems, ‘reading in’ one meaning can be simplistic, blocking the way to other possible interpretations and ideas.

Technique

Wordplay and sound effects

There are several examples of Plath’s clever wordplay and witty sound effects in this poem: the short i sound of ‘din in it’ combined with the repeated n seems to mimic the bees’ buzzing; the almost unpronounceable ‘unintelligible syllables’ echoes the meaning of the words.

She also uses internal rhyme (square – chair – square – there) and repetition (grid ... grid – dark ... dark – black ... black). These are effective: sometimes they underline a point or highlight a word; always they make the poem sing.

The five-line stanza used in ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ is similar to that used in all five bee poems. There is, however, one difference in this poem: there is an additional single line at the end of the poem: ‘The box is only temporary.’ It is almost as if it has escaped – has been freed – from the form of the poem.

Note

This is a complex and rich poem, one that will benefit from several readings. As it is part of a cycle of five poems, reading it together with the other four may add to your understanding.





CHILD

A reading of the poem

This simple poem is almost like a lullaby. The mother addresses her child, wanting to fill his eye, 'the one absolutely beautiful thing', with wonders. The tone at first is clear and bright. She longs to fill his vision with colour, ducks, newness and flowers. He is like a flower-stalk 'without wrinkle' or a pool that reflects the beauty of the world. However, the tone changes in the final stanza; the narrator turns away from the child and his world to 'this troublous/Wringing of hands'. She sees another world that is the direct opposite of the light and flower-filled world of the child: 'this dark/Ceiling without a star'.

This could perhaps be a reflection of her fears for the child in a world that is often antagonistic to beauty and dangerous for the helpless. It might also refer to her own feelings of unhappiness and depression. There is a marked contrast between the joyful, limpid quality of the first three stanzas and the dark, unlit, enclosed space of the last line. What effect does this have on the reader? What is your response to the poem?

Plath and children

'Child' is one of a number of poems that Plath wrote about children, in particular her own children and her relationship with them. It is an eloquent love poem, reflecting a strong connection with them and with the world she would like to show to them. However, in most of these poems the poet turns from the tender joy and lightness of her child's world to anxiety; the conclusion

here creates a strong sense of darkness, chilliness. There is a suggestion that she fears threatening forces that may hurt the child.

Style

'Child' is written in the three-line stanza form, one that Plath used often in her later poems. It seems particularly appropriate here. The short stanzas are clear and uncluttered, the rhythm quick and light. Most lines have two or three beats, giving the poem an easy, flowing movement. The themes are simple: love, childhood joys, motherhood and also fear and anxiety about the bleakness that may threaten the child, the 'troublous/Wringing of hands'. The language is concrete: the narrator lists simple objects that bring joy to children: 'colours and ducks', 'The zoo of the new'. Her fear is also worded in concrete terms: 'Wringing of hands', 'dark/Ceiling without a star'. Compare this poem in tone, theme and style with 'Morning Song'.





OVERVIEW OF SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

This is a brief look at the selection of poems by Sylvia Plath that you have studied. It offers one interpretation of her work. It is important that you develop your own response to each poem; where this differs from the suggestions given here, trust your own judgment. Reread the poem and validate your opinion.

Background

Plath wrote incessantly during her short life: poetry, short stories, articles, essays and one semi-autobiographical novel. Her writings were first published in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic; later they appeared in book form.

She considered poems written before 1956 as 'juvenilia'. Her first published book, *The Colossus*, includes only poems written after this date, among them two of the poems you have studied, 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' and 'The Times Are Tidy'. Her remaining poems were published after her death in three collections: *Ariel and Other Poems*, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*.

Her last poems are generally seen as Plath's outstanding achievement. Here, she truly found her voice, expressing herself in a distinctive, unique style. She was aware of this herself. While writing them, she informed her mother:

I am a writer ... I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name ...'
(*Letters Home*, 16 October 1962)

Her husband describes these poems equally glowingly:

Her real self showed itself in her writing ... When a real self finds language and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event.

(*Ted Hughes, foreword to The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1982*)

Reading Plath's poems

There is a widespread tendency to interpret Plath's work as autobiographical, to read her poems as if they tell her life story. While it is quite obvious – and probably inevitable – that a writer's life will influence what she writes, it is important to understand that poetry is art. Writing about this issue, Ted Hughes pointed out that the reader must learn 'to distinguish between a subjective work that was trying to reach an artistic form using a real event as its basis, and a documentary of some event that did happen'.

Some critics read her later poems exclusively in light of her suicide. They argue that she signals her suicide (intentionally or otherwise) in a number of her last poems, through various references to despair, rage, loss, separation or death. That is by no means as obvious as these critics claim. Many of these poems are the work of a woman who is coming into her own, recognising her own needs, using her own voice, finding her true self. Look back, for example, at 'The Arrival of the Bee Box'. This is about facing and releasing the fears that are hidden beneath the surface – not about a woman who is contemplating death.

It is important to read the poems as they stand. Looking for signs of what was to happen afterwards in her life is to predetermine how the poems should be read, not actually attending to the poem itself.





Themes and issues

The writer's identity

In 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' (1956), one theme is the poet's identity as a writer. The speaker, surrounded by wintry bleakness, longs for the miracle that will transform this into something radiant. That miracle is the creative impulse, the imagination that will change an otherwise uneventful period. For the speaker, this miracle was of vital importance.

Motherhood

Plath wrote many poems dealing with all aspects of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood at a time when writers, especially poets, rarely touched on such topics. Her best-known work on the theme, 'Poem for Three Voices', powerfully evokes the variety of emotions experienced by women around pregnancy, miscarriage, motherhood and adoption. Her poems on this theme are remarkable for their lyricism (song-like quality), depth of feeling and tenderness.

What did my fingers do before they held him?

What did my heart do, with its love?

However, being a realist, she also reflected the other side of being a mother: the drudgery, the anxieties and the level to which a mother is bound to her child.

I have never seen a thing so clear ...

It is a terrible thing to be so open: it is as if my heart

Put on a face and walked into the world.

Both attitudes are seen in 'Morning Song'. The mother's life is shadowed by the child's arrival, but is enriched by the joy of love. 'Child' also reflects the simple pleasure she derives from her child; his eye is 'the one absolutely beautiful thing' that she longs to fill with the beauty of the world. But there is also an underlying threat to the child's safety, which distresses her.

Identity

Plath frequently returned to the issue of double identity in her writing. The subject of her undergraduate dissertation in Smith College was 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Dostoevsky Novels'. Her interest in what appears on the surface and what is hidden is reflected in 'Mirror'. Here, the depths hide something frightening and sinister, something the woman would prefer to avoid but cannot escape.

'Elm' also deals with doubleness: the apparent calm of the elm in the opening stanzas and the hidden terrors that surface as she talks.

A similar preoccupation is at the heart of 'The Arrival of the Bee Box'. The practical, square box is a simple container: apparently there are no mysteries here. However, it conceals something sinister, but also fascinating.

Nature

Plath's abiding interest in the world around her, her interest in nature, is reflected in many poems. Her descriptions are remarkable for their concrete, precise detail.





- 'Finisterre' paints a graphic picture of the scene before her eyes, conveying the harshness of the sea, the bleakness of the rocks, the delicacy of the flowers on the cliff and the effect of the mist.
- 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is strong in visual details, accurately portraying a scene on a wet, wintry day.
- Her painterly style creates graphic images in 'Pheasant': the bird itself, the flowers, the hill and elm in the background, the earlier scene where the snow was marked with the 'crosshatch' footprints of various birds.
- Through unusual images, 'Poppies in July' captures the vivid colour and fluid movement of the poppies' petals.
- 'Pheasant' reflects her stance against the destruction of nature, a concern that features in many of her poems.

Psychic landscapes

While Plath's descriptions of landscapes and seascapes are striking, the scene is at times simply the backdrop to the mood of the speaker. 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is strong in visual detail, but the place does not really matter. What comes across as significant is the mood of the speaker, the sense of tentative expectancy. The landscape is almost a backdrop. In 'Finisterre', the place is identified by the title. The landscape is captured in a series of wonderful images. Many of these are personified: cliffs are 'admonitory', rocks hide their grudges, the sea wages war and mists are without hope. The place assumes an atmosphere that is oddly human.

Technique

Style

Plath's style changed considerably during her career, but there are certain features that mark all her work:

- Remarkable use of language
- Unusual and striking imagery
- Humour

Language

Plath's 'crackling verbal energy' is apparent in her poems' biting precision of word and image. Her writing has been variously praised for its tactile quality, power, incisiveness, control, taut originality and luminosity. Joyce Carol Oates observed:

the final memorable poems ['Elm', 'Poppies in July' and 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', among others] ... read as if they've been chiselled with a fine surgical implement out of arctic ice.

In her journals, Plath constantly urges herself to develop a 'diamond-edged', 'gem-bright' style. She certainly achieved this. Part of her technique was to reuse certain words in many poems, which thus took on an almost symbolic meaning: smiles, hooks, element, dissatisfaction, vowels, shriek, horse, sea.

'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is a good example of her earlier control of language and form. In it, the language is clear and precise, creating a series of carefully worked out pictures.





'Pheasant' is a later example of her skilled control of descriptive language. The form here is less dominant and the poet's feelings are reflected in the personal voice that speaks throughout. The words are simple, the descriptions are vivid and the poem is crystal clear. It is a good example of Plath's descriptive powers at their best.

'Elm' shows her powerful response to loss, pain and terror. The feeling of despair, for example, is conveyed through a number of highly charged nouns and verbs.

Imagery

Certain images recur in Plath's poetry, taking on a symbolic meaning that gains added force through repeated use.

- The moon symbolises barrenness, coldness and the negation of life. In 'Elm' it is merciless, cruel and barren, associated with pain and suffering.
- The mirror often symbolises the hidden alter ego (the 'other self'), as in 'Mirror'.
- The horse is a symbol of vitality. In 'Elm', love gallops off like a horse.
- Blood symbolises vitality, life force and creativity, as in 'Poppies in July'. In a later poem, Plath states: 'The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stopping it'.
- The sea is often associated with undefined menace or hidden threat, as is so graphically evident in 'Finisterre'.

She uses many other images, however, that are not symbolic – images that add to the vividness and immediacy of what she is describing. One of the most distinctive features of her work is her use of metaphors, many of which are visual. Examples abound:

- Mists are 'souls', which 'bruise the rocks out of existence' ('Finisterre').
- The pheasant is 'brown as a leaf', a 'little cornucopia' ('Pheasant').
- Poppies are 'little hell flames', 'wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth./A mouth just bloodied', 'Little bloody skirts' ('Poppies in July').
- The bee box is 'square as a chair', 'the coffin of a midget' ('The Arrival of the Bee Box').
- Bees are like 'African hands/Minute and shrunk for export' ('The Arrival of the Bee Box').
- A life of boring regularity is like a 'stuck record' ('The Times Are Tidy').
- The baby's mouth opens 'clean as a cat's' ('Morning Song').
- Her crying is 'a handful of notes', which rise 'like balloons' ('Morning Song').

Plath attached great importance to colours, often identifying them with specific attributes. The repeated use of colour to suggest certain qualities links her poems to one another, giving added force to her meaning.

- Red signifies vitality, life force: the red poppies are animated, vital, unlike the colourless life of the narrator. The pheasant's vitality is envisaged largely through its vivid colouring.





- Green signifies the positive, creativity, life force: the pheasant is red and green.
- Black is associated with death, anger, depression, aggression and destruction: the black headland that opens 'Finisterre' underlines the sinister mood.
- The depressed mood of the speaker in 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is conveyed through the repetition of black and the dominating presence of the rook.
- Surprisingly, white is also sinister: the white faces of the dead, the white mists in 'Finisterre'.

Humour

Plath's humour runs through her work – sharp and ironic at times, at other times mocking and black. She uses ironic humour to challenge self-importance, to mock what she found ridiculous and pompous and often to mock herself.

'The Times Are Tidy' ridicules the politicians and the life of the 1950s. The smug satisfaction of this decade was all-pervasive. Plath ironically contrasts this era with that of dragon-slayers and witches (created by myth-makers). The rich cream – wealth and material possessions – is an ironic substitute for adventure and excitement. The inch-thick cream suggests fat cats 'creaming' it.

In 'Finisterre', the ironic description of the monument shows how remote formal religion is from the concerns of ordinary people. The giant statue of 'Our Lady of the Shipwrecked' ignores the plight of the little people at her feet. The introduction of the shell-toy women makes the reader wonder whether they don't offer more comfort than their gigantic marble sister.

In 'Morning Song' she uses gentle self-irony, creating an amusing picture of the mother in the small details given: she stumbles from her bed, cow-like in her flowery nightdress.

'Mirror' opens with the mirror's unintentionally comic description of itself, giving the poem an ironic twist.

Plath's romanticism

Sylvia Plath was a lyric poet in the Romantic tradition. She wrote poems that drew on her own experience of life and explored a range of emotions, from love and joy to terror and despair. Like the Romantics, she looked inwards rather than outwards; her experience is gauged by what she lived through.

'Elm' is perhaps the most striking example of this. It is one of a number of poems she wrote around the same time, expressing agonising emotions. Some of these emotions were quite 'acceptable', provided they were not shown too openly: the grief and loneliness expressed in 'Elm', for example. However, less acceptable was the intensity with which she voiced them; it was considered over the top, too revealing. She also voiced other, far less 'acceptable' feelings (those not talked about in public) here and in other poems: gleeful destructiveness and hatred ('Daddy') or intense resentment ('The Zoo-Keeper's Wife').

The writer and critic Joyce Carol Oates sees in these poems the seeds of Plath's eventual suicide. Her poems have that heartbreaking quality about them that has made Sylvia Plath our acknowledged Queen of Sorrows, the spokeswoman for our most private, most helpless nightmares; her poetry is as deathly as it is





impeccable; it enchants us almost as powerfully as it must have enchanted her.

Not everyone agrees with this estimate, however. Janice Markey sees Plath's writings as life-affirming:

The enduring success and greatness of Plath's work lies in its universal appeal and in an innovative, effective presentation. Plath was the first writer in modern times to write about women with a new aggressive confidence and clarity, and the first to integrate this confidence and clarity in a sane, honest and compassionate vision.





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

1. What did you like best about Sylvia Plath's poems?
2. Choose one poem that you enjoyed and identify what appealed to you about it.
3. In what way is Plath different from the other poets on your course?
4. Plath's poetry reflects many facets of life. Which of these did you find most interesting?
5. What did you learn about Plath as a person from studying her poetry?
6. Is there anything you particularly like or dislike about her poetry?
7. Are the themes and issues in her poetry relevant to young people today?
8. Plath's unique and distinctive voice has often been praised. Do you find her voice – her way of writing, of expressing her ideas – unique?
9. Is there any particular image or description that remains with you from reading Plath's poetry? If so, identify why it made an impression on you.

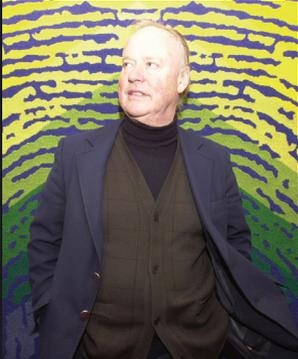




QUESTIONS

1. 'Sylvia Plath created a language for herself that was utterly and startlingly original.' How true is this statement of the poems by Plath that you have studied?
2. Discuss Plath's treatment of nature in her poems. Support your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems you have studied.
3. 'Plath's poetry is a reflection of the era in which she lived.' Discuss this statement, supporting your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems by Plath that you have studied.
4. Write a short essay on the aspects of Sylvia Plath's poems (content or style) that you found most interesting. Support your discussion by reference to or quotation from the poems by Plath that you have studied.
5. 'Sylvia Plath: A Personal Response'. Using this title, write an essay on the poetry of Plath, supporting your points by quotation from or reference to the poems on your course.
6. 'Sylvia Plath's taut language and startling images make her poems unique.' Discuss this statement, supporting your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems by Plath that you have studied.
7. 'Sylvia Plath's poetry reflects a wide range of emotions.' Discuss this statement, concentrating on at least two different emotions that are evident in her poetry.
8. 'Despite the seriousness of her themes, Plath uses humour to devastating effect at times.' Discuss this statement, supporting your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems by Plath that you have studied.
9. 'Recurring themes of loneliness, separation and pain mark the poetry of Sylvia Plath.' Discuss this statement, supporting your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems by Plath that you have studied.
10. 'The use of brilliant and startling imagery gives a surreal quality to the poems of Sylvia Plath.' Discuss this statement, supporting your discussion by quotation from or reference to the poems by Plath that you have studied.





**BRENDAN
KENNELLY**

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2019	OL 2019
HL 2022	OL 2022

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Begin

Bread

'Dear Autumn Girl'

Poem from a Three Year Old

Oliver to His Brother

I See You Dancing, Father

A Cry for Art O'Leary

Things I Might Do

A Great Day

Fragments

The soul's loneliness

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Overview of Brendan Kennelly's poetry

Questions





INTRODUCTION

Brendan Kennelly's poetry challenges us to see, listen and think differently. It enables us to look afresh at the 'inanimate' world around us and hear the voice of 'Bread'. It encourages to really look for the revitalising effects of springtime, even in the mundane context of morning, rush-hour city traffic. His poetry challenges us to listen differently and to recognise the significant questions concerning life, death and the purpose of it all, which emerge from the chatter of a three year old.

Kennelly's poetry also challenges the reader to enter the dark side of humanity. It dares the reader to confront the unthinkable and risk losing his/her bearings in the maze-like mind of Judas the betrayer or admit the humanity in the slaughterer Cromwell. To explore these poems is to look and think differently, to question the established paradigms of self and history.

The selection of poems by Brendan Kennelly for this course asks us to look unflinchingly at the elements and circumstances of love. We are invited to look critically upon the overdone glamour and razzmatazz of 'A Great Day', but to also experience the giddy romance and ever-accompanying risk involved in inviting another person into one's own intimate world, in 'Dear Autumn Girl'. These poems enable us to hear the anguished cries of a woman for her dead lover and husband in 'A Cry for Art O'Leary' but also to experience the shocking moment of realisation of total estrangement in 'Fragments'.

We are walking in step with a poet who has the honesty and courage to acknowledge the loneliness within, in 'The soul's loneliness' and 'Begin'. But Kennelly always manages to look beyond the present moment and find a reason for hope. Sometimes hope is sustained by a wonderful memory, as in 'I See You Dancing, Father'. In 'Begin' it is the loneliness itself that acts as a spur to engage with the world outside of the self to:

*begin to wonder at unknown faces
at crying birds in the sudden rain*

This is the poem through which many readers have found the courage to rethink, to take a different perspective on their lives and somehow find the strength to carry on.

*Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.*

And finally, in 'Saint Brigid's Prayer', we arrive at that marvellous Heaven, reimagined as an everyday pub where family, friends and neighbours meet up for a beer with God, in a happy hour hereafter.

We are fortunate to have access to Brendan Kennelly's own philosophy of poetry, in the many prefaces to his volumes. These function as a personal and privileged guided tour to the complex, original, highly inventive and insightful world of his poetry.





BEGIN

Background

The original version of this poem was first collected in the volume *Good Souls to Survive* (1967). This version is used as the concluding poem in the volume *Begin* (1999) and also published in *The Essential Brendan Kennelly: Selected Poems* (2011).

Introduction

Despite the limitations of human life – that every experience ends, however well it began (lines 5–6); that time is ever moving on (lines 11–12); that loneliness is part of the human condition (lines 1 and 13); and that there is always a temptation just to give up (lines 21–22) – this poem asserts a determination to rise above these limitations. It is a forceful clarion call to poet and reader, in the repeated rhythms of a piece of music or a prayer, encouraging us, urging us to keep going, to begin again. For Kennelly, this beginning again is an ethnic strength, a kind of Irish default position, and it is also an opportunity to create poetry, as he outlines in the ‘Echoing Note’ preface to the volume *Begin* (1999):

There's some force in Irish life and culture which tells me that the most vital and sane approach to reality is to begin again. After the troubles, the scandals, the hatreds, the begrudgeries (a popular disease intent on killing off all intelligent fulfilment of potential), after the darkness of disappointment and depression, there comes the realisation that perhaps all these sadnesses are merely the raw material for a new fresh moment of brightness which may

in turn lead back to darkness, but not just yet. In that poised moment, poetry lives or wishes to live.

The poem ‘Begin’ outlines some approaches and means by which we may reach this ‘new fresh moment of brightness’. To begin again is to reconnect with the world and people, to wonder again, to really look and see the ordinary everyday sights and happenings – queues, swans in the canal, bridges, birds, lovers. This wondering is a re-engagement with the world, a renewal of connections at the human level. But it can also be read as a renewal of the poetic life – the need to wonder, to question, to relook, to relearn and, in this way, discover fresh insights and avoid staleness. (You might connect with Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem ‘God’s Grandeur’ – ‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’.) This concept of ‘connection’ is central to Kennelly’s philosophy of poetry.

Above all, poetry to me is connection, or the hope of connection both with oneself and with the outside world, with the living and the dead.

In short, this is a poem that offers hope in the face of setback, courage to begin again after failure and confidently asserts that the struggle of life is worth it. And it does this while honestly acknowledging the difficulties. It is based on that honest truth. This is its great strength. What a wonderful way to begin a reading of Kennelly’s poetry.

A reading of the poem

‘Begin again to the summoning birds’. The word ‘again’ qualifies the entire poem, signalling the need for repeated beginnings at each





dawn. There's a sense of formality about the word 'summoning' – refusal from the dawn or the sleeper is not acceptable; the day must be faced. There may be a hint of reluctance to wake up here but it is dissipated by the light musical echo (assonance) of 'sight of light' in the second line. This, in turn, is lost in the 'roar' of morning traffic 'all along' Dublin's Pembroke Road. Fully awake now to sight and sound, this is the mundane morning experience of most city dwellers.

'Every beginning is a promise'. 'Promise' is a strong, positive word that gives an assurance, an explicit undertaking. Each beginning is hopeful but the awareness of its fragile, temporary nature is faced honestly – 'dying in dark'. This thought, in turn, is forced away by the persistent drive and uplift of the 'determination and exaltation of springtime' that is 'flowering the way to work'. The morning is transformed, just as the queue of girls waiting for buses is transformed into a 'pageant', a spectacular performance, a brilliant show. This is the magic of beginning, yet it cannot totally hide the loneliness in the image of the swans, even if they enjoy the security of mating for life. Their longevity, in turn, introduces two different facets of time – the continuity ('bridges linking the past and future') and the experience of passing through time ('old friends passing through with us still'). The latter image brings a degree of comfort and reassurance to the usually bleak concept of time.

In these first quatrains we notice the rhythmic updraughts and downdraughts of the poet's thoughts in the conversation he is having with himself. In general, so far, do you think the tone of this conversation is evenly balanced or definitely upbeat?

The opening to the next eight-line section is quite startling, maybe even demoralising, on a first reading – 'Begin to the loneliness that cannot end'. With his usual rigorous honesty and openness, Kennelly is saying that we must acknowledge the loneliness that we all experience because that is what moves us to begin to go out of ourselves and make connections with the world and 'begin to wonder at unknown faces/at crying birds... at branches stark... at seagulls foraging'. Here the list of connections becomes a cascade of freshly observed images that gathers force as it slips downwards over the repeated 'at' 'at' 'at' until it arrives at the final romantic image of 'couples sharing a sunny secret'. This image also captures both the individuality and the togetherness of love – 'alone together while making good'. Or we could read it as describing the island that lovers create for themselves in public. The understated ordinariness of the language used here to describe love, in contrast to the usual hyperbole, creates a wonderful authentic moment. It is as if love resists definition. It is also an example of the power of wonder to produce fresh insight.

The resistance to giving-in is taken to a global scale in the final quatrain where, 'in a world that dreams of ending' there is 'something that will not acknowledge conclusion'. What is this 'something' – hope, faith, courage, doggedness, true grit? Kennelly himself, in an interview with Richard Pine in *Dark Fathers into Light* (1994) describes it in the following way:

It's the most normal thing in the world, this strange life-giving quality of Dublin, co-existing with the crushing narcissism and the assassins among us and the begrudgerly, the knockery, the refusal to let hope live, as if up from the





very streets themselves came the opposite of all that. That quality, that is sacramental to me. And it's also the most 'romantic'. I like the outrageously irrational assertion of hope where there doesn't seem to be much.

However, we conceive of this 'something', whether we think of it as a quality of place or a quality in people, or both, it seems to defy definition. It will not be easily labelled. But we do know that it forcefully 'insists' that we 'forever begin'. Beginning is to go on eternally. It's not possible to be more upbeat than that. The last word brings us back to the first, a perfect circle, symbol of continuity. And so the poem ends, with this assured statement that it's always worth beginning again.





BREAD

Background

An early version of this poem was first collected in the volume *Bread* (Gallery Books, 1971). Its innovative concept of giving a voice to things led to a full volume of poems entitled *The Voices*, (Gallery Books, 1973).

Introduction

The first poem in the volume, 'Connection', sets out the rationale for this concept.

Self knows that self is not enough.

The deepest well becomes exhausted.

Kennelly acknowledges the limitations of the self for a poet and this awareness drives his need for a connectedness with something other. This involves going out from the self and entering into the life of the other, which can be, as in the poem 'Connection', female beauty or desert 'bones that hint of spirits that are free'. So the writer is opened to that connection, understands it and can give voice to it.

We open in a moment, love, and then

Linked with the livingness of growing things

Express the shell and comprehend the sea.

In the collection *Voices* Kennelly gives voice to a shell, the sea, an island, time, snow, silence, tree, lightening, peace, bread, heart, grass, book, poem and word. In the preface to *A Time for Voices*:

Selected Poems 1960–1990 (1990) he wrote at some length about these voice poems:

... a group of poems in the first person – like Old English riddles, whose beckoning, fugitive voices I hadn't yet discovered ... This use of the first person is a great distancer from my point of view; by saying 'I' in such poems I experience a genuine sense of freedom, of liberating myself from myself. I have a terror of that sluggishness that wants to seduce/ambush us all into upright, respectable 'mature', competent corpses giving instruction to our youthful betters. I believe poetry must always be a flight from this deadening authoritative egotism and must find its voices in the byways, laneways, backyards, nooks and crannies of the self.

We see here that Kennelly particularly values the use of the first person voice because it allows him to distance himself and frees him from the socially expected roles of a poet (such as a wise person dispensing advice to the young). He feels strongly that a poet must escape from this officially approved, self-centred role and that poetry must find its voices, not in the mainstream, but in the margins of life experience.

Kennelly describes the process of making connection, for a poet, as 'an entering into':

For me, poetry is an entering into the lives of things and people, dreams and events, images and mindtides. The passion for 'entering into' is, I believe, the peculiar vitality of the imagination.





A reading of the poem

'Entering into' gives a uniqueness of perspective to poet, poem and reader. It is certainly essential for the poet, as Jane O'Leary, who set a number of Kennelly's poems to music, said 'It is ... essential to creativity to lose yourself in the process and let other voices speak'. It also has a unique richness for the reader who is drawn into a totally other world as we listen to the voice of the other, which in this poem is bread. In order to appreciate the 'otherness' of the world of the poem we need only remind ourselves that bread-making used to be an ordinary household chore, performed two or three times a week in most homes, and perhaps still is in some. Some, mainly children and real aficionados, find it a fascinating process to watch but for most it is a repetitive chore. Yet here, this chore has been totally transformed by the voice and the spirit of the bread. All the basic physical processes are still here – the moulding, the running through of fingers, the shaping, the slitting and stabbing and finally the fire. But the perspectives, insights and feelings of the bread take us through to another layer of perception so that we can somehow understand the bread. It is akin to a kind of 'animism', the belief that inanimate objects have a living soul.

It is through this voice that we are made privy to the intimate relationship between the bread and the woman. The physical sensuousness of the actions is conveyed: 'This/Moulding is more delicate/Than a first kiss,'; also in the running of 'her fingers through me'; and the comfort that she receives 'Even as she slits my face/And stabs my chest.' The violence of the creative act (caught by the onomatopoeic sounds of 'slits' and 'stabs')

paradoxically brings comfort in the perfection of the work. He, the bread, understands and is 'glad to go through fire/And come out/ Shaped like her dream.' This willingness to suffer for her shows the ultimate in devotion. Indeed, this poem displays, in many ways, the intimacy of a love poem.

The poem celebrates woman, in a range of guises: in the traditional role of cook and housewife, providing the staple food of life; as artist; in the more radical role of creator; and as lover, as discussed above. We see the artist at work in the delicate, sensuous moulding and in the way she 'shapes me with her skill'. She creates the perfect circular form, 'round and white'. Earlier, we noticed the violence of the creative act as she 'slits' and 'stabs' in a kind of sculpturing. As an artist she is dedicated to perfection – 'Her feeling for perfection is/Absolute'. The one-word line 'Absolute' emphasises that single-minded focus. She has dreamed him into existence; he is 'Shaped like her dream', her artistic vision.

But, through these roles she is also creator. This is first alluded to in the reference to 'This legendary garden' – perhaps the Garden of Paradise, locus of the first creation in Christian belief. The woman is definitely seen in this poem as giver of life and the bread acknowledges this: 'Now I am re-created/By her fingers'; 'I am nothing till...'; and 'I came to life at her finger-ends'. Indeed, through the woman, the bread experiences, in a sort of way, the main stages of human life – being created and dying or perhaps being created and procreating in turn. Either way, the bread experiences the cycle of life.





*In my way
I am all that can happen to men.
I came to life at her finger-ends.
I will go back into her again.*

Overall, this is a poem that celebrates the ordinary, the everyday, the life of bread, that staple of life, as the main theme. But the ordinary has been utterly transformed through the voice of the bread. That perspective changes everything. It allows us to see and comprehend anew, as if for the first time.





'DEAR AUTUMN GIRL'

Background

This poem is taken from *Love Cry*, a sequence of forty-eight sonnets published by Allen Figgis, Dublin, in 1972. Kennelly later re-issued a slightly slimmed-down version (with forty poems, which were given titles instead of numbers) in the collection *Breathing Spaces: Early Poems*, published by Bloodaxe Books in 1992. It is interesting that 'Dear Autumn Girl' was one of the poems omitted from this selection.

Introduction

The best introduction to these poems is Kennelly's own preface to the *Love Cry* selection published in *Breathing Spaces*:

Early in life, a definite number of years spent in a known place may have repercussions for as long as one lives. In the following sequence, I was trying to set down without judgement, blame or praise, what I believed I knew of people, events, rituals, animals, loneliness, violence, sensitivity, unawareness, forms of work and play, rumours, legends, gossip and my first experience of loner/outcast figures in a place I seemed to know well.

It's hard enough to say why we find certain people memorable, and others not. Several decades on, I still remember faces, hands, voices, smells, curses, the sense of gritty men and women with little money. I hope I've remembered them accurately, or as accurately as writing poems about them would permit.

I showed some of these poems to an old man from the place in which most of the poems are set. He read them and said vehemently 'Lies! Lies! Poetry is all bloody lies!' He paused, then added, much more gently, 'But a poet's lies can make a man look twice at himself and the world.'

I intended the love-cry of the title to resonate throughout the sequence.

The love-cry of the title does indeed 'resonate throughout the sequence'. Love, in its many manifestations, is a significant theme in the volume: sexual love; romantic love; the love of place – a distant island; the craftman's love of making, e.g. boatmaker, coffinmaker; and also the destructive consequences ensuing from lack of love – how it brutalises the human being.

A reading of the poem

This sonnet first tries to capture the hectic and chaotic emotional energy of being in love. It recognises the excitement the girl has brought to his world – the world of literature, of poetry – which proves completely inadequate in comparison to real-life love, being mere 'Garrulous masters of true mockery'. His own world narrows in, to focus solely on her and he is forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of words to do justice to her – 'recognise the poverty of praise'.

The language of the first two lines carries the emotion of the experience. The musical rhyming jingle 'helter-skelter' suggests an energy that is out of control. The image could also call up the risky, heart-stopping thrill of the fun-fair helter-skelter. All these attempt to convey the excitement and energy of love.





This is created not only by the music of the words but also in the hyphenated joining of words into a new conceit, such as 'leaf-argosies', an image that alludes to both the Elizabethan trading ships full of exotic riches and also to those wonderful chaotic leaf whirlwinds of autumn days – 'mad leaf-argosies'.

*I try but fail to give you proper praise
For the excitement you've created
In my world:*

What is this world? Perhaps the world of the literature that he teaches – 'a fool, a simple king' could suggest King Lear, the foolish unwise king who loses all? Perhaps the world of his own poetry? Interestingly enough, each of these listed components of his world – an islander at sea; a girl with child; a fool; a simple king – connects with poems in the *Love Cry* volume. To explore the reference to 'an islander at sea' it is informative to read Sonnet 10, entitled 'Special Thunder' in the collection '*Breathing Spaces*'. This poem describes the perilous voyage, in his small boat, made by an islander who risks the winter gale as he leaves the mainland to return to his island home where he 'smiled to hear the sea's defeat' and where 'The island clay felt good beneath his feet'. Sonnet 6, entitled 'Love-child', features a pregnant girl, pulsing with life and in tune with nature. But it is a bittersweet experience for her as she knows the social consequences in mid-twentieth century Ireland and will not be consoled by her cousins' 'hollow word'.

*She knew the agony of the shot bird
The threat to lovers' ecstasy;*

Sonnet 5 is entitled 'Fool'.

*'As great a fool as every walked God's earth'
They said, noting the uncouth gaping face;
Derision was his legacy from birth,
The playboy, clown and jester of the place.*

But his story takes an even more disturbing turn when, in springtime, he went out the country, 'slit the throats of new-born birds' and came home

*Blade in his left, he'd cry exultantly –
'The birds, the singing birds of spring are mine.'*

The violence of this extreme incidence of mental disability is graphic and shocking. But perhaps equally disturbing is the lack of compassion or support and even the cruelty displayed by the community who make him their 'clown and jester'.

Sonnet 8, entitled 'The King', features an eccentric man named King who was totally enraptured by the music of the song birds he kept in homemade cages on his wall.

*If you loved a bird
He stripped the wall, gave you cage and all;
No money; enough you loved to hear it sing;
When a bird died he hit the bottle hard,*

The world of Kennelly's poetry deals with these huge issues: the perilous fragility of life that is risked by the lure of one's native place; the complicated and conflicting emotions of a young pregnant girl who risks social condemnation; the disturbing social reality of how mental disability was viewed and treated by





some, at that time; and the touchingly sad generosity of another eccentric character. So Kennelly is welcoming his 'Autumn Girl' to his real world as depicted in his poetry. This is a serious act of trust.

Whether it is these characters and issues in his own poetry or others in literature, the creations of literature are judged to be inadequate. Loquacious and over-wordy, they are no more than a mockery of real life, masterpieces of mockery when compared to real life and love. So what he previously considered his 'hugest world' becomes of little significance when she walks 'smiling through a room'. Hers is a casual, natural beauty: 'your flung golden hair is still wet'. This is also a classically romantic image of nature paying homage or making reverence to her as a queen, 'Ready for September's homaged rays'. He savours the present moment and he also thinks of the future. But notice that he wonders, not fears.

*I see what is, I wonder what's to come,
I bless what you remember or forget*

The suggestion here may be that she remembers the good things and discards the less happy, that she is easy going, not confrontational. All these qualities make him realise the inadequacy of his words to do her justice.

This sonnet is a personal and honest love poem which acknowledges the giddiness of the experience, expresses gratitude for the excitement she has brought to his complicated and sometimes troubled literary world, recognises her casual, natural beauty and is grateful for her easiness of being. But in the end, it acknowledges the inadequacy of these words of praise.

The sonnet form

This poem maintains the physical structure of the sonnet, with conventional octave and sestet divisions and a patterned rhyming scheme, *ababcdcd* and *efgefg*. But the development of ideas is more fluid, refusing to be confined in the formal structure. This is most noticeable when the last line of the octave runs on into the first line of the sestet. Nevertheless, there is overall coherence to the argument as we have seen in the final summary.





POEM FROM A THREE YEAR OLD

Background note

This poem was first collected in the volume *The Visitor* (Dublin: St. Bueno's Press, 1978).

A reading of the poem

This poem celebrates childhood, in particular it celebrates children's impetus and ability to play, their inquisitiveness and sense of wonder. It is another of Kennelly's voice poems; here it allows the voice of a child (actually his own daughter) to speak through him. On one level, it is simply the voice of an ordinary three year old child insisting that she wants to play on the floor, in the middle of the night! With the limitless inquisitiveness of a child she chooses that time to ask question after question, probably prompted initially by the petals on the floor.

However, a child's innocent questions, at one level naïve, can also prove unconsciously profound. Here, the relentless questioning and deep sense of wonder raise profound issues for the adult listener/reader – about death, ageing, the meaning of life, the continuity of life and death and also the social question about the disposal of the old. We can hear this double layering of significance as we follow the child's questioning throughout the poem. The opening questions 'And will the flowers die?/And will the people die?' are at once naïve and very perceptive for a three year old. She continues her interrogation by speculating about the ageing process. She measures time in days, a concrete unit she can comprehend at her young age.

*And every day do you grow old, do I
grow old, no I'm not, do
flowers grow old?*

In a flash of understanding, like a gulp of air in the midst of this flurry of questions, she answers her own question – 'no I'm not old'. Then her line of thought moves on quickly to consider the disposal of what *is* old, both old people and old flowers. Beneath the naïve question lurks a serious issue for society – how we treat our elderly. The point is raised with innocent but brutal simplicity: 'Do you throw old people out?' Leaving that question hanging she returns to her attempt to comprehend ageing.

And how you know a flower that's old?

Once again she moves to answer her own question:

*The petals fall, the petals fall from flowers,
and do the petals fall from people too,*

Her democratic world view makes no distinction between plants and people – life is life. Thus this avalanche of questions draws to a close, temporarily. And the focus now shifts to the child's immediate needs – she wants to play!

*every day more petals fall until the
floor where I would like to play I
want to play is covered with old
flowers and people all the same
together lying there with petals fallen
on the dirty floor I want to play
the floor you come and sweep
with the huge broom.*





She already visualises the floor littered with old flowers and people 'all the same'. A child's ability and drive to play is at the core of imaginative development – they learn through creating and entering other worlds, pretending to be other people or things, and so they learn to understand the other. Sometimes the priorities of the child vie with those of the adult. Adults, with the best of intentions, tidy up and clear away, based on our assumptions that order is good!

The desire to play proves a temporary hiatus and the questions flow again, with even deeper significance:

*what happens all the dirt you sweep
from flowers and people...
... Is all the
dirt what's left of flowers and
people,*

Behind the child's naïve questions are huge philosophical and theological issues – are we, in essence, no more than the dirt we return to? And, wrapped in simple imagery, the huge questions continue:

*Why you work so hard, why brush
and sweep to make a heap of dirt?*

In other words, what is the purpose of life? The acutely observant child, in her own innocent way, then begins to wonder about the continuity of life in the world.

*... Who will bring new flowers
that will not hang their heads*

like tired old people wanting sleep?

...

*... And if we have new flowers,
will we have new people too to
keep the flowers alive and give
them water?*

The mood becomes more positive here with the drumbeat repetitions of 'new', 'new', 'new' until the sudden dramatic realisation of the end, at the end.

And will the new young flowers die?

And will the new young people die?

And why?

And so the poem ends on the unanswerable question.

The nascent wisdom of the child in this poem has echoes of the Romantic child, in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular. In Wordsworth's mythology the child was seen as a 'Seer blest' (seer: a prophet, visionary or oracle):

*The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
(Ode: Intimations of Immortality; lines 72-75)*

As the critic Christopher Rovee described the phenomenon: 'The figure of the child – a staple of Romanticism – represented





qualities under threat in an increasingly commercial and urban society, such as autonomy, intimacy with nature, and an unmitigated capacity for wonder and joy.' (Kennelly's poetry also has a strong vein of social protest against contemporary values running throughout. See the section on 'The poet as social commentator' on page 473 of these critical notes.)

In the context of this poem, the child certainly has 'an unmitigated capacity for wonder'. 'Wonder' is an activity and ability that is central to Kennelly's concept of poetry. In his commentary on this poem (available on your ebook) he talks about 'the first moment of wonder' as 'an amazing moment ... the moment on which poetry depends ... It is the strange thing in us that is undestroyed by familiarity and by experience ... as if for the first time something is happening ... and that's what poetry is about – a kind of permanent beginning.' Wonder is not just for children, as he says elsewhere: 'The thing is to keep our sense of wonder which we had as children before it was educated out of us' (Recorded by Åke Persson at the Kerry International Summer School, Tralee, 1995). Wonder finds its expression in questioning. The importance of questioning to poetry was highlighted by Kennelly in his essay 'Poetry and Violence', when he said: 'poetry is, among other things, an interrogative art, and art of relentless questioning.' It is an art practised by this child poet.





OLIVER TO HIS BROTHER

Cromwell: a historical note

Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was educated at Cambridge, represented his family in parliament, and in matters of faith he was a Puritan. Puritanism was a strict religious faith that used the Bible as a guide for daily life. Living a good life meant hard work, little pointless entertainment, Sunday as a Holy Day with no unnecessary work or sport, a day of fasting every month and the wearing of unadorned, black clothes.

At that time in England, parliament, striving for power in the government of the country, was in constant dispute with the King, Charles I. In 1642 this conflict finally erupted into civil war between the army of the King and the forces of parliament, known as the Round-heads. After their first defeat by the Royalist (Cavalier) cavalry at the battle of Edge Hill in 1642, Cromwell, who had taken a leadership role in parliament, reformed and trained a Parliamentary army – the New Model Army. This army proved successful against the Royalists and comprehensively defeated them at the battle of Naseby in 1645. From 1646 England was ruled solely by parliament. The King was executed in 1649.

English society was divided by many different factions at this time – Puritans, Episcopalians (the Anglican Protestant Church which had a hierarchical structure, being governed by bishops), Cavaliers, Levellers and other radical groups, all arguing about how the country should be governed.

The Levellers were a political movement that wanted serious reforms of parliament in order to make it truly representative of the country. They wanted all men to have the right to vote (at that time only people of property could vote), more frequent elections, equality before the law, and religious tolerance for all. The Levellers gained support, particularly among the rank and file in the Model Army, whose wages had not been paid. In order to defuse this situation Cromwell secured £10,000 from parliament to go towards paying the arrears. However, a few hundred soldiers, under Captain William Thompson, sympathetic to the Levellers, left their camp in Banbury and went to discuss their political demands with other regiments at Salisbury. Cromwell, fearing the spread of this dissention, sent troops to confront them. Captain Thompson was killed in a skirmish. Other leaders were rounded up and imprisoned in Burford Church, Oxfordshire. Three of them were later shot on 17 May 1649: Cornet James Thompson (brother of Captain William Thompson), Corporal Perkins and John Church (See commemoration plaque). This ended the Levellers' influence in the New Model Army.

Cromwell in Ireland (August 1649–May 1650)

Having crushed dissent in England, Cromwell now turned to putting down rebellion in Ireland and Scotland.

Subsequent to the rebellion of 1641, about two thirds of Ireland had self-government under the Confederation of Kilkenny, which had, in all but name, a parliament (the General Assembly) made up of the Old English Catholic nobility, Catholic clergy, native Irish and military leaders. In 1648 the Confederation formally allied itself with the Royalists. Cromwell's main aim was to suppress





this threat to English rule in Ireland and, it is also said, to take revenge for the Protestants slaughtered during the 1641 rebellion in Ulster. He set about this with grim determination. As author and literature professor Johnathan Allison says: 'His sackings of Drogheda on 11 September 1649 and of Wexford in the following month are remembered with particular horror, and are most immediately associated with what is known in Ireland as "the curse of Cromwell."' ('Cromwell: Hosting the Ghost' in *Dark Fathers into Light*, Richard Pine ed., Bloodaxe Books, 1994). Casualty figures for the siege of Drogheda are estimated at 3,552 dead, which includes the Royalist garrison held by Sir Arthur Aston who was an English Catholic, and also many Irish civilian inhabitants. Cromwell is said to have lost sixty-four men. There is much historical debate about the killing of the garrison soldiers. Some historians point out that it was an accepted convention of war at the time that no quarter would be given to anyone bearing arms if a summons to surrender had been rejected, which was the case in Drogheda. Others emphasise the fact that the killing was not confined to the garrison but was indiscriminate and included unarmed priests and civilians.

After Drogheda the New Model Army moved south to secure the ports of Wexford, Waterford and Duncannon. The sacking of Wexford has also produced historical debate. Apparently, Cromwell's army gained access while he himself was discussing surrender terms. An estimated 2,000 garrison soldiers were killed, together with 1,500 townspeople. Whether or not this was ordered by Cromwell is disputed but it is also pointed out that he did nothing to stop it and there is no evidence that any of his soldiers were disciplined.

In 1650 Waterford and Duncannon surrendered after determined resistance, as did Clonmel, where Cromwell's losses are estimated at 2,000 men. The policy of slaughtering garrisons appears to have been abandoned. Cromwell departed Ireland in May 1650, leaving his commanders to pursue the war in the sieges of Limerick, Galway and other fortifications.

At the conclusion of this war in 1652/53, the Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland involved harsh measures. Among these were that:

- Anyone found to have been involved in the rebellion of 1641 was executed.
- Those who participated in the Confederation had their lands confiscated and were transported as indentured labourers (slaves) to the English colonies in North America and the Caribbean. Some have put the numbers as high as 50,000.
- Catholic landowners who had not taken part in the wars still had their lands confiscated but they could claim land in Connaught as compensation.

In general, the idea was that the remaining Irish could be more securely managed if confined between the borders of the Atlantic and the River Shannon, giving rise to the watchword 'To Hell or Connaught'. The overall result of the settlement was the decimation of Catholic landowners and their replacement by English colonists, many of whom were soldiers from Cromwell's army who were granted land in lieu of wages or were adventurers who had loaned money to the English parliament.

In December 1653 Cromwell was appointed 'Lord Protector' by parliament, in effect, head of the Commonwealth. He died in





September 1658 and was at first buried in Westminster Abbey but his body was disinterred after the restoration of the monarchy and its whereabouts are now unknown.

Introduction

For most Irish people Oliver Cromwell is remembered as the Butcher of Drogheda, where his army massacred over 3,500 garrison and civilians, and as the man responsible for uprooting hundreds of thousands of Irish from their land and either selling them into slavery or forcing them across the Shannon into Connaught, giving rise to the watchword 'To Hell or Connaught'. He is popularly remembered as the *bête noire* of Irish history. Yet there is more to the 'black beast' than this single view and it is this complexity of the man that Kennelly wished to portray in the volume *Cromwell*, first published by Beaver Row press in 1983 and reprinted by Bloodaxe Books in 1987. He wished to understand the man behind the myths, clichés and labels, as he said:

There are few states as secure as living in the clichés and labels of religion and history. Ireland is, above all, the Land of Labels, a green kingdom of clichés. To write poetry in Ireland is to declare war on labels and clichés ... But I try to fight them, to fight their muggy, cloying, complacent, sticky, distorting, stultifying, murderous and utterly reassuring embrace. And I've tried to do this from the beginning. I sensed there was freedom in the forbidden figures, a liberating expansiveness waiting to be discovered for the imagination in the company of the fiends.
(From the Introduction to *Breathing Spaces*, 1992; p. 11)

Kennelly used historical sources such as biographies, letters and other documents to research Cromwell. But, for all the emphasis on history, we must remember that this is poetry or at least some amalgamation of the two. As Kennelly said in the introduction to *A Small Light*: 'it has always seemed proper to me to blend legend and history so that poetry is, literally, fabulous fact' (*Breathing Spaces*, 1992; p. 128)

Structure of the volume

The epic poem 'Cromwell' is a collection of 254 individual poems that are the dreams, nightmares and reveries of the central narrator, M.P.G.M Buffún Esq.. Kennelly explains in his 'Note' introducing the volume:

This poem tries to present the nature and implications of various forms of dream and nightmare, including the nightmare of Irish history. Just as Irish history is inextricably commingled with English history, so is this poem's little hero, M.P.G.M Buffún Esq., helplessly entangled with Oliver Cromwell as the latter appears and disappears in history, biography, speeches, letters, legend, folklore, fantasy etc. The method of the poem is imaginistic not chronological. This seemed to be the most effective way to represent a "relationship" that has produced a singularly tragic mess.

Many characters inhabit Buffún's dreams including historical figures such as the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser and King William of Orange but also bizarre characters such as the Hand, the Belly and the Giant. It is a collection of nightmares, primarily historical with the main focus on Cromwell who is invited into his dreams by Buffún.





It has been suggested that Buffún is a kind of mask or alter ego for the poet. Kennelly has found the use of such a persona, or aspect of personality as perceived by others, to be very useful in writing poetry.

The use of a persona in poetry is not a refusal to confront and explore the self but a method of extending it, procuring for it a more imaginative and enriching breathing space by driving out the demons of embarrassment and inhibition and some, at least, of the more crippling forms of shyness and sensitivity.... It is one of the fertile paradoxes of poetry that one can be more candid by engaging less in frontalism and by listening more keenly to the voices of the personae in the wings.

(Breathing Spaces, 1992; p. 102)

The portrayal of Oliver in ‘Oliver to His Brother’

We first notice that he is referred to as ‘Oliver’, not ‘Cromwell’ or ‘General Cromwell’. It is a personal, intimate naming that signals the aspect we meet at the beginning of the poem – Cromwell the family man. (This is one of three such letter-poems in the volume; the others are to his son and daughter.) Cromwell’s form of address to his brother is intimate and caring: ‘Loving brother, I am glad to hear of your welfare’ and ‘I send my affection to all your family’. Yet, underneath this civility, even at this early stage in the poem, there’s a hint of the strict Puritan faith that was one of Cromwell’s defining characteristics. Is there a kind of censure in that his children ‘have so much leisure/They can travel far to eat cherries’? The Puritans were strongly against unnecessary leisure.

However, it seems that sentimentality wins out here and using heart over reason he will bend the rigid rules for his daughter. ‘This is most excusable in my daughter/Who loves that fruit and whom I bless.’ Cromwell rationalises the indulgence as exercise. ‘Cherries and exercise go well together’. As for his son, he wishes him advised – presumably educated in right thinking and living according to the Puritan faith. Yet he understands weakness or slippage in children – he suspects his son may not take advice, but chooses to believe the best of him. ‘I choose to believe he believes what you say’. Is this another sign of sentimentality and affection overcoming reason?

Private affairs dealt with, the public man emerges with Puritan gravitas. ‘Let sons and daughters be serious; the age requires it.’ Right at the end of the first half, or first sonnet, the self-righteousness of the man emerges. ‘I have things to do, all in my own way’. This is not unconnected with the moral certainty and sense of mission in his Puritan faith, which was to rid the country of all heretics. Love of God and country (which is referenced in this poem as the ‘Christblessed fields of England’) had as a corollary hatred of England’s enemies such as Spain, Catholics, Levellers etc. These enemies are explicitly listed in another poem in the volume, ‘Oliver Speaks to his Countrymen’:

*At home, there is danger from Priests and Jesuits,
Papists and Cavaliers.*

*Dark, spectral Jesuits, the Spaniard
Levellers and discontented persons
Make one black anti-Christian mass
To overwhelm us all.*





In this current poem, 'Oliver to his Brother', the focus of his justice is on the Levellers, three of whom were executed in Burford Churchyard.

Throughout the volume 'Cromwell', military violence is sometimes portrayed as a necessary education, as civilising, even purifying and redeeming. We hear of the clinical benefits of violence in the poem 'Severest Friend', addressed to Buffún.

*'The last intention in my heart was to harm you' Oliver said,
I came here knowing I had surgery to do
That you and yours be more alive than dead,
Saved from your self-wasting ways.'*

At other times violence is portrayed as a sick indulgence on the part of Cromwell. In 'Oliver to His Brother' it is spiritually redeeming as Cornet Thompson 'asked for prayers, got them, died well'. The minimalist description and the staccato delivery shows total lack of empathy or indeed, any feeling (in contrast to the passages of reference to his family). Of course Cromwell may have seen this as just plain speaking. Plain style of dress and speech was a fundamental tenet of Puritanism. For the third man, execution brings out strength of character, in Cromwell's perception:

*A third chose to look death in the face,
Stood straight, showed no fear, chilled into his pride.*

With these executions Cromwell proves as ruthless to his own soldiers as to a foreign enemy. Nowhere are the two worlds of family man and soldier, private and public man, more starkly contrasted than in the lines:

*Men die their different ways
And girls eat cherries
In the Christblessed fields of England.*

This personality division is quite scary, possibly even pathological. But what is most scary is his total lack of emotion or any kind of human empathy at this stage of the poem.

*Some weep. Some have cause. Let weep who will.
Whole floods of brine are at their beck and call.*

The progress of the poem is disturbing, from that innocent, bucolic picture of the early lines to this cold, merciless, resolute ending of the final line, 'I have work to do in Ireland'.

An Irish reader may read this word 'work' as an euphemism for slaughter but Cromwell, as a good Puritan, would have felt that he was doing God's work in ridding the world of heretics and the work of Government in suppressing rebels.

We have already encountered Kennelly poems that give a voice to people and things. In this poem he gives a voice to the Butcher of Drogheda. The volume as a whole has many varied and conflicting voices. Indeed, we hear two very different voices of Cromwell himself in 'Oliver to his Brother'. This illustrates an important facet of Kennelly's poetry – the dramatic aspect of it, in the dialogues and the conflict. In the words of Jonathan Allison, 'Kennelly sees the poet as dialogic, not monologic. He believes in poetry as drama, as a Yeatsian quarrel with the self, and as an exploration and presentation of alternative points of view; above all he has a notion of poetry as non-judgemental, open to the voices of difference and of the other.' (From 'Cromwell: Hosting the Ghost')





in *Dark Fathers into Light*, Richard Pine ed., Bloodaxe Books 1994). Here too we see poetry as a type of history; the mixture of history and legend producing ‘fabulous fact’ as he names it. The poem ‘Cromwell’ makes an important contribution to the re-thinking and re-imagining of Irish identity in Irish history. John McDonagh, in his book, *Brendan Kennelly: A Host of Ghosts* makes the point that the post-colonial model of Irish history favoured by the Free State Government told the story of ‘the honourable struggle of the Irish people against the essentially cruel nature of British rule ... a polarised version of history that sought out figures like Oliver Cromwell and demonised them.’ In this history Cromwell ‘becomes symbolic... of the violence and moral depravity of the British colonial machine.’ Kennelly, by re-drawing a more complex Cromwell disturbs this simple view of Irish history and Irish identity. And so, the poem reminds us that history itself is fluid and unstable.

Poetic form

Most of the poems in *Cromwell* have a loose sonnet form in that they consist of fourteen lines but the rhyming schemes and metre tend to be irregular. Some critics view this as a lack of technical skill, others see it as deliberate experimentation, that he is disrupting the conventional iambic pentameter just as he is disrupting our view of history in the poem. ‘Oliver to His Brother’ is actually structured as two sonnets, each revealing a different aspect of Cromwell: family man and Puritan soldier. There is a cleverly wrought transition at the end of the first sonnet where the real world begins to intrude into untrammelled young lives:

Let sons and daughters be serious; the age requires it.

You will have noticed also that the language used by Cromwell in this poem is very plain, for the most part lacking in ornamentation or imagery. It is written in quite formal English. The Puritans favoured unadorned speech as the closest to pure reason.





I SEE YOU DANCING, FATHER

Background

This poem was first collected in *Selected Poems* (edited by Kevin Byrne, Dublin: Kerrymount Publications, 1985).

Introduction

Philip Kearney, in his introduction to the collection of short memoirs by Irish sons entitled *Fathers and Sons* (compiled by Tom Hyde, Wolfhound Press 1995) writes 'It takes a particular courage to speak tenderly (and publicly) of one's father.' In reference to that collection he says: 'A number of patterns may be observed throughout the text. There is a recurrent theme of regret for opportunities missed, for questions unasked, for fathers remaining unknown behind unassailable emotional fortifications.' As in life, so in literature too we find examples of this father and son relationship such as Gar and S.B. O'Donnell in Brian Friel's drama *Philadelphia, here I come!* who are unable to say anything even remotely personal to each other. But there are also examples in literature of more positive father-son relationships. Seamus Heaney commemorates his father in the image of a man digging in the vegetable garden and forges a poetic and personal link between the work of both.

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

*Between my finger and thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

Brendan Kennelly chooses to remember his father as a man dancing. This too is no fanciful poetic memory but a real activity that defined his father, as another Kerry author, John B. Keane, remembered:

It was at an election meeting in Ballylongford and Brendan's father climbed onto a platform with my uncle Mick Purtill, who was his friend, and other members of the Fine Gael party.

First he turned around and tapping the floor with his small feet he said to my uncle Mick, 'A lovely platform for a dance, Mick' and he gave us a little dance before the actual meeting started.

(From 'The Bard of Ballylongford' in This Fellow with the Fabulous Smile: a tribute to Brendan Kennelly, Åke Persson ed. Bloodaxe Books 1996)

A reading of the poem

No grumpy morning riser here but a man who begins the day dancing! He is musically gifted and energised by the rhythm of dance.

*And as you danced
You whistled.*

He is self-sufficient, happy in himself, a contented man.

*You made your own music
Always in tune with yourself.*





This praise is quickly followed by ‘Well, nearly always, anyway.’ This is the Irishman’s way of diffusing the embarrassment caused by positive personal remarks – by half-retracting the compliment given and introducing a note of humour.

Kennelly moves on from this little shaft of humour to make a deliberate and conscious memory choice. While acknowledging his father’s sad and undignified old age (‘Mind and body broken’) he reaches farther back to ‘the moment before the dance begins’:

Your lips are enjoying themselves

Whistling an air.

...

I see you dancing, father.

And that memory he holds like a photograph, as a true likeness of the man. The poet is conscious of his own mortality also (‘In the time I have to spare’); aware too of the uncertainties of the future (‘Whatever happens’) but also of what ‘cannot happen’. Perhaps there is a hint of regret here that he never got to share this image with his father or let him know how he felt about him?

This poem is structured as a simple personal narrative, written in colloquial language.

No sooner downstairs after the night’s rest

And in the door

Than you started to dance a step

It is language as spoken rather than formally composed. And it is the ordinariness of the language combined with the unguarded surprise of the image that carries the honest emotion here. The

other stark image of his father as an old man ‘Mind and body broken’ haunts the poem like a ghost but it’s the image of the man full of energy, finding and expressing himself in dance, that is foregrounded.





A CRY FOR ART O'LEARY

Historical context

The original lament, 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire', was composed by Art's widow Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, immediately following his death on 4 May, 1773. It was created, and survived for many years in the oral tradition of Irish poetry.

Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (c. 1743–c. 1800) was of the O'Connell clan – old Gaelic Catholic gentry that managed to survive the Cromwellian Settlement and the Penal Laws; achieving considerable wealth through trade. It was her father, Domhnall Mór, who built Derrynane House, near Cahirdaniel, Co. Kerry. This was very much a Gaelic household, steeped in Irish language and culture. They supported Gaelic poets; indeed both Eileen and her mother were themselves poets. Eileen was an aunt to Daniel O'Connell.

Art Ó Laoghaire (Arthur O'Leary) also came from a family of Gaelic Catholic gentry at Rathleigh, Macroom, Co. Cork. He had recently returned to Ireland from Europe, where he had served as a Captain of Hussars in the Austrian army. At that time, Catholics who could afford it were able to get round the Penal Laws by travelling to Europe for education and employment, usually in the armies. This had been made possible by the Treaty of Dingle 1529, between James Fitzgerald, eleventh Earl of Desmond and the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V & I. This gave rights of citizenship and other privileges to Irish exiles in Hapsburg-ruled Spain, Austria and the Netherlands.

Art and Eileen were married, against her family's wishes. They lived in his home at Rathleigh and had five children, three of whom died in infancy.

Art, on his return to Ireland from Europe, seems to have aroused the anger of the local Protestant Ascendancy people in power, perhaps by wearing his silver-hilted sword, a reminder of his last allegiance to the Catholic Hapsburg Emperor. There seems to have been 'bad blood' between himself and the sheriff of Cork, Abraham Morris. But it is reputed that the immediate cause of the conflict that led to his death had to do with the fact that O'Leary's horse beat Morris's horse at Macroom races. The Penal Laws allowed a Protestant to purchase a horse from a Catholic for five pounds, even if its value was greater. Morris offered; O'Leary refused to sell and then had to flee as an outlaw with a bounty of twenty guineas on his head as a reward for anyone who shot him. His location was betrayed by a local man; Morris followed with a posse of soldiers and Art O'Leary was shot dead at Carriganima.

Literary context

Oral literature was an important component of the culture of societies, in particular, pre-literate societies. It was a vital element of community, fostering a sense of history, identity, values and creativity. 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire' is regarded as one of the finest examples of Gaelic oral literature. 'Caoineadh' in Irish means weeping or crying and refers to the 'keening' or lamenting that was associated in earlier times with an Irish wake (literally means to stay awake, or keep watch or guard the body in the days before burial). This lament was probably an extempore creation or improvisation.





But there were rhythmic, poetic and social conventions to the structure of the lament. There were stock poetic elements that provided a framework for the composition and helped the performer, such as: listing the genealogy of the deceased; praise for the deceased; and emphasis on the bereft state of those left behind. Some suggest that there may have been sections of chorus, recited by all. Patterns of rhythm and the repetition of phrases and words gave power and force to the recitation and were an aide to memory. Some scholars have argued that 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire would originally have been sung.

This lament is regarded as one of the finest examples of Gaelic oral literature. It represents the Gaelic life of Ireland, the hidden Ireland of the time. It is not merely a historical artefact but also a great poem. Seán Ó Tuama described it as one of the greatest affirmations in literature of a woman's love for a man. And it is the poem that immortalised Art O'Leary. There have been numerous translations: by Eleanor Hull, Frank O'Connor, Eilís Dillon, Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Paul Muldoon, Vona Groarke, Brendan Kennelly. It has been dramatised by Tom McIntyre (1999) and a post-modern film adaptation was directed by Bob Quinn in 1975.

A reading of the poem

'A Cry for Art O'Leary' was first published in Kennelly's *Selected Poems* (ed. Kevin Byrne, Kerry Mount Publications, Dublin 1985). This poem features the cries and grieving thoughts of a woman on the sudden death of her lover and husband. Her emotions range widely from recollections of romantic love, to disbelief and fantasies that he is still alive, to bitter hatred of his killer,

through regret that she herself wasn't there to die in his place, to proclaiming his worth as a hero, to seeking vengeance for him, until finally finding some composure in the woman's poetry she makes for him. If we follow the path of the changing faces of her grief, it may open up the poem for us.

The opening mood is one of romantic love and it catches the spontaneous, intense, all-absorbing incapacitating feeling of love at first sight. It is the kind of lovespace where nothing else matters, not even friends or family, who advise against it.

*I left my friends for you
Threw away my home for you
What else could I do?*

The rhythm of the end rhymes helps to create what Declan Kiberd, speaking of the original Irish version, called a 'throbbing intensity', here communicating the intensity of each one's feelings for the other. There is the pulse of 'you', 'you', 'you' as she caught sight of him, in the opening stanza that echoes with the 'for me, for me' repeated in the second stanza, as she recounts how well he has provided for her. This repeated rhythm was one of the poetic features of the original lament, indeed of all keening. The entire world has changed for her.

*You made the whole world
Pleasing to me
White rider of love!*

In a nostalgic moment she describes how she was attracted by the elegance of his attire the famous 'silver-hilted sword' but also the hat with its 'band of gold' and the shirt pin 'of glinting silver'.





Perhaps it was the flaunting of affluence that made him enemies among the Protestant Ascendancy class. However, her thoughts turn quickly to bitterness against the English.

*They're the ones who killed you
Darling of my heart*

The next section (lines 35–62) captures her frenzied reaction and the sudden energy she got from shock at the sight of his horse arriving home, stained with blood. This energy is carried, once again, in the repetition of phrases 'I leaped', 'I clapped', 'I followed', until she finds him 'lying/Dead near a furze bush', with 'Only a crooked wasted hag/Throwing her cloak across you'. The reality of his death as the complete opposite to his life, bears in on her in the image – no more the expert rider, the elegantly dressed man, the lover. Both mad grief and love are caught in the dramatic image as she kneels to share his life's blood, to 'kiss your face/And drink your free blood'.

Then her mind flits back to an eerily prescient omen, as she recalls what he said when he was leaving the house:

*Do your best for us
I must be going now
I'll not be home again*

The next section (lines 75–95) slips into a reverie, a kind of day-dreaming where she fantasises that he is still alive. Denial is a common stage of grieving. It is heart-wrenching to hear the bereaved still inhabit a world where the tragedy has not yet happened.

*Up on your horse now
Ride out to Macroom
...
Put on your clothes
Your black beaver*

This turns into a paean, a song of praise or triumph as she says

*Every bush will salute you
Every stream will speak to you
Men and women acknowledge you
They know a great man
When they set eyes on him*

Only the listener hears the emptiness of the words. This mood of reverie is punctured by the reality of Morris and the mood changes to one of bitterness and anger that he has destroyed her family, taken the father of her children and even the unborn child in her womb.

*Two children play in the house
A third lives in me
He won't come alive from me*

The next short section (lines 103–111) is filled with regret that she couldn't have died in his place. In the original Irish version, these were spoken by Art's sister. Then Eileen seems to dip in and out of reverie (lines 112–120). As she sees him 'Stuck in a coffin' she compares him to some heroic figure out of Celtic mythology:





True man with true heart

...

You fished the clean streams

Drank nightlong in halls

Among frank-breasted women

But then reality intrudes in the 'I miss you' and once again she is at the centre of widespread sorrow for him, a tornado of weeping (lines 121–128):

My man!

I am crying for you

In far Derrynane

In yellow-appled Carren

Where many a horseman

And vigilant woman

Would be quick to join

In crying for you

...

O crying women

Long live your crying

Till Art O'Leary

Goes back to school

On a fateful day

Not for books and music

But for stones and clay

'Back to school' is a reference to the controversy surrounding O'Leary's burial. The family wished to bury him in the monastery of Kilcrea, Co. Cork, which was the family burial ground. Because of some legal issues, possibly to do with Penal Laws, he was

temporarily buried in the churchyard at Killnamartyr until his remains were later interred in the monastery of Kilcrea. Monasteries were well known for their schools, hence the reference here. The contrast between life, learning and culture and this inelegant reality of death is sharply realised in lines 137–137, 'Not for books and music/But for stones and clay'.

The condition of the bereaved, another common feature of the lament, is seen in the next section (lines 138–148). Grief has severed Eileen from any satisfaction in the good harvest or the farm work. The physical weight of this grief is caught in the image 'My heart is a lump of grief' but the most striking representation of her state is shown in the metaphor of the trunk, where she is locked down inside herself.

I am a locked trunk

The key is lost

I must wait till rust

Devours the screw

The following section (lines 149–175) sets out Art O'Leary's genealogy combined with praise both for his skills as a rider and huntsman and also the beauty of the O'Leary lands, rich with nature's bounty. The recitation of the social statues of the deceased in the form of his genealogy and also praise of the deceased were common elements of the Irish lament. The voice of the bereaved woman breaks down in heartfelt, personal cries,

My heart! My grief!

My man! My darling!





Then we have reference to another prescient vision, this time really a nightmare. The unnaturalness of his death is communicated in the grotesque images she sees around their house – the strangled hounds, the choked birds, the withered trees. It is as if his death is against nature. And we have the recurring image of ‘blood running crazily/Over earth and stone’.

However, the following section (lines 189–206) reveals the strength of this woman. It shows her determination not to spend money on mourning clothes but rather on the law and if that fails she will appeal to the King. Should that fail she herself will seek vengeance. We are back to Morris for a third time as she appeals to the men of Ireland:

*Is there a man in Ireland
To put a bullet through your head*

In the final section (lines 207–216) she has achieved some degree of dignified composure as she thanks the ‘white women of the mill’ for the poetry they made for Art O’Leary. She finds understanding of her grief in their poetry, in the particularly female, elemental rhythms of it, rhythms that are as old as time but the best of all time.

*Deep women-rhythms of blood
The fiercest and the sweetest
Since time began*

It is in this tradition of female poetry that she herself mourns,

*Singing of this cry I womanmake
For my man*

This ending draws together and names what was obvious throughout the poem – that this is the lamentation of a woman. But it has been given further significance by its location in the context of a school or tradition of women’s poetry. There is an authority and a universality about the voice. It is the voice of woman.

Themes

Loss and love

The voice of Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonail is the voice of all women who have lost husbands and lovers to wars, vendettas and murders of all kind; the voice of all women outraged by the loss and seeking justice; the voice of women who find the strength and determination to carry on after tragedy, to farm the land, rear the surviving children.

Yes, it is an iconic lament but it is also a love poem. The intensity of her grief is mirrored in the intensity of her love. We can gauge the depth and completeness of the relationship from the range of epithets she uses to address him. The most often used one is the simplest but it is one that is all-encompassing and voices their completeness together – ‘my man’. Other epithets range from the intimate and personal ‘my love’, ‘my lover’, ‘my darling’, ‘my love’s creature’, ‘darling of my heart’; to the romantic and sensual – ‘white rider of love’, ‘horseman of the summoning eyes’. To add yet another layer to the relationship she also addresses him as ‘my laughing man’ and ‘my best friend’. They were also comrades enjoying a friendship.





The poem begins and ends with love. In the beginning there is that romantic love of the opening two stanzas, dedicated to each other. This is followed by the sensuousness of their early days together:

*In the best of beds I stretched
Till milking-time hummed for me*

Later we hear the paean comparing him to a heroic figure from the past; and the length to which she will go to avenge him. The poem ends in the

*cry I womanmake
For my man*

It is a cry of lament but also of love. We can even argue that love has triumphed over death, in this poem, for well over two centuries, and counting.

Drama

The poem has many dramatic qualities that hold the listener or reader, such as: the conflict that ended in a fatal shooting; the almost unequalled sharpness of the grief; the openness with which she shared her intimate feelings and allowed the listener in; the intensity of the narrative voice; the swift cutting between scenes; the sudden changes of mood; the photographic clarity of the imagery that allows the reader/listener to be there, in the moment; and others.

Historical/political conflict

We could argue that the poem is Ireland in microcosm, where the historical/political conflict between native Irish and English

planter, between Catholic and Protestant, is played out. Here too we have: the 'them and us' mentality; the cult of the informer; the volatile social climate, where relatively minor disagreements can escalate into slaughter; the mourning wives; the fatherless children; and the lack of clarity about what and why exactly it actually happened.





THINGS I MIGHT DO

A reading of the poem

'Things I Might Do' comes from Section IX of *The Book of Judas*, entitled 'I know I've arrived, can you tell me why I'm here?' Section IX portrays Judas' long, seemingly endless death by hanging, during which his thoughts range in time from his conception to the twentieth century, in place from Nazareth to Dublin, and over a variety of moods. (For more detail see the section 'The Book of Judas: An overview').

The Book of Judas has a fantasy film quality about it. The reader can be transported instantly from one era to another. In this poem we hear the thoughts inside the head of the dying man, see the images he sees, each cutting swiftly to the next, and we hear the voices he remembers.

One of the many questions Kennelly asks in the preface to the book is: 'But can we believe Judas?' It is worth keeping this question in mind, when reading the poem.

Given the context, the casual, untroubled, planning voice we hear at the opening of the poem is unexpected. The dying man is just tossing possibilities around – 'things I might do!' And it's quite a bizarre will he is making, in this 'donation' of his heart. The heart is considered, in poetic terms, as the seat of emotions, of love. Altruistic love is not something we would readily associate with Judas the betrayer. However, for him, love and betrayal are necessarily interlinked, as he says in the poem 'Taste' (Section XII):

*To savour the full taste of betrayal
One must half-love one's victim
And be wholly loved by him
Or her or it or they...*

In 'Things I Might Do' he wonders should he make his heart 'into a month like October/A chalice for the sad madness of leaves'. The image catches the seemingly directionless frenzy of windblown autumn leaves and perhaps the sad madness of Judas himself. But this act also carries some overtones of a religious ritual. The chalice (calix) in Roman times was a drinking cup and could also be lifted in a toast or poured out as an offering to the gods. With either or both connotations, it is used here as an expression of reverence (homage) to the year's end. This complex image of his heart transformed into 'a month like October/A chalice...' is wonderfully unexpected, like a metaphysical conceit that startles the reader into seeing the otherness of things. October is the year's end only in terms of growth and new life and that is how it resonates with Judas.

In contrast, the next possibility, in the second stanza, is nostalgic and conjures up the innocence of childhood.

*Should I make it into a small white church in
A country-place where bells are childhood prayers?*

This church is intimate (small) and pure (white), in a natural, unspoiled place where the bells call people to pray (perhaps the Angelus bells?) and they repeat the prayers they learned in childhood. It is an image full of nostalgia for a time of innocence and religious faith.





The jarring juxtaposition with the following possibility, ‘a backroom of a brothel in Dublin’ could hardly be more shocking. This is a place of trade, of mercenary bargaining where a fake reproduction of love, ‘somethinglike love endures’. The word ‘endures’ has many connotations. As well as ‘to continue or live on’ it can also mean to ‘submit to; to suffer; put up with’ – a real Judas word that can have opposite meanings! In this second stanza Judas is deliberately equating the sacred and the seedy, as if they were of equal value. Does he have any principles, the reader may be asking at this stage.

It’s as if he can hear us, as if he is inside our heads – he brings in the concept of judgement:

Should I make it a judge to judge itself?

Is he suggesting the manipulation of justice and truth here? Possibly. Moving swiftly on, Judas follows up with a somewhat more comforting metaphorical possibility – that of ‘a caring face’. The power of this is limited, however, as it is but one face ‘in a memory storm’. This is followed by a disturbing metamorphosis – a bed, normally a place of rest, transports Judas, in a dream, to the hanging tree. But the voice in the dream is comforting. It reassures him with motherly affection, soothing him with repeated phrases as one would a child.

*‘There now, there now, rest as best you can,
Darling, rest your treacherous head
And when you’ve rested, come home to me.’*

Whose voice is this? Is it the voice of the tree or his mother or Jesus? The voice is calling him home, to a place of safety, acceptance and support or at least, in the words of Robert Frost

‘Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in’. Whoever it is knows and accepts his ‘treacherous head’ and has no illusions about the real Judas. In the wider context of *The Book of Judas* we see the profound effect on Judas of the voice of Jesus saying ‘I love you’. (See ‘The Stormy End’ in *The Book of Judas: an overview*) So this may be the voice of Jesus, who experienced the treachery, calling him home at the end of all.

In this poem we first met Judas as the self-focused, self-important individual considering what he might do with his heart. No lack of self-esteem there, one might think. We also met the Judas of two faces or two facets, as he flits between choices – church or brothel; judge or a caring face. Or, is he being facetious here, deliberately ‘hamming’ it up, having a laugh at a gullible audience? Is he putting on a show? After all, Judas is the master of make-believe, a three-card-trick man, now you see him, now you don’t. But, is he the joker who may be crying inside?

And what of the voice? Is it the voice of Jesus or a Jesus-voice created by Judas’ dream? Is it a voice he hears or a voice he would like to hear, the voice of his innermost wishes?

There are so many uncertainties here that all we can say is that we meet Judas the enigma. Perhaps part of that enigma is the need that Judas the betrayer has to be loved.

The Book of Judas: An overview

The Book of Judas is a major epic poem consisting of about 600 individual poems in the almost 400-page volume, published by Bloodaxe Books in 1991. Judas, of course, is a byword for betrayal





and this epic deals with the concept of betrayal in general – betrayal of others, betrayal of the self, but also betrayal of and by specific groups of people and institutions. The book centres on the biblical Judas and the Judas/Jesus relationship but it also ranges up and down in time and centuries and features characters as diverse as Pontius Pilate, Barabbas, Marilyn Monroe, Hitler, Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh and James Joyce.

The book is structured in twelve sections and Kennelly cues us in to the main themes of each. Section I, entitled ‘Do It’ is, he says, about intention or purpose or ambition. This first section acts as a kind of introduction to betrayal (see the poem ‘Service’).

The best way to serve the age is to betray it.

...

If betrayal is a service, learn to betray

With the kind of style that impresses men

Until they dream of being me.

Section II ‘Are the poems honest, doctor’ focuses on children and young people who are betrayed in sexual abuse, betrayed by the state, hungry and sleeping in doorways, savagely beaten in school, betrayed by being indoctrinated to hate Judas (see ‘Feed the Children’).

Section III ‘I hear the pages crying’, Kennelly describes as ‘a notion of love’. In particular, it looks at the relationship between Judas and Jesus. In ‘My Mind of Questions’ Judas tries to imagine the ordinary day-to-day life of Jesus as a boy in Nazareth. In ‘No Image Fits’ Judas experiences intense admiration and love for Jesus yet cannot quite comprehend him.

No image fits, no rod, no crown.

I brought him down.

‘A Moment of Love’ is probably the poem that gets closest to the truth – that Judas is terrified of the total transparency of Jesus that is so different from Judas and is ‘Warring against all that I am?’

I am forcing my heart to open to the fact

That of all of those I've known and half-known

He's the one who refuses to hide

Anything. Terrifying. He must be attacked

From all angles, get him, do him, he's the one

To be shot knifed hanged strangled drowned crucified.

So this ‘notion of love’ is a very complicated love/terror relationship that ends in betrayal.

Section IV ‘Bunk’ is saying that history is bunk. It deals with a vision of an ideal society and the betrayal of political promises that have occurred through the centuries.

Section V ‘The chosen few in the heavenly know’ looks back to the time of the Apostles but interprets events from the perspective of modern society. It applies modern concepts of career building and power play to biblical times. We find Judas being interviewed for the job of Apostle and being grilled in a media interview about the notorious kiss. So the section functions as a back-to-front critique of current society. It's not without humour; we find Brendan Behan, ‘drunk as a lord’, attending the Last Supper.

In Section VI ‘You’, Kennelly imagines a post-Christian world, bleak and empty, in which Judas is desperately trying to have a





conversation with Jesus about what happened. Judas appears to see them as mirror images of each other in the poem 'If I, If You'.

*If I had not betrayed you
How would you have accomplished the miracle*

...

*And if you had not betrayed me
How could I ever have begun to know
The sad heart of man?"*

In despair, in the dark night of his soul, Judas is left with a fleeting image that promised friendship, in the final poem 'doorway':

*Why, in that moment
of heart's darkness, of
severance without end,
did you turn to me
in the freezing doorway,
smile and say 'I'll always
be your friend'?*

Section VII 'High on Silver' deals with social values and focuses particularly on the young, whose dreams are betrayed in the obsession with money and 'getting on' in the world.

In Section VIII just when we think we may be catching a glimpse of the vulnerable human Judas ('For lack of love a man is blighted more than he supposes') the Judas voice slides away into the bleak world of rampant, joyless sexual orgy and prostitution.

Section IX is entitled 'I know I've arrived, can you tell me why I'm here?' This section portrays the long, drawn out death by hanging

of Judas. During this slow death his thoughts range widely from the time of his conception to the twentieth century. He regrets not being made Head of the Church instead of Peter ('A Dream of Keys'); attends 'A Special Meeting' for those contemplating suicide, where he meets Marilyn Monroe and Hitler; makes a pilgrimage to Lough Derg; is reincarnated as an IRA bomber; and still insists on self-justification, in his upside-down view of the world in the poem 'It is Done'.

Betrayed?

*I betrayed
Nothing or what has become
Nothing worth
Betraying*

He has 'Arrived' and can give a resume of events in a varied and interesting life but cannot see their purpose or meaning, the meaning of himself, his 'selfhood'.

For him, at the end of his life, only two things are worth remembering:

*Only the sounds of a kiss in the evening light
Will not be forgotten
(from 'Sounds')*

and Jesus saying 'I love you' in 'The Stony End'.

*Nothing cracked my heart
until that evening
at the stony end*





*of the healing garden
when you turned and said,
as if remembering a secret
known long ago and long forgotten,
'I love you.'*

The poem 'Things I Might Do' comes from this section of *The Book of Judas*.

Section X, 'Some Lads' brings on a carnival of characters and the result is a kind of zany party-crawl. James Joyce comes to dinner with the Holy Family and in the conversation Jesus dissociates himself from the Catholic clergy in Ireland. Pilate is doing a PhD on the Crucifixion. Heaven and Hell marry and appear as characters. Flanagan, the Irish carpenter who nailed Jesus to the Cross, goes on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, digs up Judas and brings him back as a relic. Judas forges one of the four Gospels. Hitler comes to Dublin and asks Judas to arrange a meeting with De Valera. Finally, in 'Special Decree' Judas and the lads take over authorship of the book, on a temporary basis, as the author is suffering from 'judasfatigue'.

Section XI focuses on politics and politicians. Many of the biblical characters reappear as Irish politicians in a satirical censure of politicians, the Church and sexual morality.

Section XII, 'The True Thing' deals with language, poets and poetry. Here too there is betrayal. Language has failed:

*Language hides its face in shame and is no longer willing
To speak of earth or hell or heaven*

*Or the bloodmarvel of ordinary feeling.
(from 'Once, Somewhere')*

The only way he can be free is to turn his back on language, deny its value, say nothing.

*Language is a farce.
The fascist flesh rules you and me.
No words can shape the curse.
I lock my lips on nothing and go free.
(from 'Taste')*

And yet, at the end, in the final poem, looking back at a life he followed

*... as a blind man follows his expensive dog
...
Yearning occasionally, nevertheless, for dialogue with God.
I would ask, to begin with, what became of the true thing
And after that, well, anything might happen.
I can even imagine a poet starting to sing
In a way I haven't heard for a long time.
If the song comes right, the true thing may find a name
Singing to me of who, and why, I am.
(from 'The True Thing')*

There is still that faint hope, qualified by 'if' and 'may' that the song, the poetry, may sing the truth about Judas.

In the preface to *The Book of Judas*, Kennelly takes this reasoning one step further and suggests that the Judasvoice may be





essential to poetry, 'the possibility that Judas may be the spirit of language, of poetry.'

I've heard people say, 'Poets are self-centred, malignant bastards, aren't they, really?' These same people frequently go on to say that it's a great wonder, and a paradoxical cause for gratitude, that such malignant, self-centred bastards are capable of producing 'such beautiful stuff'. The implication is that poetry is produced in spite of the nature of these 'self-centred malignant' souls. The Book of Judas explores the possibility that 'beauty' is produced because of it. Judas has a permanent residence on the human tongue.

Poetry comes out of the flawed brokenness of humanity.

In summary, this epic poem explores the flawed nature of humanity by taking as its central character the millennia-old scapegoat who has become a byword for deception, Judas the betrayer of Jesus. By cutting through this over-simplified label and imaginatively allowing the complexity of the character to emerge, Kennelly has enabled us to see and explore the Judas in all societies and the Judas in ourselves.





A GREAT DAY

Background

This poem was first collected in *Breathing Spaces: Early Poems* (Bloodaxe Books 1992).

A reading of the poem

On a first reading it is easy to see that this poem sets out to capture the sights, sounds and mood of a wedding day. She is 'all in white', a white that resists metaphor or comparison with anything else and he's 'in dignified blue'. We hear the formal language of an earlier time:

*What God has joined together
Let no man put asunder.*

There is fine music and speech-making:

*Songs poured out like wine.
Praises flowed as they had never done.*

And the guests

*... sang and danced
The whole day long, the whole night long.
There could never be anything but dance and song.*

The couple were full of admiration for how each other looked: she thought 'He looks so good in blue'; and he felt 'Such whiteness seems both beautiful and true'. The wedding guests seem to be transformed by the experience, 'Seemed to see each other in a new way/This added to the distinction of the day'.

The day ends with the conventional ritual – the bride changes out of her wedding dress and off they go on their honeymoon. On the train, alone at last, she says 'Darling, it was a great day.'

On the surface the poem describes a wonderful wedding day but if we explore it more closely, all is not quite perfect. The voice of the poet cues in the reader early on. Consider that discussion about the snow metaphor:

Something about snow is not quite right

and

*But since this has been so often said
I may be justified in considering it dead.*

Here we have the poet as a self-conscious observer, displaying a post-modern consciousness that focuses on the artifice in the poem, the tricks of the trade in how it's made (to coin a rhyme). The effect is that the reader is made to see the poem as a deliberately constructed account. Here also we have the voice of the poet as ironic commentator. The snow metaphor is rejected as over-used, yet the title 'A Great Day' must be one of the most clichéd, tired, unoriginal, imprecise phrases and it is used again by the bride in wrapping up the poem. The voice of ironic commentator and distanced viewer persists in the description of the church wedding:

*They came together, as is habitual
In that part of the world,
Through a grave ritual,*





He is viewing this as an anthropologist (who allows himself a pun on 'grave' meaning serious and/or burial plot). He is interpreting the couple's attitude, that they are listening with only a small quantity (modicum) of wonder. This phrase raises questions about their level of belief in the religious ceremony and promises of faithfulness.

Apart from the poetic voice that intrudes, there are clues everywhere that undermine the perfection of this day. Even the wedding outfits come in for subtle criticism. The groom, referring to the bride's dress, says that such whiteness 'seems' both beautiful and true. White, in the coded language of colour, represents purity, virginity. The groom's own 'dignified blue' suit is undercut by the description of it in slang terminology – 'all dickied up'. Is there a hint of criticism here, that this dressing up is overdone? Overall, in the poem, there is a preoccupation with dress, with surface appearance, how they presented to the gathering and very little about how they felt. We learn very little of their emotions, nothing of the deeper person.

The 'Long hours of Dionysiac festivity' has connotations from classical times of a drunken, licentious orgy. This was a 'loud' crowd that sang and danced 'The whole day long, the whole night long'. It is difficult not to see it as overindulgence.

And there are other little references that subtly undermine the perfection of the day: the use of 'seem' or 'seemed'; that he 'never saw the white dress again' reminds us of the ephemeral nature of the experience; even the posture of the trees outside the train window shows reticence, i.e. reluctance to communicate what

they know and feel. Only at the end is it admitted that 'A tide of thoughts flowed in her head, in his head'. It would have been very interesting to hear the voices of this torrent but they are covered over with a cliché. 'Darling, it was a great day', she said.

You will have noticed that rhyme, used sparingly in Kennelly's poetry, plays a prominent part here. We are conscious of the jingle of rhyme everywhere throughout the poem – said/dead; too/blue; white/bite, etc. It can be seen as subverting or working against any seriousness of the day. For example, when the Gospel reference ('What God has joined together/Let no man put asunder') is taken literally it leads to the following rhyming couplet:

*Man in woman, woman in man
Soon afterwards, the fun began.*

The rhyme, together with the sexual suggestiveness, helps to show how the religious ceremony is trivialised. Have a look at the mind/ground off-rhyme in the stanza beginning 'He looks so good in blue'. Is there a possibility that the poet is poking fun at social class here, and encouraging us to use the posh, upper class pronunciation of ground as 'grynd', to rhyme with mind? Perhaps that's an insinuation too far. Overall, despite the glamour and excitement, there is an emptiness at the heart of the poem that is reinforced by the jingling rhymes.

A critique of social values

Through a very incisive poetic analysis of one of our most romanticised celebration days the poet highlights and questions certain values and practices, such as:





- The preoccupation with appearance and surface presentation;
- That surface communication, clichéd thought and language are prioritised over deeper thought and feeling;
- The use of churches as architectural venues despite the couple having only a modicum of belief in their values and teachings;
- The overdone, day and night orgy of celebration;
- The failure of language to communicate and to describe accurately.





FRAGMENTS

Background

This poem was first collected in *Breathing Spaces: Early Poems* (Bloodaxe Books 1992).

A reading of the poem

In this poem we hear the voice of an older man questioning the fragmented memories of a life that doesn't make sense anymore. The man is profoundly shocked by the sudden awareness that both she and he are now different people, unrecognisable and unknowable from the lovers they once were. They are strangers to their younger selves, and now also to each other. The shock of this is carried in brutally honest questions:

What had he to say to her now?

Where was the woman he believed he had known

...

Who was this stranger with the graven face?

...

And what was he, at sixty? Who was

That man lifting the blackthorn stick

In the first two stanzas he snatches at and captures fragments of memories of her – everyday and romantic images – in a street, working, dancing and making love. Outdoor energetic images of her dominate the memories – out walking, by the sea, loving the sun, where she had the capacity to communicate her love of nature in fresh, uncliché language:

And saying so, always for the first time?

But he cannot recall the thoughts and feelings that led up to the most significant step in their lives (and one that is still couched in romantic imagery), 'the dreaming-up of a home'.

In stanzas three and four the focus turns on himself. There is noticeably less life-detail here and, as before, no answers, just the image of the solitary man, walking. The logic of this poem is imagistic. The first two stanzas had images of their active life of working and walking and loving and also that romantic image of the home. There is a distinct transition in the third and fourth stanzas to the image of the man alone. First we see him taking down the blackthorn stick from beside the 'quietly dying' fire, which must have resonances for the man himself. And then we meet him as 'He listened to his own steps in the walk/Past the reedy mud', an image that carries a powerful sense of solitariness or loneliness. The poem finishes with that beautiful but plaintive image as the startled flock of plover 'scattered, black fragments, crying' – an image that echoes both his own memory fragments and his heart-cries. So the logic of the imagery takes us from the life-giving, carefree atmosphere of sun and sea to a man listening to his own footsteps, from companionship to solitariness. It is the imagery that tells the story and communicates the feelings. Little is actually voiced other than the bewilderment in the questions.

This poem highlights a significant human issue – how people change over time and the effect this has on human relationships. This change is an insidious process that creates such a metamorphosis in people, in their intimate relationships, in their physical being, perhaps in their very essence. This happens slowly, almost secretly and life is so busy that we do not notice





these incremental changes in ourselves or others. The sudden realisation that not only those closest to us but we ourselves are now quite different people creates a moment of profound existential shock. It is that moment that is captured by this poem. There is no attempt in the poem at explanation or analysis. Remember Kennelly's statement: 'A writer is not interested in explaining reality, he's interested in capturing it'. (See the critical commentary on 'I See You Dancing, Father') The speaker here is literally overwhelmed by the big questions: 'Who was this stranger?'; 'Who was/That man?' And the poem is a photograph of that moment. Yet it is not an anti-romantic poem – as the earlier memories show. Perhaps it was a moment of Heraclitean insight for the poet, as it can be for the reader – 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man' (Heraclitus).





THE SOUL'S LONELINESS

Introduction

In *Poetry My Arse* (1995), we meet an entire symphony of voices, not often in tune. As Kennelly describes it:

*To try to do justice to this second-city-Empire language,
Ace de Horner becomes a kind of shuffling arena of voices.
Somewhere along the journey, my own voice steps into this
poem simply because it must, it passionately wants to be
heard by Ace, by Janey Mary, by all the other voices, by the
reader. Then, very quickly, Ace de Horner takes over again.
Takes over what? Takes over the fact that he was taken
over. So he throws me out and takes himself over again.
In the post-colonial situation, the question of identity is
paramount and apparently permanent.
(Acenote, 15)*

I think it reasonable to suggest that 'The soul's loneliness', which features in this volume of poems, provides one such occasion when Kennelly's own voice steps in.

A reading of the poem

The casual, conversation-style opening line attempts to downplay the feeling of loneliness but it fails and the experience just pours out of the speaker, all in a one-sentence poem. This is something that cannot be tamed or contained. It is alive, a tangible presence that can be heard and seen and touched. It is heard 'in the ticking of the clock' that is 'beside the books and photographs'. This loneliness is connected to an awareness of time, particularly times

past, in the books read and the photographs of a past life. Time past also features in the visual elements – 'the shine/of an Eason's plastic bag at midnight'. This draws up memories of a bookshop, probably thronged with people, the companionable buzz of talk and, for a reader, the excitement of book-buying. The loneliness takes on cosmic proportions in that poignant, tangible image of the tree of Christ, the Cross, alive, swaying outside his window 'in the day's afterglow'. This religious symbolism carries overtones of the most gruesome suffering and the death, for a time, of all hope. But it also carries the possibility of a new beginning, not only death but resurrection also.

*I shiver a little at the strangeness
of my flesh, the swell of sweat,*

It is as if he is estranged from his body. In the introductory 'Acenote', recalling what Brendan Behan said about Dublin offering a lot of loneliness but little or no solitude, Kennelly distinguishes between the two states:

*In loneliness we are severed; in solitude we may grow
strong. Loneliness, given the opportunity, preys on others.
Solitude tends to explore the self.
(Acenote, 14)*

It is that severance, even from the self, that he experiences here. But then, a tender memory of family and of his child's naïve insight into life – 'the child's poem I'll never forget' – seems to encourage him to search for connections again, to re-engage, initially with 'eyes searching the floor/for a definition of grace'. The term 'grace' is probably used in its religious sense of 'the unmerited favour of





God', in particular being given the strength (a grace) by God to endure trials and sorrows. That he is searching for the definition of the word would suggest how tenuous and delicate is this ray of hope for him.

or a trace of yourself I've never noticed before

'Trace of yourself' may refer to the child but more likely to his former wife. So, from the sense of being cut off, severed by loneliness, the speaker is desperately seeking to make connections – spiritual and family – again.

In an overview, we might consider the photographic quality and effectiveness of the imagery – how he can use the detritus of commerce to express a private emotion 'an Eason's plastic bag at midnight'; the 'eyes searching the floor', downcast but seeking even a description of grace, for support; and in particular that extraordinary image of the Christ tree that is so different, almost surreal, but imaginatively real.

We might focus on the spirituality of the poem – the Christ figure occurs a number of times in the epic; the notion of 'grace', a gift of hidden and unexpected strength, whether we consider it in a religious or everyday spiritual sense.

But most of all we might be humbled by the transparent honesty of this personal poem about a taboo subject, or at least a condition that many people are reluctant to admit experiencing – loneliness. Kennelly's poetry has drawn fearlessly on many of his own life experiences, however painful. This was acknowledged in an interview with Arminta Wallace, after the publication of *Familiar Strangers: New and Collected Poems 1960–2004*, when he was

asked if this process of revisiting his life throughout his poems was painful:

Kennelly's voice grew quiet. 'It was. It blew my head, because I had to read things – my parents' deaths, my brother's death, the alcoholism, the failed marriage – all that, you know. And you do really relive things if the images are strong; the window in the kitchen, the colour of the curtains. You're in the moment. But you remember great moments too.'

(The Irish Times, 22 May 2004)

Context of the poem

'The soul's loneliness' is taken from the volume *Poetry My Arse* (Bloodaxe Books 1995). This epic of 546 individual poems follows the daily life of the ageing poet Ace de Horner on his rambles around Dublin city, accompanied by his ferocious pit-bull terrier, Kanooce. We get all the gossip about the begrudgers, gobshites, chancers and other characters he meets; we hear about his relationship with his girlfriend Janey Mary; his other affairs; his thoughts and feelings, sorrows and pleasures. The poem is an often bawdy, vulgar, witty but also insightful, sad and sometimes uproariously funny portrait of the artist as an old man.

But it is also a portrait of Dublin, the post-colonial city through which Ace wanders. In the introductory 'Acenote', Kennelly outlines what he considers the marks or significant qualities of a post-colonial city. The first one is 'feeling a bit lost in history and language'. We deal with this, he says, by putting up a show of pretence, which leads to the second sign – 'the fact that caricature,





the art of spontaneous, amusing, and instructive distortion, is a way of life and a constant mode of expression.' The conflicting elements in caricature (truth and exaggeration) 'reflect the conflicting nature of the original political/military situation'. He describes *Poetry My Arse* as 'a labyrinth of comic distortion of everything one is, feels, says, writes and dreams of putting forward as serious'. The third mark of the post-colonial city, according to Kennelly, is 'a special kind of unavoidable social and cultural incest ... Dublin is a helplessly ... incestuous city where we feed off each other's characters, marriage troubles, drink problems, money messes, sex cavortings, job catastrophes and other forms of misfortune, distress, failure and crack. If you don't like implacable gossip, stay out of Dublin. If you do, you're in heaven ... The pure savagery of gossip is stimulating. It shows a dynamic interest in other people's affairs and is most often accompanied by an equally dynamic resolution not to know oneself.' The resulting vitality, particularly in verbal energy, is the fourth mark of post-colonialism, according to Kennelly (Acenote, 13).

In the main, this is the kind of poetry we encounter in *Poetry My Arse*, a very different poetry, a poetry of the streets, in the language of the streets – popular, gossipy, derogatory, witty, bawdy, vulgar but also carrying insights and truths, in short, a language that is unpoetic in the traditional lyrical sense. But it is the poetry of everyday life, a poetry that permeates all life, as can be seen from a section of the introductory poem, 'The Song of Ace de Horner':

I am the wind on the Liffey

*I am the youngster fleeing the policeman on O'Connell
Bridge*

I am the Warrington Daycare Centre

*I am the fire plan, the smoke alarm, the smoke that kills in
seconds*

*I am the woman up from the country rambling among
bargains, fingering*

I am the paperback written to lighten the journey

*I am the newest rumour in the streets of Dublin, take
me to bed, spread me with the relish of prophecy, taste
me like a juicy honeymoon but above all add to me
add to me like a parody of the myth
you were born to hunger for*

*I am a thin tree trembling with growth like a leggy girl all
promise*

I am a terrified whisper on the phone

I am the scream that wakes me in the darkness





I am a crow's nest in a tree outside Manchester

I am your eyes seeing through me

*I am the child's cry in the childminder's ear, where
on earth are my father and mother?*

*I am river canal sea street scandal pisstaker starving cat
graffiti Liffey rat white plastic bag in wild flight
over Dublin...*

Poetry My Arse is the third of Kennelly's epic poems and could be read as fulfilling a similar function to *Cromwell* and *The Book of Judas*. *Cromwell* and *Judas*, both mythologised figures had significant influence, respectively, on historical and personal Irish identity. Both characters were humanised and de-simplified in order to provoke a critique of Irishness. Could this poem be read as an exploration of the myth of the poet in Irish society? Perhaps it is a kind of counter-culture poetry that challenges our notion of poetry – posing questions about the issues thought proper to explore in poetry; whether or not it is the place for gossip and jokes; the kind of language it should use; does it need to display mastery of the conventional poetic techniques, etc.?

Kennelly is aware, from the start, of the risks he is taking and the road he is negotiating. The pun in the title *Poetry My Arse* throws down the challenge. 'Ars' is the Latin word for 'art'. Is this poetry or is it toilet paper? This is where Kennelly stands on the question, as he says in *Acenote*:

Any extended poem about Dublin must involve this joke-making genius. Needless to say, this poem itself will become a joke. Joke begets joke begets joke, let's be serious about that. The trick is to continue to parody the parody, caricature the caricature, cartoon the cartoon.
(*Acenote*, p. 16)

It needs to be emphasised that *Poetry My Arse* is not just one long series of jokes and scatological wit. There are poems here too that plumb the depths of human experience, as Kennelly describes, and as we see in 'A soul's loneliness':

*Yet I believe there is a remote, lonely corner of the mind,
out of reach of incest or Dublincest, that no amount of
parody and caricature can twist or disfigure or render
ridiculous. I've tried to let Ace de Horner discover and live
these moments. Unshareable, private, lonely moments. But
real.*
(*Acenote*, p. 16)





SAINT BRIGID'S PRAYER

(from the Irish)

Background

'Saint Brigid's Prayer' was first collected in *Love of Ireland: Poems from the Irish* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1989)

A note on Saint Brigid

Saint Brigid (c.451–c.524 AD) is said to have been born in Co. Louth to Dubhtach, a chieftain of Leinster, and his baptised Pict slave girl. So Brigid was born into slavery and worked as a dairy maid for some years. She was famous for her generosity to the poor. On one occasion she is said to have given away her father's jewelled sword to a beggar. But the King of Leinster, discerning that there was something special about her, persuaded her father to pardon her and even free her. She refused to marry but instead became Ireland's first nun, founding a monastery at Kildare c.480 AD. She is said to have worked many miracles. Saint Brigid is the patron saint of blacksmiths, mariners, dairy workers, brewers, poets, scholars, and the poor, among others. She is also referred to as Muire na nGael. Her feast day is 1 February, the beginning of spring.

A reading of the poem

Is this not the most extraordinary prayer you have ever heard or read, light-hearted but uplifting?

The first six lines open with 'a lake of beer', and singing and dancing. That image of the 'Heavenly Host' 'tippling', the archaic religious language combined with modern drinking slang, helps to

create the outlandish humour that some may frown at but also lets us know that this Heaven sure is going to be different from expectations. But there is a change of tone in lines 7 and 8: 'I'd put at their disposal /vats of suffering'. Does this refer to hangovers? Or does it refer to suffering for those who want or need to do further penance? We have no idea at this stage. Either way, it pulls the reader up short here and reminds us that this isn't going to be just a drinking song.

Continuing with the imagery of containers, the next stanza wishes for 'White cups of love' and 'sweet pitchers of mercy' (i.e. clemency, forgiveness, compassion) for every man. Wow! Are not love and mercy among the most important needs of every human being? Saint Brigid is getting serious beneath all the partying.

And it continues in the following stanza with insights into the human heart 'the happy heart is true' – true to itself; to be happy is our natural condition.

I'd make the men contented for their own sake.

Good word – 'contented' – great concept. It doesn't feel as out of reach, as nebulous or as showy as the ideal of 'happiness'. Contentment seems attainable. Saint Brigid wishes us to be contented in ourselves and for ourselves, rather than feeling that we have to measure up to what others want us to be or do. This is turning into one of those nights that starts out on beer and laughs but ends up with a deep conversation about the meaning of life!

The next stanza has a very reassuring view of Heaven as an everyday place, just a gathering of people from the nearby parishes, people we'd know, friends maybe, gathered in





camaraderie. And lots of women, particularly 'the three Marys of great renown'. There are many biblical volunteers for the three Marys but the likely reference is to the three Marys who were there at the Crucifixion – Mary the Mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene; and Mary of Cleophas. These were the women who stuck around, who were there for the dying Christ. Must have been a terrible scene but they had staying power.

The final stanza is filled with companionship, chat and, of course, beer. This Heaven is so ordinary – beer and friends replace harps and wings!

'I'd sit with the men, the women and God'. They'd all be filled with a generous altruistic spirit, toasting each other's good health – forever! 'and every drop would be a prayer'. A prayer? Well, the prayers in this poem are structured as wishes – 'I'd like' or 'I'd love'. So a prayer is a kind of wish. She has simplified 'prayer' for us too.

Despite its boozy opening, this poem has raised our thoughts to things of the spirit – values in life (love and mercy), the human condition, happiness as the default position, and it encourages us to think of issues like community and companionship, and prayer as simple wishing.





OVERVIEW OF BRENDAN KENNELLY'S POETRY

This section consists of some general points to help you think about the poetry of Brendan Kennelly, to take a broader view after working on individual poems. These comments are based on the course poems, with a lot of help from the poet. They are merely starting points to initiate thought and discussion. You can develop them and add your own insights.

Darkness into light

Darkness

1. Even that most hopeful of poems 'Begin' has its shades of darkness.
 - An awareness of endings; that every experience ends however well it began
*Every beginning is a promise
born in light and dying in dark*
 - That loneliness is part of the human condition
Begin to the loneliness that cannot end
2. 'Fragments' records:
 - How time changes us, often radically
Who was this stranger with the graven face?
 - How people grow apart and separate, emotionally and physically, with resulting loneliness
He listened to his own steps in the walk

3. In 'The soul's loneliness', this feeling is real and present to the senses, in the ticking of the clock, etc.
4. The volume *Cromwell* explores the darkness of our history, the fractured nature of Irish identity.
5. *The Book of Judas* explores the fractured nature of the individual, the Judas within all of us.
 - See Judas as shapeshifter in 'Things I Might Do' – fantasising outrageously, spinning yarns, a mover and shaker, putting on a show for the lads.

Into light

But despite all this, there is a ruggedly positive strength in Kennelly's poetry, a determination to pick himself up, to find the 'new fresh moment of brightness'. This courage to begin again, Kennelly suggests, is 'a force in Irish life and culture'. It goes against the odds: 'I like the outrageously irrational assertion of hope where there doesn't seem to be much'. (Kennelly in an interview with Richard Pine, *Dark Fathers into Light*, 1994; p.185)

- He asserts this irrational hope in 'Begin'; even finding a positive aspect to the loneliness, 'since it perhaps is what makes us begin'. We also find it in the forceful assertion of hope in those famous final four lines of 'Begin', lines that have helped many people out of a dark place.
- We find it in the search for grace in 'The soul's loneliness' in the reaching out for connections to family in the same crisis, 'the child's poem I'll never forget.../or a trace of yourself I've never noticed before'.





- It is evident in how Dark Eileen, out of the depths of raw grief, found the strength at the end, through the deep women-rhythms of poetry, to create the keening for her man in 'A Cry for Art O'Leary'.
- 'Saint Brigid's Prayer' is afloat with the hope of happiness.
- Even Judas in 'Things I Might Do' may have a yearning to be loved.
- Kennelly's exploration into the savagery of Irish history even proved a positive and rewarding experience, as he told Arminta Wallace in an interview for *The Irish Times* (22 May 2004):

In 'Cromwell', for example, I was dealing with something terrible. Hatred and absence of dialogue, and how easy hatred is. But if you find out enough about a person, you're bound to find things that you like. I remember reading through five volumes of Cromwell's letters edited by Macauley, the historian, and I found out he was a good farmer, and a republican, and sensible. As well as a mad slaughterer. So I tried to present him in the form of a dialogue. This is my idea of celebration – to step outside yourself and find a sympathetic, intelligent place for somebody that you were trained to hate. The place that you would condemn in yourself. You should express your own darkness.

- Explore the complexity of Cromwell in his differing roles – as caring family man and as ruthless executioner – in 'Oliver to His Brother'.

Love

1. 'Dear Autumn Girl'
 - Shows the magical energy of being in love
 - The worthwhile risks taken when inviting her into his world
 - The way her natural beauty lights up his life
 - Feelings that are beyond poetry to render adequately
2. **Begin**
 - The island that lovers create for themselves, even in a crowd 'alone together while making good'
3. **I See You Dancing, Father**
 - A tribute to a loved father
4. **Fragments**
 - The other ending for love
5. **A Great Day**
 - A somewhat cynical look at the show-off aspect of love, in the wedding day

The celebration of women

1. **Bread**
 - The many incarnations of woman: in the traditional role of cook, providing the staple food of life; as artist with single-minded devotion to the perfection of her art or craft; in the more radical role of Creator; and lover.
2. 'Dear Autumn Girl'
 - How she brings radiance to his life





3. A Cry for Art O'Leary

- Woman as lover and wife
- As the unparalleled voice of both love and grief through the ages
- The strength, determination and degree of composure she finds at the end
- The celebration of 'womanpoetry'

Celebration and transformation of the ordinary

- In the voice/consciousness of the bread
- Bread-making as an act of creation
- In the magic of the dance where his father realises his true self
- In the pageant of the queuing girls
- In 'wonder' everywhere: 'begin to wonder at unknown faces/at crying birds in the sudden rain'
- The reverse transformation of Heaven into the wonderfully ordinary – a lake of beer happy people and good company.

*I'd sit with the men, the women and God
there by the lake of beer.*

*We'd be drinking good health forever
and every drop would be a prayer.*

Some philosophical issues

1. Poem from a Three Year Old

- The meaning of life:
Is all the/dirt what's left of flowers and/people

- One's purpose in life:
*'Why you work so hard, why brush
and sweep to make a heap of dirt?*
- Ageing, death and the unanswerable question:
*'And will the new young people die?
And why?'*

2. A Cry for Art O'Leary

- Man's inhumanity to man

3. Saint Brigid's Prayer

- That happiness is the natural condition of man
- That we should/can be contented for our own sake
- The human values of love, mercy, community
- The value of good wishes.

Poetry as social critique/The poet as social commentator

- The subtle undermining of 'A Great Day', to reveal the overindulgence, the emphasis on show, the shallow level of talk, etc.
- The treatment of the elderly, raised obliquely in 'Poem from a Three Year Old'
- The social issues alluded to in 'Dear Autumn Girl'
- The political and religious violence and oppression in 'A Cry for Art O'Leary'
- The social vision in 'Saint Brigid's Prayer'





- Throughout *The Book of Judas* there is trenchant social criticism

Kennelly's philosophy of poetry

- That poetry begins from wonder and questioning. (See 'Poem from a Three Year Old')

Poetry is, among others, an interrogative art, an art of relentless questioning.

(from 'Poetry and Violence' in Journey into Joy: Collected Prose, 1994; 36)

- That poetry is about making connections

Above all poetry to me is connection, or the hope of connection both with oneself and with the outside world, with the living and the dead.

(Preface to A Time for Voices, 1990; 12)

See 'Begin'; 'Bread'; 'Dear Autumn Girl'; 'I See You Dancing, Father'.

- That poetry is an 'entering into'.

For me poetry is an entering into the lives of things and people, dreams and events, images and mindtides. This passion for "entering into" is, I believe, the peculiar vitality of the imagination.

(Introduction to Breathing Spaces, 1999; 10)

See 'Bread', 'Oliver to His Brother', 'Things I Might Do'.

- That poetry can emerge out of the setbacks and anguishes of life.

After the darkness of disappointment and depression,

there comes a realization that perhaps all these sadnesses are merely the raw material for a new fresh moment of brightness, that may in turn lead back into darkness, but not just yet. In this poised moment, poetry lives or wishes to live.

(Echoing Note to volume Begin, 1999; 13)

Poetry as narrative

- Is there a single poem in this selection that doesn't have some element of story in it? Check. Examine each of the poems in turn and briefly recount the story.
- Some of them are personal stories. Read the following poems again: 'Dear Autumn Girl', 'I See You Dancing, Father' and 'The soul's loneliness'. What image of the poet do these create for you?

Sense of humour

This selection is not exactly overflowing with jokes but consider 'Saint Brigid's Prayer'.

- The sense of fun in creating a totally other Heaven – unexpected, it throws the reader.
- The sense of mischief in the 'lake of beer' – God as a drinking mate, and an afterlife of permanent toasting.

Language

Kennelly employs a wide range of language. Consider:

- The stiff formality of the language used in 'Oliver to His Brother'. Read this poem aloud to get the full effect.





- The weight and forward impetus of the language used in the well-structured argument of the final four lines of 'Begin'.
- The casual directness of speech in the opening of 'The soul's loneliness': 'it's nothing to go on about/but ...'
- The rhythms of the vernacular in 'I See You Dancing, Father':
'No sooner downstairs after the night's rest/And in the door/
Than'
This is the rhythm of the Irish language. Translate it.





QUESTIONS

1. If you had the opportunity to speak to Brendan Kennelly, what questions would you like to ask about his poetry that you have read?
2. Write about any significant thoughts that reading Kennelly's poetry prompted for you.
3. Write an essay or a blog in which you explain to young people why they should read Kennelly's poetry.
4. What did the reading of his poems contribute to your view of history?
5. What did the reading of his poetry contribute to your view of life?
6. Kennelly tells the story of what a neighbour of his in Kerry, to whom he had given a volume of his poems, once said: 'Lies! Lies! Poetry is all bloody lies' ... and then, after a pause ... 'But a poet's lies can make a man look twice at himself and the world.' Write about Kennelly's poetry in the context of this statement.





SEAMUS HEANEY

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2019

OL 2019

HL 2021

OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Death of a Naturalist, 1966

Door into the Dark, 1969

The Forge

Bogland

Wintering Out, 1972

The Tollund Man

North, 1975

Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication (I) Sunlight

A Constable Calls

Field Work, 1979

The Skunk

The Harvest Bow

Station Island, 1984

The Underground

The Haw Lantern, 1987

Seeing Things, 1991

The Pitchfork

Lightenings VIII (The annals say ...)

The Spirit Level, 1996

Postscript

A Call

District and Circle, 2006

Tate's Avenue

Overview of Seamus Heaney's poetry

Main works by Seamus Heaney

Questions





INTRODUCTION

Seamus Heaney was born on 13 April 1939, the eldest of nine children. Mossbawn was the family farm at Bellaghy, County Derry; here he attended Anahorish primary school from 1945 to 1951. He went as a boarder to St Columb's College, Derry, from 1951 to 1957, and it was during this time that his four year old brother, Christopher, was killed in a road accident, an experience that generated the poem 'Mid-Term Break'.

Heaney went on to study at Queen's University, Belfast, and graduated in 1961 with a first-class degree in English language and literature. He then took a Teacher Training Diploma at St Joseph's College of Education and went to teach in St Thomas's Intermediate School in Ballymurphy, Belfast, from 1962 to 1963. The headmaster there was the short-story writer Michael McLaverty, who encouraged Heaney to write and introduced him to the work of Patrick Kavanagh.

From 1963 to 1966 Heaney taught at St Joseph's College of Education, and it was during this time that he became involved with Philip Hobsbaum's 'Group'. This was a self-critical poetry workshop founded by the Queen's University lecturer that included many emerging talents, such as Michael Longley, James Simmons and Stewart Parker.

In 1965 Heaney married, and in 1966 he succeeded Hobsbaum in the English Department at Queen's.

Principal volumes

Death of a Naturalist (1966)

Door into the Dark (1969)

Wintering Out (1972)

North (1975)

Field Work (1979)

Sweeney Astray (1983)

Station Island (1984)

The Haw Lantern (1987)

Seeing Things (1991)

The Spirit Level (1996)

Electric Light (2001)

District and Circle (2006)

Human Chain (2010)

Prescribed poems

'The Forge'; 'Bogland'

'The Tollund Man'

'Mossbawn: (I) Sunlight';

'A Constable Calls'

'The Skunk'; 'The Harvest Bow'

'The Underground'

'The Pitchfork'; 'Lightenings VIII'

'Postscript'; 'A Call'

'Tate's Avenue'

In this chapter, the critical commentaries on the prescribed poems are interwoven with the narrative on Heaney's life and main volumes of his poetry





DEATH OF A NATURALIST, 1966

Heaney's first volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, was published in 1966. Filled mostly with the characters, scenes, customs, flora and fauna of the countryside that formed him, this volume explores Heaney's cultural and poetic origins. Poems such as 'Digging', 'Follower', 'Churning Day', 'Ancestral Photograph' and 'The Diviner' honour his rural roots as they celebrate ancestral and family skills, diggers of turf, makers of butter, ploughers of fields and diviners of water and show a people living in a close and almost spiritual relationship with the earth. Dominant among these is the larger-than-life heroic figure of his father. In describing them, and keenly aware that he is breaking with this tradition, Heaney seems to be at the same time defining his own space as a writer.

*But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

His writing and his development as a poet, which is inspired by his sense of place, is really an adult version of childhood exploration.

*As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dark moss.*

*Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To store big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring*

*Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.
(‘Personal Helicon’)*

Many of the poems in this volume deal with childhood and coming of age. 'The Barn' and 'An Advancement of Learning' are an invitation into childhood terror (fear of the dark and of rats). 'Death of a Naturalist', 'Blackberry Picking', 'The Early Purges' and 'Mid-Term Break' explore loss of innocence and a growing awareness of sex, decay, cruelty and death. Two poems ('At a Potato Digging' and 'For the Commander of the Eliza') deal poignantly with race memory, exploring the horrors of the Great Famine.

Towards the end of the volume there is a scattering of love poems celebrating his relationship with his wife, to whom this volume was dedicated. 'Twice Shy' and 'Valediction' are from this series.

The book brought instant recognition and praise for Heaney, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1967, and the Cholmondeley Award in 1968.





DOOR INTO THE DARK, 1969

Door into the Dark, Heaney's second volume, was published in 1969. While the first volume dealt in the main with childhood, coming of age and the poet's relationship with the somewhat heroic figure of his father, this volume deals with more adult relationships. It focuses in particular on the joys, grief and social role of women as mothers and partners, in such poems as 'The Wife's Tale', 'Cana Revisited', and 'Elegy for a Still-Born Child'.

A series of poems – 'Rite of Spring', 'Undine', 'Outlaw', and 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' – celebrate the teeming fertility of nature. A couple of poems – 'The Forge' and 'Thatcher' – hark back to the themes of the first volume in the celebration of local skills and in the poet's discovery in them of metaphors for his own craft. But the poet's Irish focus broadens out from local considerations to a more general awareness of Irish geography, history and archaeology in such poems as 'The Peninsula', 'Whinlands', 'The Plantation', 'Shoreline' and 'Bogland'.





THE FORGE

Theme

At one level this might be read as another descriptive poem celebrating local craftsmanship (such as that of the diviner, thatcher and digger already mentioned) and exploring cultural roots, a nostalgic poem of social history. Such a reading leaves one unsatisfied, an outsider rebuffed by an inarticulate and rude, if talented, smith.

The real subject of this poem is the mystery of the creative process. The work of the forge serves as an extended metaphor for the beating out of a work of art, the crafting of poetry. The reader, like the speaker in this case, is outside, peering in at the mystery. One can catch glimpses of beauty in the making ('The unpredictable fantail of sparks') or hear snatches of its elegant sound (the 'short-pitched ring' or the 'hiss'), but the secret of its construction remains a mystery, inaccessible to the non-artist. Just as in 'The Diviner', the onlookers can see the event but cannot themselves perform it or even understand it.

Creativity is a fabulous process, the stuff of legend, of medieval romance. The anvil is a horned 'unicorn'; but it is also a sacred process, and the smith is its high priest:

*at one end square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music.*

The making of art is not the exclusive preserve of intellectuals and the 'chattering classes' but can be born of even the uncouth and

uncommunicative ('hairs in his nose,/He leans out ...grunts and goes in').

Art is not necessarily anchored to the here and now. The artist withdraws from the modern world to create ('He ...recalls a clatter/Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;/Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick/To beat real iron out...').

So the poem deals with the mystery and the sacredness of art and at the same time puts before us the ordinariness of the artist.

Origins of the image

This is probably based on Heaney's experience of a real forge – Devlin's forge at Hillhead, not far from Mossbawn, where the Heaneys first lived during the poet's youth. From this forge he borrowed the anvil to lend realism to his part as a blacksmith in a Bellaghy Dramatic Society production about the 1798 Rising. So the ordinary bric-a-brac of life is endowed with metaphysical meaning and poetic significance by the writer.

But the image has literary echoes also. Smiths featured in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet much admired by Heaney. Hopkins uses the smith as a symbol of human strength, beauty and Christian courage in 'Felix Randal' and as a metaphor for God in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', where he sees the God-smith forging humankind to what shape he wills.

*With an anvil-ding
And with fire in him forge thy will
Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring
Through him, melt him but master him still.*





Joyce too, through Stephen Dedalus, utters that famous arrogant statement of artistic *raison d'être* in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he resolves to 'forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.

So for Heaney the forge had both a strong physical and a literary presence.

Imagery and sound

All the imagery in this poem is generated by the forge and its surroundings. The discarded bric-a-brac ('old axles and iron hoops rusting') recalls the real disorder out of which true beauty is created. The unexpected glory of sparks ('The unpredictable fantail of sparks') provides the only flash of colour in the otherwise Stygian gloom.

Darkness is the predominant backdrop colour here. In fact a number of poems in this volume – 'The Outlaw', 'Gallarus Oratory' and 'The Forge' – feature dark places, enclosed spaces that, paradoxically, are places of great energy and creativity, whether biological, spiritual or artistic. Here too the dark is seductive and creative, enticing and explosive. Would you agree with the critic who said that Heaney here presents 'an image of the poet as master of the powers of darkness'?

The central image is the anvil, which Heaney allows to have a couple of different implications, associating its horn with the mythical beast of medieval romance and its square end with a religious altar. So both the romantic and the sacred aspects of creativity are fostered.

Sound is an essential feature of pictorial composition for Heaney. At a conscious level we are aware of the musical quality of the verse, the onomatopoeic 'ring', 'hiss', 'slam' and 'flick', and the alliteration of 'grunts and goes.' But there are also subterranean musical echoes within words, which provide a background resonance. For example, the flat *e* and *a* sounds in 'somewhere', 'square' and 'altar' focus on the weight of the anvil and its central importance.

Form

The poem is structured as a Petrarchan sonnet, with the octave devoted to the forge and the sestet providing a shift in focus to the smith. This division allows the anvil as 'an altar' to be emphasised at the pivotal point of the poem. Other than that it is not technically effective as a sonnet: the pentameter rhythm is uneven, and the rhyming scheme is irregular (*abba cddc efgfeg*), with the sestet most uneven. Some of the rhymes are off-rhymes rather than true. One could see this as a failure of technique, a lack of verbal sophistication; or could one see it as a naturalness that fits the often conversational rhythms of language ('He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter/Of hoofs...') and the rough subject?





BOGLAND

Background and context

In the autumn of 1968 the Heaneys spent some time with the painter T. P. Flanagan and his family at McFadden's hotel in Gort an Choirce, Co. Donegal. Poet and painter wandered the landscape, stopping at times to sketch or view. They were careful to keep separate and independent their reactions to the landscape, the painter reluctant to show Heaney even the outline of his sketches, lest they should influence and colour the poet's own individual, authentic approach to the subject. Heaney dedicated 'Bogland' to T. P. Flanagan.

In *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978*, Heaney gives us some more information about the genesis of this poem and the significance of bog for him.

I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbours had got their photographs in the paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you

will realise that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was 'found in a bog.' Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealised need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after 'We have no prairies...' – but we have bogs.

At that time I was teaching modern literature in Queen's University, Belfast, and had been reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up – or rather, laid down – the bog as an answering Irish myth. I wrote it quickly the next morning, having slept on my excitement, and revised it on the hoof, from line to line, as it came...

Again, as in the case of 'Digging', the seminal impulse had been unconscious. What generated the poem about memory was something lying beneath the very floor of memory, something I only connected with the poem months after it was written, which was a warning that older people would give us about going into the bog. They were afraid we might fall into the pools in the old workings so they put it about (and we believed them) that there was no bottom in the bog-holes. Little did they – or I – know that I would filch it for the last line of a book.

A number of poems in *Door into the Dark* deal with local landscape – 'Whinlands', 'The Plantation', 'Shoreline' and





'Bogland'. There is a similarity of approach to the theme, in that the poet is delving into the past history of the place and also making connections with modern society, perhaps attempting to find a universal significance in the landscape. 'Bogland' is the clearest of these poems.

Bogland: our national consciousness

As he said himself, Heaney thought of bogland as the memory of the landscape, a landscape he viewed poetically as somehow incorporating national consciousness. Here he has forged a metaphor to explore 'Irishness'. In this poem the bog is, first of all, a repository of history. It preserves and gives back heritage ('the skeleton of the Great Irish Elk/Out of the peat'). Also, it yields up some mysteries:

*Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.*

Notions of superstition and magic were associated with the burial of butter in bogs, adding another layer of complexity to this newly excavated consciousness. Myth and folk knowledge too are part of it ('The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage'). Tales to frighten children still resonate in the adult consciousness ('The wet centre is bottomless'). So the bog is the repository of our history, of memories of myth and magic, of folk fears – all of which go to make up identity, what we are, how we still think and feel. Heaney is attempting to deal with buried memory, with the dark areas of the human psyche, the Cyclops-like grotesqueness in all of us. The bog is the door into this dark.

But Heaney is dealing also with tribal consciousness, race memory. The contrast with the American prairies helps to define this. The prairie view opens out before a person, providing opportunities, offering possibilities of new achievement, of expansion. In contrast, the Irish landscape limits the view, restricts human possibilities.

*Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon*

*Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn.*

It draws us downwards, inwards and backwards through history. Is Heaney adverting to the inward-looking nature of the Ulster mind, aware, as one critic put it, 'that Ulster is not a place of expanding frontiers'? Certainly the process of uncovering the consciousness involves going down and down, excavating layers of history and past experience, uncovering the psychological profile of Irishness.

*Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,*

*Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.*

These pioneers uncover past magnificence that is grandly out of place and functionless today (the great elk has become 'an astounding crate full of air'), along with the magic, the superstition and the folk fears. But the poet is aware too of the depth and complexity of national consciousness, that the full truth may





be unreachable ('The wet centre is bottomless'). So, through the metaphor of bogland, the poet has created a metaphorical description of Ireland and is, as Edna Longley said, ready to 'pioneer the frontiers of Irish consciousness'.

Theme

The poem is making a statement about the complexity of the Irish mentality, with its layers of race memory, its sense of heritage, myth and magic, its introspection, its fluid, shifting consciousness ('Melting and opening underfoot'), which ultimately may be impossible to define fully.

Imagery

The central metaphor is that of bog, with all the connotations that that image can hold about Irishness. We have already examined its main facet: as repository of a heritage. But even more interesting from a psychological point of view is its delicate nature: the surface is a thin, delicate layer for living on, 'crusting/Between the sights of the sun.' Underneath this is a soft, moving, volatile mass, an apt parallel for the unconscious mind. It is gentle and placid ('The ground itself is kind, black butter'). It has not got the hardness of coal, rather it is a flabby consciousness, an all-enveloping softness that embraces 'the waterlogged trunks/Of great firs, soft as pulp.' The bog is feminine, all-embracing, welcoming.

Eyes and sight feature prominently, appropriate to the notion of search in the theme ('big sun', 'everywhere the eye concedes', 'sights of the sun'). But the most arresting sight reference is to 'the cyclops' eye', an image that makes naught of time, linking

us immediately to the classical world. Perhaps more significant are the associations thrown up by the image of misshapen man, grotesque humanity. It is through this singular and unnatural vision that the past is viewed.

Everywhere there is water or hints of it (the tarn, waterlogged trunks, bogholes, Atlantic seepage, the wet centre that is bottomless).

But the most astonishing image, with all the excitement of a conceit, is forged out of the great Irish elk as 'an astounding crate full of air.' The heritage, while exciting, does not sit easily in today's world and almost defies description.

Altogether, the poem is threaded together on memorable natural images full of significance to the theme.

Form

The poem is written in thin, unrhymed four-line stanzas. The short lines force a tightening of expression, where ideas are communicated in short bursts of phrases, concentrated but unpolished.

The ground itself is kind, black butter,

*Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.*

At times, as with the last line quoted, the language is casual, almost colloquial.





WINTERING OUT, 1972

Heaney's third volume of poetry, *Wintering Out*, was published in 1972. The terms 'wintering out' and 'winterage' are used in farming to describe the custom of putting mature cattle onto a sheltered area of dry land with relatively good grass. This is often at some distance from the main farm, where they would be expected to survive the winter with no extra feeding and with little supervision. It was a sort of seasonal exile for animals. The term 'wintering out' was also used in connection with the seasonal movement of migrant farm labourers, and it is in this context that the term is used in the poem 'Servant Boy'.

The year 1969 saw riots, bombs and sectarian killings in Northern Ireland. The Provisional IRA became a powerful force, and the British army was deployed on the streets. Yet at this stage, Heaney hardly ever addresses these contemporary political issues directly. Instead he makes a journey back into the past, exploring Ireland's past and also the remote past of prehistoric humans. So he concentrates on the origins of the conflict: the sense of linguistic and cultural difference; the history of conflicting classes; an exploration of the traditions, history and sense of identity of his own clan, the Northern Catholics.

For example, in 'Bog Oak', through the metaphor of the title, he can revisit the native dispossessed of the seventeenth century. In 'Gifts of Rain' he tries to forge links with the watery landscape of his birth and establish a sense of his own identity. 'The Last Mummer' points up the clash of cultures and signals the death of the old ways. And there are many poems exploring the meaning

of place-names and, in so doing, exemplifying the linguistic dispossession of the Irish: poems such as 'Anahorish', 'Broach', 'Toome', and 'Traditions'.

'The Other Side' is one of the few poems in *Wintering Out* that deals directly and personally with the issue of religious and cultural difference in present-day society. Directness and immediacy are achieved by dramatising the issues and objectifying them in the uneasy relationship between the poet's family and a Presbyterian neighbour. Once again Heaney is focusing in on the local scene, the small picture; but by examining the microcosm he gives us an insight into the larger scene, the relationship between the two cultures. Differences in outlook, self-image and modes of language, as well as in religion, are explored.

In 'The Tollund Man' he finds an oblique way of examining the sacrificial killings, the power of religion and the deadly demands of myth in our society. But this examination is carried out at one remove, with the voice of the anthropologist or historian for the most part. It is as if the present is too raw to be viewed directly.

Part 2 contains some more personal and emotive poems: exploring the sadness behind the celebration on his 'Wedding Day', recording painful separation in 'Mother of the Groom', and a string of poems featuring isolated, unappreciated, tragically unhappy female figures: 'A Winter's Tale', 'Shore Woman', 'Maighdean Mara', 'Limbo' and 'Bye-child'.





THE TOLLUND MAN

Background and genesis of the poem

We have seen Heaney's fascination with local landscape, in particular bogland, and his use of it as a metaphor to explore the nature of Irish consciousness. He seemed more reluctant to explore the contemporary visible expression of that consciousness in the explosion of political violence in 1969. But in that year the chance discovery of a book, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* by P. V. Glob, a Danish archaeologist, seemed to provide a new poetic impetus for Heaney to continue exploring the past, and at the same time it provided a historical perspective and parallels with which he could confront the present Troubles.

Glob's book is concerned with the perfectly preserved bodies, dating from the Iron Age, discovered this century in Danish bogs. One of these is 'Tollund Man', discovered in 1950 in western Denmark by two turf-cutters. The man was naked, except for a cap and belt, with a noose around his neck (a 'torc' in the poem). It is presumed that he had been put to death in a fertility rite as an offering to the Earth Mother, the fertility goddess Nerthus, and buried in her bog, which preserved his body.

Glob's book was fascinating for Heaney, as it dealt with many of his poetic obsessions and themes, such as landscape, history, myth, sexuality, and violence. The poet was moved particularly by the photograph of Tollund Man. His first reaction was one of recognition, familiarity across the ages. 'The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of the

moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside,' he said in an interview (with James Randall, in *Plough Shares*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1979). This empathy, this sense of instant familiarity, almost of family feeling, gives a great intimacy to the poem.

But, more importantly, the image of Tollund Man, a symbol of humans sacrificed to dark forces and the needs of community, provides a link to the present-day Troubles. Heaney had been searching for 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament.' In October 1974, in a lecture entitled 'Feeling into Words' given at the Royal Society of Literature, he explained the connections – political, religious and social – that Tollund Man established for him across the Dark Ages.

From that moment [the outbreak of violence in 1969] the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish. I do not mean public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity – although there is nothing necessarily unpoetic about such celebration, if one thinks of Yeats's 'Easter 1916'. I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to





grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. And when I say religious, I am not thinking simply of the sectarian division. To some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power.

Now I realise that this idiom is remote from the agnostic world of economic interest whose iron hand operates in the velvet glove of 'talks between elected representatives', and remote from the political manoeuvres of power-sharing; but it is not remote from the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing, and not remote from the bankrupt psychology and mythologies implicit in the terms Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant. The question, as ever, is 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?' And my answer is, by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity'.

Some of these emblems I found in a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started, in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People*. It was chiefly concerned with preserved

bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. The author, P. V. Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these, and in particular the Tollund Man, whose head is now preserved near Aarhus in the museum at Silkeborg, were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern. And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles. When I wrote this poem, I had a completely new sensation, one of fear. It was a vow to go on pilgrimage and I felt as it came to me – and again it came quickly – that unless I was deeply in earnest about what I was saying, I was simply invoking dangers for myself. It is called 'The Tollund Man'...

And just how persistent the barbaric attitudes are, not only in the slaughter but in the psyche, I discovered again when the frisson of the poem itself had passed, and indeed after I had fulfilled the vow and gone to Jutland, 'the holy blissful martyr for to seke.' I read the following in a chapter on 'The Religion of the Pagan Celts' by the Celtic scholar Anne Ross:





'Moving from sanctuaries and shrines ...we come now to consider the nature of the actual deities ...But before going on to look at the nature of some of the individual deities and their cults, one can perhaps bridge the gap as it were by considering a symbol which, in its way, sums up the whole of Celtic pagan religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts. This is the symbol of the severed human head; in all its various modes of iconographic representation and verbal presentation, one may find the hard core of Celtic religion. It is indeed ...a kind of shorthand symbol for the entire religious outlook of the pagan Celts.'

My sense of occasion and almost awe as I vowed to go to pray to the Tollund Man and assist at his enshrined head had a longer ancestry than I had at the time realised.

I began by suggesting that my point of view involved poetry as divination, as a restoration of the culture to itself. In Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed. But here we stray from the realm of technique into the realm of tradition; to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet.

Politics

The poet is responding somewhat obliquely to political violence and present-day killings. He is using the *Bog People* material as an analogy, and, by setting up ironic similarities and contrasts, he is able to comment on the present Troubles.

One common motif linking past, present and future is that of a journey: the man's last sacrificial journey 'as he rode the tumbriel', the fatal journey of the brothers, 'trailed/For miles along the lines', and the poet's pilgrimage ('driving'). The ironic contrast between the consenting sacrificial death ('his sad freedom') and the brutality of the twentieth-century killing is surely intended. This refers to an incident in the 1920s in which four brothers were massacred by loyalist paramilitaries. Their bodies had been dragged along the railway lines over the sleepers as a kind of degrading, hate-filled mutilation. The shocking detail of the description ('Tell-tale skin and teeth/Flecking the sleepers') brings home the frenzy and inhumanity of that event; it contrasts poignantly with the quiet dignity of Tollund Man's last journey. We get the impression that he at least had some control over events: he 'rode' the tumbriel, he wasn't dragged, and it was for him a kind of 'freedom'.

The stark Anglo-Saxon poeticism of 'old man-killing parishes' links pagan past and Christian present in its hyphenated image. The same linkage is evident in

*I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground...*





Iron Age martyrs, modern-day martyrs – both become symbols, icons, sacred territory.

Is Heaney saying that present-day atrocities, albeit more brutal, are just modern versions of an age-old pattern of human activity? That in every society people are sacrificed to a political or religious goddess, are driven by inscrutable forces and desires to accept death for a cause, are mere pawns in the service of a community? And where does the poet stand on this issue? We don't know, because he doesn't comment explicitly. But we do know that he empathises, has a feeling for the situation. On his pilgrimage he will experience something of the feelings of the dispossessed, if only because he will be dispossessed of language.

*Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.*

Cultural dispossession has been an important element in his writings about nationalist community identity in Northern Ireland. He feels that he will share too the estrangement and unhappiness of the victim, a situation oddly familiar to him:

*I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.*

Feelings of estrangement and familiarity together produce this inconclusive, paradoxical ending, where 'home' does not seem very secure or comforting.

The critic Edna Longley complains about the 'ambiguous resolution' of this ending, but feels that this may be as far as he

can go and points out that he has reacted to tragic circumstances in a similar way in other poems. What we can say is that Heaney understands the nature of the victim in this poem; and, as the critic Michael Parker says, 'composing from a sense of reverence for a victim from the distant past came more easily to him than responding to the all-too-immediate horror of the present.'

Religious symbolism: pagan and Christian layers of meaning

Though this poem deals explicitly with violence and killing, paradoxically it has the shape and tone of a religious poem. The origin of the first killing is the pagan sacrifice to the Earth Mother, goddess of fertility. The fertility theme is introduced early, in the imagery of the first two stanzas: the 'pods' of his eyelids suggest dormant life, an idea reinforced explicitly in the 'gruel of winter seeds'. The earth as female principle is seen in stanza 4:

*She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen...*

'Bridegroom to the goddess', he enters the earth naked to guarantee fertility: spring reproduction. Eros and thanatos – sex drive and death wish – are closely intertwined. So it is primarily a religious fertility rite. Even the poet's prayer is expressed in fertility terms, 'to make germinate'. Tollund Man is seen as a religious figure. He has the preserved body of a religious martyr, itself evidence of holiness ('a saint's kept body'). The adjective 'mild' used to describe his eyelids suggests gentleness. The poet risks blasphemy and prays to him to bring germination (new life, religious life?) to the dead of Northern Ireland.





Edna Longley sees Tollund Man as a Christ figure, ‘a Christ surrogate whose death and bizarre resurrection might redeem or symbolise redemption for “the scattered, ambushed/Flesh of labourers”’. Heaney’s Tollund Man assumes a number of religious roles – sacrificial victim, martyr, saint and Christ figure – and so becomes a powerful religious icon, to whom the poet risks praying and for whom he will undertake a pilgrimage.

Edna Longley has drawn attention to the religious shape of the poem and described its three parts as ‘evocation’, ‘invocation’, and ‘vocation’: evocation, or drawing of the scene, in part I; invocation, or the poet’s prayer, in part II; and vocation, or the poet’s inner compulsion or need to make a pilgrimage, in part III. The poet, as in the age-old way of pilgrimage, vows to make a journey to the sacred site seeking enlightenment or divine assistance. The pilgrimage here bridges time and space and gives this the universality of religious poetry. With a little humorous twist it links the Iron Age with the age of the motor car. Heaney is a twentieth-century motorist-pilgrim. Yet this has all the elements of a genuine pilgrimage: the sombre, reverent mood (‘Something of his sad freedom ... Should come to me’); the recitation of prayers and litanies (‘saying the names/Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard’); the looking for signs (‘Watching the pointing hands’).

How diction, imagery and word sounds create mood

Part I

The mood of the opening stanza is one of gentle reverence. The first line is one of almost monosyllabic simplicity of language – no

musical effects, no repeated consonant or vowel sounds: just a plain simplicity of expression, reflecting the purity of the poet’s feelings. Lines 2, 3 and 4 have a pattern of *s*, *p*, *d* and *i* sounds, which carry the softness of the tone. This mood of gentleness is reinforced by the adjective ‘mild’, with its Christian associations.

The harsher reality of the event begins to intrude in the second stanza, through the diction (filth, dug, gruel, caked), with its raucous and harsh sounds. The image of ‘last gruel ... Caked in his stomach’ is a vivid reminder of the untimeliness of the death.

The prevailing mood of the third stanza is one of sympathy. The imagery of the pathetic dress, ‘Naked except for/The cap, noose and girdle,’ reminds us of the unequal odds. The only energy of the entire part comes in the fourth stanza, with the frisson of sexuality in the imagery, describing the deadly sexual embrace.

The mood of quietness returns in the fifth stanza, created by the long *o* and *a* sounds and the gentle *s* sounds. The choice of the word ‘reposes’ befits the tranquillity of a statue or any religious icon.

Part II

In the first stanza of this section the diction chosen is full of weighty religious terminology (blasphemy, consecrate, holy ground, pray). This contrasts oddly with the violence of the imagery in stanzas 3 and 4. The unexpectedness of this adds to the shock, but the shape and style of the quatrain has something to do with the effect also. The horrific violence is made all the more poignant by being carried in a neutral style and tone, like reportage. The horrifying images are pruned of all excess words





and squeezed into the thin short-line quatrains. Images flick across the eye in a staccato rhythm, like a film shot at some pace.

*The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,*

*Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers*

Then we get the pathos of ‘four young brothers’, which draws us back to the image of ‘stockinged corpses’ and suggests youth, innocence and vulnerability. These images are among the most telling in the poem and create feelings of both revulsion and sympathy.

Part III

The mood changes again with the sombre rhythms and sounds here. A sad music is achieved with the rhythmic trochees at the end of each of the first three lines (freedom, tumbriel, driving), the *s* alliteration, the plaintive *e* sounds (free, he, me), and the long *a* sounds (‘Saying the names’). Out of this doleful music emerges the startling image of a tumbriel, anachronistic with its associations with the French Revolution and reminders of state killing in every age.

The mood created in the last two stanzas is somewhat confused, as the poet experiences contradictory feelings. He empathises and is alienated at the same time. The alienation is reinforced by the meaningless litany of foreign sounds and disjointed imagery

of fragments of people, the synecdoche of ‘pointing hands’ and ‘tongue’. The poet is lost yet strangely at home in the familiarity of violence. The image of ‘man-killing parishes’, yoking together the pagan and the Christian worlds, offers a final bleak comment on the state of humankind.





NORTH, 1975

Biographical background

Heaney spent the academic year 1970–71 as guest lecturer at the University of Berkeley, California, and found it difficult to settle back into life in Northern Ireland when he returned, a transition he described as ‘like putting an old dirty glove on again’. He found the daily ritual of road-blocks, arrests, vigilante patrols, explosions and killings deeply disturbing. There were many flash-points and multiple killings at that time, such as Bloody Sunday in January 1972, when British paratroopers opened fire during a Civil Rights Association march, killing thirteen unarmed civilians and wounding others. Soon afterwards the internal Northern Ireland system of government operating from Stormont was abolished and direct rule from London instituted in its place.

Whatever the background reasons, whether political, family or artistic, Heaney decided it was time to leave Belfast and devote himself entirely to his writing. He resigned his post as lecturer in English at Queen’s University and moved with his family to a cottage in Glanmore, Co. Wicklow, during the summer of 1972, determined to go it alone as a poet and freelance writer. Inevitably the newspapers gave the move a political dimension. A Southern paper trumpeted ‘Ulster poet moves south’, while the Protestant Telegraph in Belfast referred to Heaney as ‘the well-known Papish propagandist’.

North: the volume

North, Heaney’s fourth volume, appeared in 1975. The publisher’s blurb gives an accurate overview: ‘Here the Irish experience

is refracted through images drawn from different parts of the Northern European experience, and the idea of the north allows the poet to contemplate the violence on his home ground in relation to memories of the Scandinavian and English invasions which have marked Irish history so indelibly.’ In Part I, he ranges over two or three thousand years of European civilisation, from the myths of classical Greece to nineteenth-century Irish history, examining stories of conquest, cultural conflict and deeds of violence in an effort to understand the present-day Irish conflict, attempting to illuminate the present through focusing on the past.

If Part I deals with conflict, in its broadest scope, at the level of history and myth, exploring the conflict of tribes and nations, in Part II the focus narrows to the individual human being caught in this vortex. Heaney attempts to understand his own psyche, to chart his personal journey, to understand the pressures on and prejudices of one individual in Northern Ireland. In ‘An Unacknowledged Legislator’s Dream’ and ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ we get his personal and philosophical reaction to his present-day divided and war-torn society.

*Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us:
Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,
Subtle discrimination by addresses
With hardly an exception to the rule
That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled Prod
And Séamus (call me Seán) was sure-fire Pape.
O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,
Of open minds as open as a trap
(‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’)*





The six poems in 'Singing School' (a set of six autobiographical poems) mark milestones in his development as a poet and member of his tribe, the Northern Catholic. In 'The Ministry of Fear', 'Fosterage' and 'Exposure' he charts a fascination with words from his first encounter as a schoolboy in St Columb's College and the encouragement of Michael McLaverty to his present status as writer in exile in Co. Wicklow.

*I am neither internee nor informer;
An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful; a wood-kerne*

*Escaped from the massacre,
Taking protective colouring
From bole and bark, feeling
Every wind that blows
(Exposure)*

In 'A Constable Calls' he recalls, from a child's perspective, his fear of an alien law. In 'Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966' his nationalist view of loyalist triumphalism during the marching season is charted. 'Summer 1969' suggests the impossibility of his escaping the conflict, historically or geographically. Even on holiday in Spain he is confronted with violence in Goya's famous painting *Shootings of the Third of May*.

This then is a book of enormous scope, examining the violence and savagery of conquest, at its broadest incidence in myth and international history, but also at the microcosmic level of the individual human psyche.

This collection of conflict poems is prefaced by two poems of a completely different sort, two peaceful poems outside the stream of history and time, recalling the security of childhood, the holistic nature of the old ways of life, the peacefulness of the countryside, and the stability and certainty provided by family love and values. These are 'Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication'. The first of these is 'Sunlight'.





MOSSBAWN: TWO POEMS IN DEDICATION (I) SUNLIGHT

Background

Mossbawn is the family home where Seamus Heaney grew up, a place that was for him, as home is for all children, the centre of the world and the source of all life and energy. He says of it:

I would begin with the Greek word omphalos, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard. There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. Five households drew water from it. Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water. The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos.
(BBC radio interview, 1978, reprinted in *Preoccupations*, 1980.)

Mary Heaney was his aunt, a kind of second mother to him, for whom he had a special affection. She features in a number of his poems: as one of the family women in 'Churning Day', both as a young girl and as a woman taking the young Séamus on a trip to the seaside in 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', and as the planter of a memorial tree in 'Clearances'. She represents the old secure, stable way of life, a sense of community and traditional rural values.

Significance of the poem

Given the context of this poem in a volume dealing primarily with violence, past and present, are we justified in viewing the piece as somewhat escapist? The poet has created a timeless zone of slow days, domestic ritual, natural and human warmth, and companionable silence – a safe haven amid the surrounding violence. We are taken back in time to childhood, pictured here as the golden age of innocence and security. (In general, childhood is not sentimentalised by Heaney: see 'Death of a Naturalist', 'Mid-Term Break' and 'The Early Purges'.) Is this nostalgic escapism or a search for alternative human values, values no longer found in present-day society?

Values

The values featured here are domestic: the value of unspectacular routine work ('Now she dusts the board/with a goose's wing'); the practice of simple culinary skills ('her hands scuffled/over the bakeboard'); the routine of a life-style pared down to its essentials of bread, water and love. Far from suggesting deprivation, these bare essentials are imbued with a sense of mystery, a sense of the





sacramental, suggesting a religious simplicity of life: the water is 'honeyed', 'the scone rising,' and 'here is love.'

Family feeling is important here. Love grows out of simple shared domestic tasks, love flourishes in an ordinary, unspectacular setting, among ordinary, unglamorous people ('broad-lapped,/ with whitened nails/and measling shins'), flowering in the silent spaces between people.

*And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.*

Love is associated with the simplest of food staple, lurking in the life-giving meal, unspectacular ('a tinsmith's scoop') yet vital.

The values of silence and peace are also stressed ('sunlit absence', 'each long afternoon', 'here is a space/again', 'the tick of two clocks').

All these values are found by reaching back to a pre-modern time. All the props of the scene suggest an earlier age: the pump in the yard, a griddle cooling, the reddening stove, a goose's wing, the meal bin. They are rural values, born of a simple life. Yet they are made to appear poignantly appealing, offering an ideal way of living.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere created is one of warmth, serenity and quiet vitality. This is achieved primarily through the imagery and symbolism. Images of sunlight and heat predominate ('a sunlit

absence', 'water honeyed', 'the sun stood/like a griddle cooling/ against the wall,' 'the reddening stove'). The 'helmeted' pump is both actual and symbolic, a soldier on sentry duty protecting the household. But, more importantly, the pump is in immediate contact with the hidden springs of the earth, the source of life. Its water is mysteriously transformed ('honeyed'). As the critic Michael Parker says, it 'serves as an icon or symbol for the subterranean energies of the place and people'. The sun too is captured by the scene, reduced to domestic proportions ('like a griddle cooling'). The bread and water too are life symbols. The alliterative language (helmeted, heated, honeyed) creates a melodic flow that also helps to build this atmosphere of 'mellow fruitfulness'. Heaney himself is reported as saying that it was intended to be a description of the experience of a foetus in the womb.

But the atmosphere is not lazy. There is a quiet energy in this poem, achieved partly through the style of verse. A great deal is packed into these very short lines. The resulting enjambment or continuation of ideas – not just from one line to the next but also from one verse to the next – creates a sense of contained energy. The erratic activities and pauses in the aunt's baking ritual contribute also to this sense of restlessness ('now she dusts the board', 'now sits', 'here is a space').





A CONSTABLE CALLS

This is one of a set of six autobiographical poems entitled 'Singing School', which deals with the development of Heaney's sense of identity as a poet and as a member of the Northern Catholic community. It records the sense of fear and guilt experienced as a child when he encountered a figure of the law. Perhaps it is meant to be symbolic of the uneasy nationalist relationship with the forces of law and order, but in truth it could be describing 'any child's encounter with a threatening figure of remote authority' (James Simmons).

The bicycle is described in images and sounds that suggest ugliness and crude strength. The *ow* sound in 'cowl' has a crude primitiveness, and the assonance of 'fat black' emphasises the suggestions of ungainly strength in the adjectives. The 'spud' of the dynamo continues to build, both in image and sound, the pervasive atmosphere of crude, even brutal, strength. Perhaps there is also a hint of aggression, possibly life-threatening, in that dynamo metaphor, 'gleaming and cocked back' (as in a gun?). The feeling of oppression is created quite overtly, indeed without a great deal of subtlety, in the image at the end of the second stanza:

*The pedal treads hanging relieved
Of the boot of the law.*

And all of this is created before we meet the policeman.

The policeman never comes across as a person but is defined in terms of his accoutrements and uniform. A series of disjointed

references to the 'heavy ledger', the 'polished holster', 'the braid cord/Looped into the revolver butt' and 'the baton-case' establish the figure of military authority, while the only human reference, to the upside-down cap ('The line of its pressure ran like a bevel/In his slightly sweating hair'), does not serve to humanise this figure but rather repels us further. Under this stern figure of authority the agricultural survey returns have assumed the status of a day of reckoning, and the 'heavy ledger' becomes the 'domesday book'. The brisk official tone of the questioning enhances the impersonal nature of this encounter.

*'Any other root crops?
Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?'
'No?'*

There are quite divergent critical views on the truth of this poem. Some read it as a specific political statement, the policeman the embodiment of the unionist state and the young boy experiencing the fear, the guilt and the alienation of the dispossessed Irish. Others, such as James Simmons ('The trouble with Seamus' in *Séamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Elmer Andrews), are of the opinion that this is a false reading. Simmons feels that this is quite a weak poem, describing ordinary, exaggerated childish fears, and that it doesn't add very much to our understanding of the nationalist identity.

The father may have been making a few false returns, but the child has heard of the black hole in the barracks and fears that his father may be carried off for his crimes. This is a pleasant little story, vividly told, but there is little about it to justify its place in a short





sequence. A protestant poet might write an exactly similar piece. False returns and a fear of the law are probably universal, but in the context of Heaney's poem, the very vagueness of the story must be generally thought to be one more example of the horrors of being a catholic in Northern Ireland.

How do you read this poem? The critic Edna Longley, writing about the falseness of the ending, speaks of 'the caller's bike becoming, even from the child's eye view, an implausibly melodramatic time-bomb'. Do you find this poem real or melodramatic?





FIELD WORK, 1979

Biographical and political background

The Heaney family lived a fairly insular rural existence in the cottage at Glanmore, Co. Wicklow, from 1972 until 1976. 'I wanted the kids to have that sort of wild animal life that I had. They were like little rodents through the hedges ... I wanted that eye-level life with the backs of ditches, the ferns and the smell of cow dung, and I suppose I didn't want to lose that in myself.'

Isolated, the family was forced back on its own resources, a process that was different and unsettling but not without its rewards. The children's enjoyment of the simple life enabled Heaney to re-imagine his own childhood and rural values. The isolation also forced husband and wife to rediscover each other. These issues surfaced as themes in his lyrics.

Heaney went back to full-time teaching in the English Department of Carysfort Teacher Training College from 1975 to 1981. And, chiefly to facilitate their growing family, in 1976 the Heaneys abandoned their rural retreat for the convenience of a house in Sandymount, Dublin.

The violence in Northern Ireland continued to increase. In 1975 and 1976 alone over five hundred people were killed and more than five thousand were injured. The poet's cousin Colum McCartney was killed in a random sectarian attack. In 1975 three members of the Miami Showband were murdered by the UVF. Retaliation killings were common. In August 1976 the 'Peace People' movement was begun, after three children were killed by

a runaway car in Andersonstown when the IRA driver was shot by a British army patrol. For a while ordinary people north and south raised their voices against the killings – killings that feature in a very personal and poignant way in *Field Work*.

Field Work: the volume

Published in 1979, *Field Work* is the volume that first reflects Heaney's move to Co. Wicklow. The ten Glanmore sonnets that form the centrepiece capture the atmosphere of the place: the mysterious landscape that doesn't always yield up its secrets, populated by deer and rats, cuckoos and corncrakes, and the kind of rural work practices that make casual appearances: ploughs, tractors, silage, etc. He explores the relationship between language and land.

It might be seen as a retreat from the world, as many a literary figure before him had done. Indeed the scope of the poetry has narrowed considerably from that in *North*, which ranged over continents and millennia, to a field and four years in *Field Work*. But Heaney did not see this retreat as a running away, rather as a time for refocusing, for learning. As he put it (in *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, autumn 1979): 'Those four years were an important growth time when I was asking myself questions about the proper function of poets and poetry and learning a new commitment to the art.' Indeed he refers frequently to the time spent in 'the hedge-school of Glanmore', with all the image's connotations of peasant learning in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Heaney begins the volume with 'Oysters', determined to begin afresh, to cast aside history, to live for the day, and to write freely





out of his imagination, unshackled by heritage. But, ironically, his imagination takes him right back to politics and to Ulster in the very next poem. 'After a Killing' was written following the murder of the British ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, in July 1976. In the face of the centuries-old conflict the poet struggles to find some crumb of comfort in nature ('small-eyed survivor flowers') or in unexpected human courtesy ('a girl walks in home to us/Carrying a basket full of new potatoes').

The march referred to in 'At the Water's Edge' occurred in March 1972 amid a protest about the Bloody Sunday shootings of January 1972. 'The Strand at Lough Beg' is an elegy for his cousin Colum McCartney, the victim of a sectarian killing. 'A Postcard from North Antrim' commemorates Seán Armstrong, a friend who was similarly gunned down. 'Casualty' celebrates the determined independence of the fisherman Louis O'Neill, an acquaintance of Heaney's, who was blown up.

There is no escape from Ulster for Heaney, no escape from death, even in this rural retreat of Glanmore, where a foraging nocturnal badger might be taken as the spirit of 'the murdered dead' and where such 'visitations are taken for signs.' The difference in the poetry is that these are elegies recording the poet's personal grief at the loss of friends and relations rather than philosophical pieces attempting to understand the ills of the nation (such as we found in 'North'). The focus here is more limited, and the tone is what Heaney himself described as 'a more social voice'. It is as if truth is to be found at the level of individual experience and feeling.

But there are few certainties in this book. *Field Work* is strewn with unanswered and unanswerable questions: Who's sorry for our trouble? ... What will become of us? ... What is my apology for poetry? The old certainties are no longer within reach; instead there is a great deal of troubled questioning.

One of Heaney's responses to the uncertainty is to strive for renewal in his personal life. He attempts to find a new understanding of marriage and to forge a new, real and more equal relationship with his wife. In a series of very personal, even idiosyncratic love poems he explores married life and love. He is enthralled by his wife's alluring charm, whether she is diving into a pool in Tuscany ('The Otter') or rummaging around in a bottom drawer ('The Skunk'). She is a nest in 'Home Comings', a reclaimed marsh in 'Polder' and a tree spirit in 'Field Work'.

In 'Harvest Bow' he looks back again to find reassurance in family and cultural continuity. This poem seems to fulfil a similar function to the Mossbawn poems, in its celebration of the way of life and skills of his father, his aunts, etc.

Field Work deals with both political and domestic experience and how they are intertwined. The last two poems exemplify this, where Heaney identifies with Francis Ledwidge, the young poet killed in the First World War, and also with the sufferings of a family from Dante's *Inferno*, tortured for political purposes ('In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' and 'Ugolino').





THE SKUNK

Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'

A comparison with Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' might provide an easy way into the Heaney poem. Lowell was read and much admired by Heaney in the 1970s. The Lowell poem is one of intense isolation, loneliness and depression, where the speaker is driven to be a voyeur of lovers in cars.

*A car radio bleats,
'Love, O careless Love...' I hear my ill-spirit sob in each
blood cell, as if my hand were at its throat...
I myself am hell, nobody's here – only skunks, that search in
the moonlight for a bite to eat.*

Heaney's 'Skunk' also fills the night loneliness as, temporarily exiled, the poet sits writing in the Californian darkness, separated from his wife. But Heaney's state of mind is not at all like the tormented, desolate Lowell's; instead he is writing love letters, 'broaching the word "wife"/like a stored cask'. The skunk becomes a regular feature of his evenings ('I expected her like a visitor'). Somehow the skunk's visit recalls his wife's presence, perhaps because of the accidental contemporaneity with the poet's love letters. In a very risky zoomorphic comparison, the skunk takes on the qualities of the absent wife.

*And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,
Mythologized, demythologized,
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.*

This Californian encounter is recalled for him in the last verse, when he sees his wife rummaging for a nightdress in a bedroom bottom drawer, striking a quite ridiculous skunk-like posture.

The analogy

This is one of a series of poems in which Heaney's wife is sometimes pictured as an otter, a skunk, a sand martin's nest, etc. These zoomorphic comparisons (attributing the form or nature of an animal to something) are unusual and unexpected, rather in the style of metaphysical conceits. While they are startling in themselves, the effect is to emphasise the naturalness of the relationship and to communicate something of the primitive erotic animal attraction involved.

The analogy here is particularly risky, in that the associations normally evoked by the skunk are noxious, unpleasant and anything but erotic. The new associations created by the poet are equally startling ('like the chasuble/At a funeral mass'). Perhaps it is this unexpected mixture of connotations, sacred and sexual, repulsive and erotically inviting, that forms the main appeal of this analogy.

A love poem

This is a very sensuous poem, where all the senses are assailed at once. A gentle romantic light provides the ambient colour for the poem ('My desk light softened beyond the verandah'). Otherwise the predominant colour is black, but a black that comes with diverse associations: that of wild animal, funeral mass and alluring nightdress. The sense of smell is evoked with exotic effect ('the





beautiful, useless/Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence'). Smell and taste are combined in a synaesthetic image.

The aftermath of a mouthful of wine

Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

Sounds too are used to emphasise the primitive nature of the feelings ('snuffing the boards') and also to create the erotic allure ('stirred by the sootfall!') with the s sounds and the soft o.

But the poem goes beyond just creating a sensuous atmosphere. It has a direct erotic appeal. Watching the animal, he is 'tense as a voyeur', fascinated by her glamour, her mysteriousness, in a moment of transferred eroticism. This is recreated in the bedroom scene of the last stanza, a moment described by the critic Neil Corcoran (in *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney*) as 'charged with affection and intimacy, turning a faintly ridiculous human posture into an unconscious erotic invitation'.

'Sootfall', a word created by Heaney, conjures up both the delicacy of the discarded clothes and their dirtiness. That they have been used by her is alluring. It is faintly ironic that she is searching for a plunge-line nightdress, as he finds her attractive and exciting without it. The animal analogy here emphasises the basic, primitive nature of sex. It is a moment of stark married intimacy, forthrightly and honestly recalled.

The aspect of love dramatised here is not of the superficial, jazzy, romantic variety. If anything, the poet's attitude is anti-romantic, focusing on the physical attraction of older, imperfect bodies. She must feel that she needs the plunge-line nightdress. The shadowy presence of the skunk emphasises the more banal contexts for

erotic attraction. This is about ordinary, everyday, unscrubbed, unperfumed intimacy between real people. Neither love nor the human body is idealised here.

Imagery

One of the more exciting technical features of this poem is the unusual imagery, the startling comparisons drawn in similes and metaphors. Some are quite shocking, such as the skunk's tail 'damasked like the chasuble/At a funeral mass.' The suggestion of black here is picked up by the 'plunge-line nightdress' at the end of the poem, creating altogether a combination of unusual associations, sacred and sexual. The uncomfortable honesty of the poet's self-image, where he sees himself 'tense as a voyeur', sets the tone of the poem. 'The word "wife"/Like a stored cask' throws up suggestions about the value of the relationship, its maturity, its age, indeed its hidden and private ingredients.

The combining of sensations in the imagery that has already been noticed ('a mouthful of wine ... inhaling you off a cold pillow') portrays the multifaceted richness of the love, as well as its sensuality. But of all the imagery, the final metaphor must be the most startling: the wife's skunk-like posture at a bottom drawer.

Rhythm of language

The rhythm varies and changes to suit the purpose at particular stages of the poem. He uses self-contained, stopped lines of three or four stresses when setting the scene (for example in stanza 2). The effect is of a picture painted with the economy of four brush-strokes. But he also uses enjambment, with each line running into the next – even into the next verse – to create a sense of urgency





and excitement and to allow a flow of feelings. (We can see this at work in stanzas 3 and 4, for example.) The language used ranges from the usual heavily descriptive, conversational style we are accustomed to in Heaney to the more analytical and academic at times ('mythologized', 'demythologized', etc.).





THE HARVEST BOW

This poem is in the tradition of ‘Digging’, ‘Follower’, the ‘Mossbawn’ poems and others where Heaney returns to his family, in particular to his father and aunt, and to the ethos and values of his childhood community. Here he considers this artefact, the harvest bow, a woven corn ornament produced by his father, to whom this poem is addressed.

The bow as a work of art

To the poet the bow is a work of art that enlightens the viewer (‘brightens as it tightens twist by twist/Into a knowable corona’). Notice the emphasis on illumination. In a paradoxical image, the poet hints at its natural – therefore transient – nature but also suggests that it has the enduring quality of all good art (‘wheat that does not rust’). Like all art, it carries real feelings and emotional truth (it is a ‘love-knot’). Yet it is somehow disposable (‘a throwaway’) and fragile (‘of straw’). Perhaps the somewhat paradoxical nature of the qualities of the harvest bow in the first stanza stem from the use of two different viewpoints: to the poet it is a work of art; to his father, the maker, it is a mere symbolic trifle (‘a throwaway love-knot of straw’).

Artefact as inspiration for the poet

At any rate, the harvest bow has become a source of inspiration for the poet. He regards it almost as a fetish (anything irrationally revered), as he touches it to re-establish contact with his sense of community and heritage.

*I tell and finger it like braille,
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.*

It embodies and opens up his heritage for the poet. Fashioned by his father’s hands, it reveals a sense both of the traditional work practices and of the sports carried out by those hands:

*Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks.*

It carries something of the spirit of his ‘tongue-tied’ father, their shared past and the relationship between father and son. These are transmitted through images of simple boyhood activities (fishing, whacking the tops off weeds, silent, companionable walks with his father). This artefact embodies in its form the essence of his community, that skill and effort, the patient repetitive agricultural labour that every year produced works of art, of natural creativity in ‘that original townland/Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.’

So the harvest bow has become for the poet a doorway to a lost communal past, perhaps also a symbol of an age of innocence that attracts and inspires him.

Art as symbol

Perhaps it might be considered symbolic in a broader sense also. As a product of nature’s richest bounty, it could be seen as the embodiment of the life force, preserving the gold of the sun against time (‘brightens as it tightens’, ‘knowable corona’, ‘its golden loops’). In the final simile, that ‘spirit of the corn’ has evaded time’s trap (‘Like a drawn snare/Slipped’) and loosed





the life force, leaving the bow 'burnished' and 'still warm'. Paradoxically, the bow seems to be both death snare and symbol of life here. It incorporates both time and timelessness, symbolising the permanence of art and the transience of life.

The function of art in the community

What is the significance of the motto 'The end of art is peace'? We are reminded of Keats's discovered wisdom in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.' Whatever about its meaning, the insight gained here from the contemplation of this work of art is much less confidently asserted than that of Keats ('Could be the motto of this frail device'). Here it is more of an aspiration than definite advice for living. Nor does it seem to grow naturally out of the poem.

And what does it mean? Does it signify personal peace, individual tranquillity of mind achieved through the contemplation of, or the practice of, art? Does he mean social or political peace, achieved through understanding of the ethos and values of communities and apprehended through works of art such as this harvest bow? The end of art is peace is a slogan that W. B. Yeats borrowed from the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite poet and essayist, Coventry Patmore, and that Yeats used to embody his own ideas on the purpose of art in life. In Heaney's poem the motto certainly raises the question of the function of art (including literature) in society.

The literary critic Tony Curtis feels that the central message of the poem is a socio-political one.

The poem has a simplistic but strong central argument: work with 'fine intent' and hark to your gift, others may then learn, 'Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.' There may be no easy, clear, instructions from the previous generations, but Heaney and Ireland itself may learn from what does survive, the palpable.

So the sense of tradition and continuity, the value of family relationships, of delicate human craft skills, the even tenor of life lived in a rural setting and the other aspects of rural life so important to Heaney can be apprehended to some extent through surviving art and artefacts. This could be to the betterment of peaceful living.

This argument applies not just to the father's artefact but also to Heaney's own art, his poetry. This poem too is meant to be a force for the enlightenment of society, offering a tiny ray of hope by offering models of better living from a previous generation.

Do you find this line of thought convincing, or is it mere nostalgia on the part of the poet?

A portrait of his father

There are quite a few differences between this and previous representations of his father. In previous poems the father was associated with strenuous physical activities, such as digging and ploughing. Earlier poems have focused on his rump, his shoulders, etc. Here the focus is on his hands. So a new aspect of his father, as delicate craftsman, is examined here.





The father is also a changed man, a man who has mellowed with age.

As you plaited the harvest bow

You implicated the mellowed silence in you.

But Heaney does not let us forget the kind of man he was, as he contrasts the delicate dexterity of the present with the rough strength of the younger man, wielding ashplants and lapping the spurs on game-cocks.

The father–son relationship is still complex. The artistic relationship is similar to that of earlier poems: the poet is finding a similarity, a continuity, between his father’s skill and his own craft. Here his craft is to interpret, to verbalise the father’s craftsmanship. In this poem too the father is still portrayed as a strong, silent figure, unemotional, not good at verbal communication.

There is both a closeness and a sense of distance in this relationship. Silence unites father and son but also separates them. Silence can be both companionable and difficult to interpret. We might also notice that father and son are separated symbolically by the stanza division in stanzas 3 and 4 but united by the run-on lines between the verses.

You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick.

These hints of a less than idyllic relationship save the poem from sentimentality and nostalgia. For all that, the poet has a sense of pride in the father’s craftsmanship, in the skill of those hands that ‘harked to their gift and worked with fine intent’.

Themes and preoccupations

- The lost rural heritage and the need for a sense of continuity
- The function of art and poetry in society
- The importance of family relationships
- Stable memories of childhood as a well of healing waters to be drawn on when necessary.

Technique

Stanza form

As befits a weighty philosophical theme and a more narrative style of writing, Heaney is using a bigger verse format of six-line stanzas. There is no regular rhythm or metrical pattern, but lines are predominantly four-stress, with some three-stress and a few pentameters. It has much of the unstructured rhythm of conversation.

Sounds

The poem has a musical quality. Verses are structured in couplets, some rhyming but most half-rhyming. These off-rhymes do not draw attention away from the argument and create a pleasant unobtrusive music (bow – you; rust – twist; loops – slopes; midges – hedges; wall – lapel). Internal rhyme and assonance are used to create a musical background, or to draw attention to an image or idea. For example, in the first stanza ‘plaited – implicated’, ‘brightens – tightens’ and the repeated long o sounds in ‘knowable’, ‘corona’ and ‘throwaway’ create a sense of opening out, an expanding perspective, in tune with the idea and meaning. Other sound effects are used similarly throughout the poem.





Imagery

Images of corn predominate. The harvest bow is pictured as 'wheat that does not rust', 'love-knot of straw' and 'golden loop' and finally metamorphoses into 'a drawn snare'. Most of these images emphasise the golden colour and the positive life force of the corn. Even the snare is 'burnished' and 'still warm'. The bric-a-brac of the rural scene is realised in great and realistic detail ('Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges').

There are images too with a more philosophical abstract texture: a 'knowable corona', the 'drawn snare' (of time), etc.

Tone

The tone is reasonably positive. The poet believes his retrospective exploration is valuable and significant and that the discoveries made are of value to the present generation. The memories are relatively pleasant but realistically drawn, so the tone is one of satisfied retrospection rather than sentimental nostalgia. For all the quiet optimism there is a certain tentativeness about the tone as the poet realises how frail is the fetish and how experimental is the wisdom gleaned.

The end of art is peace

Could be the motto of this frail device.





STATION ISLAND, 1984

Published in 1984 by Faber and Faber, *Station Island* is a very complicated and sophisticated work, which uses a great range of myth, legend, and literary and historical allusion. These come from both Irish and European culture, ancient, medieval and modern, and Heaney uses them as entry points, or sometimes as parallels, in order to examine his own culture. Heaney has often been accused of not ‘tackling’ violence directly, of lack of passionate involvement in the Northern question. However, he does deal with the situation; indeed this volume is full of allusions and references to prisons, cells, compounds, policemen, punishments, informers, betrayals, and victims of violence. But Heaney is happier exploring the situation at one remove, using myth, legend, literature and history as an intermediary, a glass through which it is viewed.

Biographical background: the 1980s

For Seamus Heaney the 1980s were marked by a number of prestigious international teaching positions, while the publication of his prose heralded a growing reputation as a sharply intuitive literary interpreter and critic. In 1980 his collection of essays and lectures *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–78* was published. In 1982 he began a five-year contract teaching one term a year at Harvard University. With Ted Hughes he edited *The Rattle Bag*, a hugely varied anthology of poetry for young people, and he received an honorary doctorate from Queen’s University.

In 1983 *An Open Letter* was published as a *Field Day* pamphlet. In this verse letter Heaney objects to his work being included in an

anthology of British poetry. 1984 saw him elected to the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard; and in 1988 he became Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford. The Government of the Tongue, another collection of his lectures and critical writing, appeared also in that year.

Meanwhile at home the political situation deteriorated seriously. In August 1979 Lord Mountbatten, his fourteen year old grandson and a fourteen year old friend were blown up at Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo. Also at this time eighteen British soldiers were blown up by the IRA at Warrenpoint, Co. Down. The period of March to October 1981 saw the hunger strike by Republican prisoners in Long Kesh and the deaths of ten prisoners, among them Bobby Sands, who had just been elected a Westminster MP.





THE UNDERGROUND

A reading of the poem

The poem describes an event from Heaney's honeymoon in 1965, when the couple were rushing from a London Underground station, late for a Proms concert at the Albert Hall. It is a complex and uneasy love poem, at one level. It can be read as just a description of a mad late dash or a romantic love chase, an interpretation that is strengthened by the allusion to Pan's sexual pursuit of Eurydice. 'And me, me then like a fleet god gaining upon you before you turned to a reed'. The frantic energy of the chase is communicated by the energy of the verbs 'flapped', 'sprang' and the stream of running participles, 'running', 'speeding', 'gaining'. The language has some of the gentle intimacy of a love poem. He is speaking to his wife in casual phrases of colloquial English, informal, intimate: 'There we were ... you in your going-away coat ... me then like ...' The allusion to a fairy about being lost and then finding a way home lends it a certain sense of security and happiness, on the surface at least. The casual, intimate tone of the writing seems to set up the incident as a memory to smile about later.

Yet there are discordant notes in the love song, hints of unease, difficulties, trouble beneath the surface. The Pan/Syrinx myth thought it produced beautiful plaintive music was not a happy love story. Hansel and Gretel had more trials to undergo. This poem concludes not in the music-filled Albert Hall but in 'a draughty lamplit station', with the speaker troubled and tense - 'Bared and tensed as I am'. Tense, because he knows that like Orpheus, he will

be damned if he looks back, yet he waits for a glimpse of the wife that he loves. All in all it makes for somewhat uneasy reading in a love poem.

If we consider the context of this poem it helps to elucidate that darker layer of meaning that is always hinted at here. This is the introductory poem to Heaney's volume *Station Island*, in which he visits Lough Derg, a famous place of pilgrimage in Co. Donegal where thousands visit each year to fast and do penance. In this autobiographical volume, the ghosts of Heaney's past visit him with troubling conversations and memories. So the sentiment 'damned if I look back' at the end of this poem, proves ironic and completely in vain as the entire volume *Station Island* is about looking back and facing the troubled past. So as well as the tragic love reason from Orpheus there is another reason for not looking back, a resistance to confronting the ghosts of the troubled past. 'The Underground' too takes on other layers of meaning, such as the memories we keep hidden, buried in the underground of the subconscious. It houses the ghosts of the past, underground, in the Underworld. So this poem flags the dangers of looking back, not only in love, but the troubling terrors of the psychological journey back to the Underworld of the past, which Heaney resists but will undertake in the volume *Station Island*.





THE HAW LANTERN, 1987

The Haw Lantern, published in 1987, is chiefly a book about loss, emptiness and absence. The most accessible and moving poems in the book are elegies: 'The Summer of Lost Rachel', for a niece who died in an accident; 'The Wishing Tree', for his wife's late mother; a poem for Robert Fitzgerald, a deceased colleague at Harvard; and 'The Stone Verdict', an elegy for his father. But the most powerful of all are 'Clearances', a sequence of eight sonnets, elegies in memory of his mother, who died in 1984. Some deal simply and movingly with very ordinary, everyday experiences, such as peeling potatoes together or folding sheets. Another deals with the scene at the deathbed. Yet another is written from the vantage point of the house of the dead, drawn with mundane realism, which gives it a surreal quality. Altogether they are a very moving series of poems on the relationship between mothers and sons.





SEEING THINGS, 1991

Seeing Things, published in 1991, in some ways sees a return to the concerns of the early Heaney. It deals with personal vision and personal history, rather than with politics or historical issues. He returns to childhood memories: football, fishing, sailing, skating; memories of an old bicycle, of market days, of rat poison in an outhouse, of first firing a gun; memories of Glanmore, revisited in a sequence of seven sonnets. He is going back, making a 'journey back into the heartland of the ordinary.' But here Heaney is interested in seeing the ordinary in a different way, looking more deeply into things, as in *Field of Vision*. He is both the observer we met in the early Heaney and now also the visionary, exploring the significance of these observations. This results in a new, fresh 'seeing', a new excitement, as in 'Fosterling'.

*Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
To credit marvels.*

It leads him to a deeper, more philosophical questioning about meaning:

*Where does spirit live? Inside or outside
Things remembered, made things, things unmade?*

The very title suggests this new, complex vision of the poet. 'Seeing things' could refer to sensitive and accurate observation, or to an ability to imagine what is not really there, or even to a visionary and mythical ability to see into the heart of things.

Underlying the volume is a view of the poet as mediator between states, one who facilitates movement between this world and the

next, between the marvellous and the actual, the transcendent and the material world (see 'Lightenings VIII'). Many of these poems therefore feature threshold states, crossings between the ordinary and the fabulous. Heaney claims for poetry a visionary power, an ability to transcend the immediate world of the everyday.

The poet came to terms with his relationship with his mother in the 'Clearances' sequence of the previous volume. His father, who died in 1986, is a recurring presence in this volume. But now there is a more equal relationship, less awe, more affection and an effort to understand the timeless significance of fathers and sons in such poems as 'Man and Boy', 'The Ash Plant', 'Squarings XV' and 'Seeing Things'.

Part I consists of thirty or so individual lyric pieces. Part II has forty-eight twelve-line poems, divided into four groups of twelve under the headings 'Lightenings', 'Settings', 'Crossings' and 'Squarings'. 'Lightenings VIII' is from this section.

The volume opens and ends with two dark, bleak poems. The first is a translation from Virgil's *Aeneid* where Aeneas asks to descend into the underworld, and the last is from Dante's *Inferno* and shows the scene at the shoreside as the damned souls wait for Charon's boat to take them across to Hell. The desire to see beyond boundaries, this gift of 'seeing', can be traumatic and dangerous.





THE PITCHFORK

A reading of the poem

This poem is in the tradition of Heaney's farming poems – selecting an aspect or single object of that life and work, subjecting it to minute analysis and investing it with universal human and philosophical significance.

The poem probably refers to his father, a farmer whom he idealised in many of his poems. This humble implement, the pitchfork, is so beloved by the farmer that he gives it almost mythical status, comparing it to a javelin used by a classical warrior or an athlete. For him it is a defining instrument, its perfection enables the user. While it transports his imagination to fields of glory ('he played the warrior or the athlete'), nevertheless it is a very real everyday working implement ('worked in earnest in the chaff and sweat'). He examines the real perfection of its make-up in microscopic detail, the qualities of the timber and steel and its perfect balance. I don't expect the humble pitchfork was ever explored in such detail. It is imbued with a life of its own ('the clip and dart of it').

But its perfection has also been brought about by the interaction with human beings, by the mansweat of usage ('grown satiny from its own natural polish', 'sweat cured'). It is such a key reference point in his life and language that when he thinks of a space probe he imagines it as a kind of pitchfork,

*sailing past
Evenly, imperturbably through space,
Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless.*

The man has been enabled by the pitchfork, it has sparked in him a new way of seeing and thinking, a creative vision. He now knows that 'perfection or nearness to it' is to be found not by aiming for something but by developing an openness of mind, a receptive mentality – 'Not in the aiming but the opening hand'. So the pitchfork has been for the man both a beautifully crafted and working farm implement and also an instrument that pointed the way towards insight and wisdom.

This poem focuses on the perfection of a humble everyday agricultural implement, but it also celebrates the ordinary working farmer. He has an appreciation for skilled craftsmanship; he has an eye for beauty in the ordinary and familiar; an imagination capable of being transported to historic, heroic time; but above all he is someone capable of great wisdom, imagination and transforming philosophical growth.





LIGHTENINGS VIII (THE ANNALS SAY ...)

This is a whimsical adaptation of a story from the 'Annals of Clonmacnoise'. On the surface it is merely a delightful fanciful anecdote, a surreal visionary story that the sceptical might see as the result of sleep deprivation or too much fasting and the devout interpret as the sign of divine favour. For the poet the entire point of the anecdote is contained in the final line and hinges on that changing point of view. To the sailor of the visionary ship the world of the monastery is marvellous and magical, whereas to the monks at their repetitive prayers and mundane tasks it is the sailor and his ship that are extraordinary and marvellous.

Heaney is asking us to contemplate this distinction between the mundane and the marvellous, between the real and the imagined. And he is suggesting that these are not conflicting states. There is fluid access from one to the other: they may even be two sides of the same experience. As the critic Henry Hart said, 'the visionary and the real are symbiotic rather than exclusive.' By blurring any distinction between the imagined and the actual, Heaney is making a strong plea for the visionary, the created, the imaginative. Perhaps the poem even goes as far as to suggest that everything we know is based on visionary experience, that all knowledge is the product of the imagination.

Nobel Laureate

In 1995 Heaney was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature for 'works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past'.





THE SPIRIT LEVEL, 1996

Much of the poetry in *The Spirit Level*, published in 1996, seems to double back to the beginning, revisiting scenes of the poet's childhood and reworking some of the preoccupations of his early poetry, though with a less innocent eye.

There is a good deal that is quintessentially Heaney here. We notice his keen awareness of the natural, his ability to wonder at the everyday earth – the sights and sounds of rain, the cleansing purity of clay and the gem-like quality of gravel ('The Gravel Walks'). Yet his feeling for the healing, sacramental qualities of nature is no mere romantic escapism and does not blind him to the inherent dangers and pain, such as that suffered by the child who swallowed an awn of rye and whose throat 'was like standing crop probed by a scythe' ('The Butter-Print').

As in his early poetry, he is fascinated by local characters, probing their spirit or quality (such as that of the blind neighbour in 'At the Wellhead') or celebrating their skill, the work of their hands (in 'An Architect', or the bricklayer in 'Damson'). Hands for Heaney are often the focus of creativity.

Once again the strong figure of his father appears in many of the poems, often evoked by the symbol of the ashplant, which was both cattleman's working instrument and sign of tough authority. It says much that the father is frequently imaged in this way ('Two Stick Drawings' and 'The Strand'). But while there is the generic father-son tension, in a poem such as 'The Errand' Heaney displays more unguarded emotion towards his father, but stops

sort of expressing it. Unspoken feelings – the Irishman's notion of balance. We see this in 'A Call'.

Childhood memories provide the spark for many of his reflections. 'A Sofa in the Forties' was the stimulus for his early imaginative play; the mint plant cut for Sunday cooking wafts down the years; he revisits the swing, or blackberry picking. But there is a sharper edge to Heaney's excursions into the past in this volume. The womb-like security of Mossbawn ('Sunlight', for example) gives way to a less idyllic, more primitive picture in 'Keeping Going'.

*Buttermilk and urine,
The pantry, the housed beasts, the listening bedroom*

...
*It smelled of hill-fort clay and cattle dung. When the thorn
tree was cut down
You broke your arm. I shared the dread
When a strange bird perched for days on the byre roof.*

The past is viewed here from the standpoint of the present; the whitewashed walls of childhood become the bloodstained walls of today. It is as if the innocence has been spoiled irrevocably by present grown-up knowledge. This tension between then and now features in other poems too, such as 'Two Lorries' and 'The Flight Path'. The coal lorry of childhood has metamorphosed into the bomb vehicle of today. Here is an older, less innocent, more resigned voice. Life is now about bearing up, 'Keeping Going'.

*And this is all the good things amount to:
This principle of bearing, bearing up
And bearing out, just having to*





*Balance the intolerable in others
Against our own, having to abide
Whatever we settled for and settled into
Against our better judgment. Passive
Suffering makes the world go round.*

The sheer banality of the language carries the weariness of the tone. An awareness of mortality informs some of the poems, such as 'Mint', 'A Call' and 'A Dog Was Crying Tonight in Wicklow Also'.

But this heaviness is balanced by the spiritual import of other poems, celebrating the human qualities of Caedmon, an English monk of the seventh century said to have received the power of song in a vision ('Whitby-sur-Moyola'), or St Kevin's reverence for creatures ('St Kevin and the Blackbird'). Heaney often associates human goodness and saintliness with nature's gentle creatures.

As the title of the volume implies, this book's central theme is that of balance, idealism balanced by reality, nostalgia set against present pain, then and now, childhood and old age, memory and illusion, truth and lies, the bleakness of life balanced by spiritual uplift.





POSTSCRIPT

A reading of the poem

This poem begins quietly enough, with Heaney's opening three lines having an understated tone. His language is conversational. It is as if we have just met him at a party and we are engaged in some pleasant social chatting. The specific details that he gives regarding the best area and time to go to this part of the 'west' suggest that it is a treasured place for him.

Significantly, Heaney does not use any full stops until line 11, and this creates a sense of sequence that smoothly moves us, the readers, in place towards the 'west' and in time to 'September or October'. The pace begins to quicken with the final three words of the third line, 'when the wind', and, in the next eight lines, we find ourselves actually travelling in a car through this wonderful countryside.

Bright, vivid images flash by us as we speed along the coast road. Snatches of the world of 'the Flagggy Shore' snapshot into our vision for a few seconds and then vanish. We glimpse the 'foam and glitter' of the ocean. Suddenly, we see 'a flock of swans', luminous against the 'slate-grey lake'. Heaney describes the swans in four lines of breathtaking imagery that convey both their 'flesh and blood' reality and their mythical 'magic' qualities; their embodiment of 'feathers roughed and ruffling' and 'earthed lightning'.

And then, with the suddenness of a full stop, the swans are gone. But Heaney wisely warns us not to try to turn back for another look at them. For this is the way of car journeys. We 'hurry

through' a place. It is the unpredictability of whether the next thing we see will be 'known' or 'strange' that makes the experience exciting. Each new kilometre brings the possibility of a stunning image, made even more special because of its fleeting presence.

In this way Heaney encourages his readers to think again about travelling by car: to see that a car journey can be so much more than simply a movement in place and time. As he has so wonderfully demonstrated, it can also be a movement in our hearts and souls.

Imagery

This poem is an excellent example of the way in which poetry can paint vivid 'word' pictures that not only describe a scene, but also convey the sensations and emotions connected to it.

So, for example, we have his use of alliteration with the letter 's' (alliteration: where two or more words close together begin with the same letter) in the lines 'and inland among **s**tones/The **s**urface of a **s**late-grey lake is lit'. This alliteration creates a slick, watery sensation that reinforces Heaney's use of colour, 'slate-grey'. So we not only 'see' the lake, we 'feel' it as well.

Similarly, with the final two lines of the poem, 'As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways/And catch the heart off guard and blow it open', Heaney links the physical sensation of the car being blown by gusts of wind to the emotional effects of what is being seen on the car journey. In this way, he emphasises the theme of this poem by making us 'feel' the concrete, physical movement of a car journey alongside the intangible, inner changes that, he believes, can also take place.





A CALL

A reading of the poem

This poem deals with very common but very significant issues in our modern lives.

Communication

It is ironic that despite modern technology that facilitates instant communication, in many different modes, from anywhere in the world, we often shy away from having significant or deeply personal talk, particularly with family members. Expressions of love or emotions to anyone other than a partner are often regarded as too embarrassing.

Relationships and parents

As children move out of home communication is over long distances. Yet memories and the imagination offer yet another kind of communication. The memory image here is Heaney's favourite image of his father – as a farmer working the soil, nurturing growth. He is 'down on his hands and knees' as if worshipping the soil. He is conscientious and careful, gentle with the plants, reluctant to pull out the weeds yet knowing it is necessary, 'Pleased to feel each little weed-root break,/But rueful also'. This gentle, sympathetic description indicates that love is not uttered it is definitely felt and probably understood instinctively and reciprocated. See also Heaney's poem 'Digging'. It is interesting to note that the parental roles in the family are very traditional – father is working and mother, the mediator, is bustling about maintaining the link between children and the father.

Ageing and death

This thought is sparked off by the rather obvious connection with the clocks. 'Amplified' is a good choice of word – the emptiness of the hallway exaggerates the ticking sound. Yet death is not introduced in any morbid or frightening way, rather just the call of the hallway where the pendulum of time is bright and welcoming ('sunstruck pendulums'). This is far from the traditional image and grotesque figure of old Father Time with the scythe over his shoulder, the figure of death in 'Everyman'. Heaney finds himself thinking that this is how modern Death should be, as ordinary and easeful as a telephone call.





DISTRICT AND CIRCLE, 2006

This volume brought Heaney circling back to the farming world of his boyhood which is recorded here again with the same eye for precise detail, in such poems as ‘The Turnip-Snedder’; ‘A Shiver’ (on the art of swinging a sledge hammer); ‘The Harrow Pin’; and ‘Súgán’. But in this volume, Heaney framed that world in the context of World War Two, in the poems ‘Anahorish 1944’ (‘We were killing pigs when the Americans arrived’); ‘To Mick Joyce in Heaven’; ‘The Aerodrome’ and others. The world of *District and Circle* is a far less secure place than that of the early poems. ‘Anything Can Happen’ is a translation from Horace (Odes, I, 34) in which the capricious violence of the gods as Jupiter, ‘hurls the lightning’, resonates with present-day terrorism:

Anything can happen, the tallest towers ...

Be overturned ...

... Stropped-beak Fortune

Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,

Setting it down bleeding on the next.

On the same theme, the title poem ‘District and Circle’ evokes the London bombings. The poet’s present-day concerns also included climate issues – the rising flood waters in the poem ‘Iowa’ and the melting glaciers in ‘Höfn’.

There is a keen awareness of temporariness in the volume, not only in the poems marking the burials of a much-loved aunt and other relatives and in the many poems dedicated to deceased poet friends but also in the ‘Senior Infants’ trilogy where school

memories are trawled up by some now very senior ‘infants’! Far from morbid, all these poems are celebrations of life, many related with hints of humour and irony. There is a joyful acceptance of the present moment and of happenstance in the wonderful mindfulness of ‘Nonce Words’.

Heaney also circled back to revisit earlier poems ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ and the ‘Blackbird of Glanmore’. In the latter, he reconnected with ‘Mid-Term Break’ remembering:

*A little stillness dancer –
Haunter-son, lost brother –
Cavorting through the yard,
So glad to see me home,*

My homesick first term over.

‘Tate’s Avenue’ is from this volume.





TATE'S AVENUE

A reading of the poem

This is a poem about the difficulties of conducting a romantic relationship in the strict religious fundamentalist culture that operated in Belfast at that time, when Sundays were reserved solely for prayer and worship, parks were closed and involvement in sport and leisure activities was frowned upon or even forbidden. It was the era of 'locked-park Sunday Belfast', with houses and whole streets enveloped in silence. 'A walled back yard, the dustbins high and silent' recalls the isolationism and plain, unadorned functionality of outlook and culture. In contrast the speaker and his girl lie on a rug somewhere, presumably near Tate's Avenue, refusing to conform to the prevailing religious culture. Yet they find no real fun, gaiety or passion in it, as if the uncompromising cultural ethos of the place stifles enjoyment:

*And nothing gives on the rug or the ground beneath it.
I lay at my length and felt the lumpy earth*

This arid, unexciting experience is contrasted with other enjoyable times lying on rugs outside Belfast or outside the country. A memory of lying by the sea on a car rug (a hint of spontaneity) is recalled, where the reference to breathing, comfort zone and lambs tails suggest an experience that is much more relaxed, sensuous and enjoyable. The 'vestal folds unfolded' hints at the erotic.

An episode on a scraggy Spanish rug is recalled. The atmosphere is relaxed, the picnic informal to the point of being messy, no

rules or proprieties observed as they got drunk on the banks of a Spanish river before the corrida. In contrast the straight, unimaginative lines of the 'plaid square' rug in Belfast suggest conformity, a straitjacketed approach to living, the absence of emotion or sensuality. The contrast in the atmosphere of outwardly similar experiences highlights his point about the dominant cultural ethos of Belfast as it was then.





OVERVIEW OF SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY

An overview of the poet

1. Read through all the poems, slowly and in any order you like. Using any form you like – sentences, phrases or even single words – jot down your general impressions of the poet's work.
2. What are the poet's chief preoccupations in his writing?
3. How do you understand the poet's outlook on life?
 - What does he think important?
 - What makes him angry, afraid, joyful, excited, etc.?
 - Is he hopeful or pessimistic about the world, or is the attitude in the poems more complicated?
4. What is different about the way he writes?
 - His use of language (diction, imagery, sounds, rhythms of the language, etc.).
 - The form of the poems – one of the traditional forms, sonnet, ballad, elegy, villanelle, lyric or other.
 - Stanza format.
 - Traditional metre or free verse.
 - Rhymed or unrhymed.
5. How does he see his role as a poet in society? What is his speaking voice: detached observer, passionate participant or what?

6. Compare Heaney with other poets on the course, in areas such as:
 - View of life
 - Issues and preoccupations
 - Unique treatment of similar topics
 - Use of language
7. What has encountering this poet meant to you?
8. Can the poems be grouped in any way: according to certain themes; in chronological progression; according to form or style of poem? Arrange the poems in a way that you feel best reflects the importance of what the poet has to say, and explain your arrangement.

Themes and issues

Consider the statements following each heading. Re-examine the relevant poems, and make brief notes or headings, together with relevant quotations, on each theme.

Irishness – history, myths, politics

1. In the early poems, Heaney was preoccupied with local history, with communicating the experience of his own place and the customs, rituals, atmosphere, characters and myths of Mossbawn (see 'Sunlight', 'The Forge').
2. Then he began to think of history as landscape, exploring downwards, finding evidence of history in the bogs and the very contour of the land, exploring what myth and prehistoric evidence revealed about Irishness (see 'Bogland').
3. Exploring back in time, he makes historical connections between the Iron Age and the present. He draws parallels





between prehistory's human sacrifices and contemporary violence in Ulster. Is he suggesting that violence is endemic in all societies throughout history, that human sacrifice is necessary for the integrity of territory, that myths, however savage, are an integral part of the creation of the identity of a people (see 'The Tollund Man')?

4. He explores the divisions of present-day Ulster (see 'The Other Side'). Heaney has met with criticism from all sides regarding his treatment of recent Ulster history. Some critics accuse him of having too much politics in his poetry and others of not having enough – accusations such as:

- Obscuring the horrors of recent killings
- Endorsing a 'tribal' position
- Suggesting the inevitability of carnage
- Evading the issues and being non-committal

'For many readers, Heaney's art is fundamentally an art of consciously and carefully cultivated non-engagement' (Elmer Andrews). What are your views on these reactions? Is Heaney completely uncritical of his own side? (See 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man', 'A Constable Calls'.)

Tradition and identity

1. For Heaney, an awareness of one's tradition is fundamental to a sense of identity. He explains his own roots, celebrating the skills that sustained the farming community that nurtured him: the digging, the ploughing, the water-divining, the bread-making, the skills of the farmer – skills seen almost as sacred rituals (see 'Sunlight', 'The Forge').

2. Sometimes he still hankers back to the security of that life of early childhood (see 'Sunlight'). Sometimes he needs to reforge, reinterpret and understand his links with family in order to rediscover his identity (see 'The Harvest Bow': 'I tell and finger it like braille').
3. 'Our sense of the past, our sense of the land and perhaps even our sense of identity are inextricably interwoven,' according to Heaney (*Irish Press*, 1 June 1974). Finding and maintaining a sense of continuity is vital to Heaney: family traditions, customs, and values (see 'Sunlight', 'The Harvest Bow').
4. He explores his catholic roots too, as set against the other tradition (see 'The Other Side'). According to Robert Welch, 'Heaney is engaged upon a cultural and tribal exploration; he is testing out his cultural inheritance to see where the significant deposits are located; but he is not engaged upon a mindless submission to the old tradition of the goddess or whatever' (see 'Sunlight', 'The Harvest Bow', 'The Other Side', 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man').
5. Community identity is defined in terms of the bog (in contrast to the American landscape) (see 'Bogland').
6. Heaney seems to see himself as the spokesperson for this sense of identity, in the volume *Door into the Dark* in particular – an identity that is picked up from the landscape (see 'Bogland': 'We have no prairies', 'our pioneers').
7. His personal identity has overtones of victimhood about it. He certainly seems to identify with victims ('something of his sad freedom ... should come to me') (see 'The Tollund Man', 'A Constable Calls').





Identity and poetry

1. Heaney's identity as a poet is inextricably tied in with his historical and cultural identity. The autobiographical voice of *Death of a Naturalist* becomes the spokesperson of his people in *Door into the Dark* (see 'Bogland').
2. The bog becomes a kind of subconscious racial memory for him, providing inspiration for his poetry. 'The poems have more come up like bodies out of the bog of my own imagination' (television interview, November 1973) (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man').
3. 'He is proposing an idea of poetry which combines psychic investigation with historical enquiry' (Elmer Andrews) (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man'). In the essay 'Feeling into Words', Heaney himself spoke of 'poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants' (*Preoccupations*, 1980).
4. He sees the craft of poetry not just as something mechanical but rather a combination of imagination and skill. He described a poem as 'a completely successful love act between the craft and the gift' (see 'The Forge', 'Field of Vision').
5. Heaney's own voice in these poems is often indecisive and ambiguous, his position a hesitant observer on the fringes of the scene (outside in 'The Forge'; 'Forgive ... my timid circumspect involvement' in 'Station Island' vii; 'I could risk blasphemy' in 'The Tollund Man').

6. Poetry may be unimportant in politics but it is vital to a sense of identity. 'Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they [the arts] are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the core of self which lies at the base of every individuated life' (*The Government of the Tongue*, 1986).

The poet and the importance of imagination

1. Heaney sees the function of the poet as being a mediator between the real world and the imaginary. The poet explores the significance behind things (see 'The Pitchfork').
2. Imagination is the ability to accept the undemonstrable (see 'The Pitchfork').
3. The imagined, the marvellous, is not opposite to everyday reality, just another way of seeing (see 'Lightenings VIII', 'St Kevin and the Blackbird').
4. Perhaps all knowledge is acquired through the imagination. Certainly the marvellous and the imagined are central to our lives ('Lightenings VIII').

Love

1. There are poems of romantic love, dealing with feelings of excitement, of loss, and of great need (see 'The Underground', 'Tate's Avenue').
2. Feelings of erotic love are sensitively dealt with (see 'The Skunk').
3. Family love is important to Heaney:
 - An idyllic adult-child relationship in the womb-like security of Mossbawn (see 'Sunlight')





- The uncommunicated closeness of father–son relationships (see 'The Harvest Bow').

Death

- Death and violence ('The Tollund Man').
- Does death have meaning? ('The Tollund Man').

Fear and insecurity

- Associated with love ('The Underground').
- Associated with politics, religion, and everyday living ('A Constable Calls').

Childhood

- Womblike security of childhood ('Sunlight').
- The relationship with parents ('The Harvest Bow').
- Fears of childhood, real or imaginary ('A Constable Calls').
- The need for continuity between generations ('The Harvest Bow').

The role of landscape in Heaney's poetry

1. Heaney is a fine descriptive nature poet. He has an 'extraordinary gift in realising the physical world freshly and with vigorous exact economy. Heaney can bring everyday natural events before his readers' eyes with such telling precision that his images are both recognition and revelation' (Terence Browne) (see any of the poems).
2. But landscape for Heaney is more than just a subject to be painted: it is a living presence, an ever-present force, a sort of third party to human activity in the poems. It has the same

immediate personal presence that we find in Kavanagh and in Wordsworth (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man').

3. The landscape can harbour different faces, the life force ('spirit of the corn'), and a threatening, menacing aspect ('the bottomless bog'), just as the farming tradition of his community is associated with decay and also with growth (see 'The Harvest Bow', 'Bogland').
4. People have a human and a religious relationship with the landscape (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man', 'The Harvest Bow').
5. The landscape is seen as essentially female, often with erotic associations in its relationship with man (see 'The Tollund Man').
6. Heaney's landscape is dominated by the earth rather than the sky, with the bog providing a metaphor for Irish consciousness (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man').
7. 'The landscape for me is image and it's almost an element to work with as much as it is an object of admiration or description.' Heaney uses nature metaphors to express his feelings of frustration and loneliness ('need breaks on my strand' in 'Valediction') or the frustrating attempts at communicating between father and son in 'The Harvest Bow' ('your stick/Whacking the tops off weeds and bushes/Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes/Nothing') (see 'Valediction', 'The Harvest Bow', 'The Other Side').
8. The landscape is a source of creativity and insight: 'poems ... come up ... like bodies out of the bog of my own imagination' (see 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man').





Imagery and symbolism

Consider the following statements, re-examine the poems for evidence confirming or denying them, and add your own references and quotations.

1. Nature and the farming community are the chief sources of his imagery. The flora and fauna of the countryside abound: hawk, goose wing, snipe, skunk, midges. But the overall import of the natural imagery is of a poor, infertile landscape: marsh weeds, sedge, moss, rushes, the agitated hawthorn bush, the acre of ragwort, and of course the ubiquitous bog. The bog is female-spirited, sometimes erotic, a preserver of racial memories and identity but also at times dangerous and menacing. Natural imagery provides most of the metaphorical or poetic language: 'The ground itself is kind, black butter' ('Bogland'); 'The refrigerator whinnied into silence' ('The Skunk'). Even human bodies are described in natural imagery: 'the mild pods of his eye-lids' ('The Tollund Man').
2. The realistic detail is particularly noticeable in the portraiture (see 'The Harvest Bow', 'The Forge', 'Sunlight', 'A Constable Calls').
3. The imagery, particularly that involving recollections, has been filtered through the senses. The sensuousness is immediately striking:
 - The visual: 'unpredictable fantail of sparks' ('The Forge')
 - The tactile and aural: 'her hands scuffled over the bakeboard' ('Sunlight'); 'the sootfall of your things at bedtime' ('The Skunk').
4. Some of the recurring imagery and locations take on the depth and fixed value of symbol:

- The bog – symbol of the poet's racial memory and source of his poetic imagination
 - Mossbawn – symbol of security, family love, and rural values
 - The harvest bow – somehow symbolises the secret soul and spirit of that community
 - The pump – a conduit to the life-giving force of the earth, symbol of community, source of life, source of inspiration
 - The anvil – both workbench and altar of the art of writing.
5. Use of the odd Old English kenning provides a natural strength or muscularity to the versification: 'man-killing parishes' ('The Tollund Man').

Diction

1. Often we find a simple but strong monosyllabic vocabulary, a commonplace language.

*All I know is a door into the dark
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows
(‘The Forge’)*
2. Variety is provided by abstract terms of Latin or Greek origin ('juvenilia', 'decorum', 'somnambulant', 'palpable', 'mythologised'), also by French borrowing or words of French derivation ('à la', 'voyeur', 'blasphemy', 'mysterious'). There is evidence of technical vocabulary from a variety of disciplines: geography, archaeology, astronomy ('tarn', 'torc', 'corona').
3. The conversational vocabulary is realistically colloquial ('Easy now ... it's only me').





4. The syntax of some of the lines has a conversational directness and simplicity ('We have no prairies,' 'I remember this woman'; or 'Some day I will go to Aarhus,' which contrasts with the more poetic and descriptive 'To see his peat-brown head,/The mild pods of his eye-lids').

Versification

1. In this selection there is only one use of the tightly disciplined sonnet form: 'The Forge'. Examine this poem as a sonnet, considering the divisions, the development of ideas and the rhyming scheme.
2. Otherwise Heaney uses a variety of verse forms, often favouring the thin four-line stanza with lines of either three stresses (trimeter) or only two stresses (dimeter). Some of the poems seem to be imitative or shaped to suit the theme – for example 'Bogland', where the seven stanzas of short, mostly trimeter lines give the impression of depth, of descending through the layers of a boghole. Likewise in 'The Tollund Man', similar thin stanzas of dimeter and trimeter lines could suggest excavation or a long journey. Contrast the verse format of 'Bogland' with that of 'The Harvest Bow', a philosophical exploration of social ritual and custom. Do you find the technique of 'The Harvest Bow' appropriate to the poem? Explain. Heaney also uses the terza rima structure, adapted from the Italians, Dante in particular (see 'Station Island' vii).
3. Heaney uses internal rhyme more frequently than end rhyme, with sounds echoing delicately within verses:

*To see his peat-brown head
The wild pods of his eye-lids*

4. He often uses patterns of imitative sound, i.e. onomatopoeic words. For example in 'The Forge':

He grunts and goes in with a slam and a flick

5. Other common musical effects are found in abundance in Heaney's poetry, such as alliteration, assonance, etc.
 - Everywhere the eye concedes to encroaching
 - Black butter
 - Crate full of air
 - Fat black handlegrips.
6. We sometimes find the Irish pattern of double alliteration:

Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

Voices of the poet

A feature of the richness of Heaney's poetry is his ability to write from different perspectives and to use many voices: those of father, son, lover, child, friend, and spokesperson for his people. With this in mind, consider:

- 'The Harvest Bow'
- 'The Skunk'
- 'Mossbawn: Sunlight'
- 'Bogland'

A look at gender issues in Heaney's poetry

Patricia Coughlan, in a thought-provoking article, finds two opposing but possibly complementary representations of sex roles in Heaney's poetry:





- A dominant masculine figure who explores, describes, loves and has compassion for a passive feminine figure
- A woman who 'dooms, destroys, puzzles and encompasses the man, but also assists him to his self discovery: the mother stereotype, but merged intriguingly with the spouse'.

It is easy enough to identify the first representation as the speaker of the poems. Coughlan traces male activities and attitudes of the speakers in Heaney's first book, *Death of a Naturalist* – ploughing, digging and its equivalent, writing – as well as significant male attitudes, such as the importance of following in the footsteps of ancestors and imitating their prowess, in poems such as 'Digging', 'Follower', and 'Ancestral Photograph'. She traces the development of male identity in such poems as 'Death of a Naturalist' and 'An Advancement of Learning', where the young boy passes a test of male courage in facing up to a rat. The identification of the speaker with the natural maleness of creatures such as the bull and the trout ('Outlaw' and 'The Trout') is noticed in the second volume, *Door into the Dark*.

Of the poems in this selection we might agree that Heaney views the creative process as a particularly male activity in 'The Forge' – the violence of the activity, the archetypal maleness of the protagonist, leading to the suggestion that the truth of art is forged out of violence and brute strength. But the poetic process of 'seeing things' in the later poetry is a more spiritual, even intuitive practice. The image of the poet changes to one of seer, or mediator between states of awareness ('Field of Vision', 'Lightenings VIII', 'St Kevin and the Blackbird').

Something of the prowess of ancestors is present in the speaker's celebration of his father's gift in 'The Harvest Bow'. It is a quintessentially male prowess ('lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks'), yet the skill involved in making the bow exhibits an understanding of the spirit and a delicate craftsmanship. Indeed, plaiting the bow is a female art form, at least in traditional thinking. So perhaps sex roles are not so clear-cut here, as the male ancestor is celebrated for his prowess at a feminine craft.

The representation of woman in the present selection leads to the consideration of a number of issues.

Woman as lover

In 'Underground' and 'Tate's Avenue', woman, whether in real or mythical terms is alluded to as the love object, though the relationship is never analysed in any depth.

Woman in 'The Skunk' is very much sex object, alluring, exciting in a primitive, animal way:

...stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-neck nightdress.

She is an object of desire, observed with controlled voyeurism by the speaker.

Woman as mother

In 'Mossbawn: I Sunlight' the female figure is associated with traditional domestic skills, in this instance baking. The mother figure is one of the central props in Heaney's ideal picture of rural





life. The kitchen is a womb of security for the young boy, radiating warmth, nurture and love, as well as being a forger of identity, offering links with tradition and values mediated by the female figures. See also 'A Call'.

A feminist critique would argue that this representation is denying women the freedom to develop fully, by giving them fixed roles within the domestic environment and by associating them with what is maternal rather than with any intellectual activity. As Patricia Coughlan says, 'Woman, the primary inhabitant and constituent of the domestic realm, is admiringly observed, centre stage but silent.'

The earth as female

Nature – the earth and both the physical territory and the political spirit of Ireland – is viewed by Heaney as feminine. There is a hint of this in the soft, preserving, womb-like quality of the earth in 'Bogland'. This feminine aspect becomes explicitly sexual in such poems as 'Rite of Spring' and 'Undine'. But the female principle is destructive to man in such poems as 'The Tollund Man', where the male is sacrificed to the goddess, who is female lover, killer and principle of new life and growth, all at once.

*She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body.*

Coughlan feels that the female energy here is represented as 'both inert and devouring' and that if the poem is understood 'as a way of thinking about woman rather than about Irish political

murder, it reveals an intense alienation from the female.' But can it be divorced from its political context? And was not Caitlín Ní hUallacháin always the femme fatale of political revolutionaries? And hadn't this fatalistic attraction almost a frisson of sexual passion about it, coupled with maternal devotion? The poem reveals the danger of the attraction, but surely it was a willing consummation. The poet envies Tollund Man 'his sad freedom', so perhaps the poem reveals less an intense alienation than a fatalistic attraction to the female.

The feminist critique certainly throws some light on central aspects of Heaney's writing – among them a very traditional view of woman – but there is too much complexity in his vision to allow us to view the encounter of the sexes in his poetry as simply antagonistic.





MAIN WORKS BY SEAMUS HEANEY

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QUESTIONS

1. 'One of Heaney's greatest skills is that of portraiture: the vivid, realistic drawing of characters, sometimes nostalgic, often unflattering.' Discuss this statement in the light of the poems you have read.
 2. What picture of the Irish character and mentality emerges from a reading of Heaney's poetry?
 3. 'Heaney takes a pessimistic view of life, reflected in a downward-looking stance and a predominance of bleak imagery.' Discuss, with reference to the poems.
 4. 'Heaney's poetry is motivated by a vain search for the lost heritage of childhood and by a sense of tribal identity.' Discuss this view, with reference to the poems you have read.
 5. Would you agree that Heaney is an essentially backward-looking poet, finding answers only in the past?
 6. 'Heaney, in a fair and balanced way, searches for insight into both cultures of Ulster.' Discuss.
 7. 'The importance of tradition and a sense of place are key concepts in the poetry of Heaney.' Discuss this statement in the light of the poems by Heaney you have studied.
 8. Would you agree that Heaney's love poetry is filled with insight and honesty?
 9. 'Heaney's poetry, whether overtly or hidden, is autobiographical in the main.' In light of the poems you have studied, would you agree with this statement?
 10. 'There is a quality of vivid sensuousness in the poetry of Heaney.' Discuss, with reference to the poems you have read.
11. 'Heaney habitually finds mystery and significance behind ordinary objects and events.' Discuss this statement, referring to the poems for evidence.
 12. 'In imagery and in rhythms of language Heaney is essentially a poet of rural Ireland.' Discuss, with reference to the poems you have read.
 13. What image of woman emerges from the poems by Heaney you have read?
 14. 'Heaney constantly experiments with verse forms in order to find a vehicle suitable to his particular poem.' Would you agree? Examine two or three poems in light of this statement.





EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN

Notes and Explorations: Carole Scully

HL 2019	OL 2019
HL 2020	OL 2020

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Night

The Second Voyage

Deaths and Engines

Street

Fireman's Lift

All for You

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Kilcash

Translation

The Bend in the Road

On Lacking the Killer Instinct

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on
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Ideas and images in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry

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INTRODUCTION

A variety of passages

Like very many Irish people, I grew up with Gaelic spoken a good deal at home ... I have also been lucky in sharing the knowledge of Gaelic literature, music, folklore, and history of my parents, my husband and mother-in-law, and of many friends and colleagues.

This comment from Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin makes it clear that for her, life is a world of opportunities for encounters with people and knowledge. It is also evident from reading her poetry that it is from this life, and her many and varied encounters with people and with knowledge, that she draws the ideas and images that are explored and expressed in her poetry.

From the page devoted to her in the Staff Details on the website of Trinity College Dublin, where she is a long-standing member of the academic staff, we learn that she has considerable fluency in five languages: French, Irish, Italian, Latin and Romanian. Furthermore, her research interests are listed as literature and folklore, literature of the Reformation, Renaissance literature and translation studies. Her publications include collections of her own poetry; editorships of books on aspects of early English literature, translation and censorship, and Irish women; and translations of works from Irish, Italian and Romanian into English. Clearly, Ní Chuilleanáin does not live life idly, content to sit back and allow it to pass her by. Instead, life for her is lived alertly and with attention: recognising, registering and reflecting on encounters with people and knowledge. For her,

life is the trigger that inspires her to engage in writing her poetry. However, because she has such a rich and varied life and because she lives it so alertly and with such attention, her poetry is filled with layers of meaning that can prove challenging to her reader. Therefore, in order to develop a method for reading and engaging with her poetry as effectively and as meaningfully as possible, we will begin by examining some of the key life encounters with people and knowledge that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin draws on when writing her unique and thought-provoking poetry.

Cork: Architectural images

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin was born in Cork in 1942. She was soon joined by her sister Máire in 1944 and her brother Cormac in 1950. Her formative years were spent in Cork, so it is not surprising to find that the city of Cork has had an influence on her poetry. The depth of her feeling for the city was clearly expressed in 1977 when she and the artist Brian Lalor collaborated to produce a book of poems and drawings under the title 'Cork' where, as Thomas McCarthy (2007) puts it, she 'is describing her city with the affection of a daughter'. For McCarthy, many of the settings of her poems are filled with the atmosphere of the 'landscape she knows inside out from observation and highly sensitized, remembered living'. Indeed, McCarthy also suggests that it was her years living in Cork and the time that she spent as a student at the historic University College Cork that stimulated her awareness of architecture. Certainly, Ní Chuilleanáin often uses images drawn from the built world, the world of architecture, in her poems, such as 'Street', 'Fireman's Lift' and 'All for You'. We will discuss this further when we consider her poems individually.





Her parents: language and meaning, folklore and poetry

Both of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's parents were clever and talented and through them she began to encounter much of the knowledge that she would later draw on when writing her poetry. Her father, Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, was a noted academic who worked as Professor of Irish in UCC. He was particularly interested in languages and he encouraged his three children to develop their language skills. Ní Chuilleanáin has described how, when she was older, her father would write letters to her in Irish, English, Latin and French. Interestingly, she has also commented on the fact that she believes that her bilingual childhood has at times left her with a sense of uncertainty about her choice of the language and words with which to best express her meaning. This sensitivity regarding the relationship between meaning and language has developed into an interest in the process of translating texts from one language to another and the implications that this has for meaning. But more importantly for our work on her poetry, this sensitivity explains why, in writing her poetry, she pays particular attention to choosing and developing words, phrases and images that convey her meanings as fully as possible.

The language that Ní Chuilleanáin uses in her poems is deceptively straightforward and conversational. It appears to use everyday words in natural arrangements. However, it is only as we explore the meaning behind these words that we gradually come to understand that they have been used as the result of a great deal of thought and revision on Ní Chuilleanáin's part. Because of this care and effort, her apparently straightforward and

conversational language actually expresses layers of meanings. As readers of her work, we should always bear in mind that for her, as she explains, 'the word is never uncomplicated, because the word itself can be a problem. For example, if it is a word in Irish, people may not understand it: if it is in Latin, it may have acquired meanings, which were not its original meanings.'

Through her parents, Ní Chuilleanáin also encountered folklore, that is, the traditional beliefs and stories held by people. Her father was very interested in Irish folklore and Ní Chuilleanáin recalls how he was 'very much in touch with certain folklore narrators' and he 'collected folklore, visiting places where there were folkloric phenomenon, like holy wells'. Knowledge of folklore stories also came to Ní Chuilleanáin from her mother, Eilis Dillon. Along with managing three children and a busy life connected to UCC, Eilis Dillon was a writer. Indeed, Ní Chuilleanáin has said that one of the factors that influenced her decision to write poetry was that her mother was already writing in prose. This was probably a wise decision, as her mother proved to be a very successful prose writer, writing over fifty books, including both detective stories and historical novels. However, Dillon began her career by writing children's stories, so that, as Ní Chuilleanáin explains, 'I grew up in the sheltering presence of a mother who was an inveterate reader of folktales and deviser of stories for children, I knew the rules of this kind of story early.'

It is significant that Ní Chuilleanáin refers to learning 'the rules of this kind of story', since folktales, and their close relations, fairytales and myths, generally follow certain rules in the plots





and characters of their stories, or narratives. For example, the narratives of folktales, fairytales or myths usually involve good and evil people. There is a good hero, generally male, who for various reasons, sometimes involving the evil people, sets out on a quest, or journey, to find something or to complete a task. He encounters many challenges during this quest, but he manages to overcome them. He eventually succeeds in his quest or the task that he had to do and frequently wins the love of a beautiful, wealthy or royal woman. Finally, he defeats the evil people.

Ní Chuilleanáin often uses images drawn from her knowledge of folklore, fairytale and myth narratives in her poetry because she believes that the stories that they tell actually represent and communicate important truths – ideas that always remain true – about how human beings should live their lives in positive and meaningful ways. The idea of a quest or a task features in such poems as ‘The Second Voyage’ and ‘Deaths and Engines’. There are also references to the narratives of folktales, fairytales and myths in ‘The Second Voyage’ and ‘To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009’. In addition, many of her poems have a folktale feeling about them because they often begin with a story element. However, this story element does not involve a complete narrative that has a beginning, middle and end. It is usually a narrative fragment that is a brief and incomplete story describing an incident.

History: family and society

Her interest in folktales, fairytales and myths naturally led Ní Chuilleanáin into the world of history. After all, history also

tells stories, in this case real rather than imaginary, communicating knowledge about people and how they lived. As she explains, she became fascinated: ‘I think I have been captivated by history.’

Her love of history was further strengthened by the involvement of her family in the struggle to achieve a free and independent Ireland. In an article in 1995, Ní Chuilleanáin described herself as:

A Gaelic-speaking female papist whose direct and indirect descendants, men and women, on both sides, were committed to detaching Ireland from the British Empire ...

Her great-uncle was Joseph Plunkett, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916. As a child, Ní Chuilleanáin learned of the trauma that her grandmother had suffered in her life because of her family’s commitment to Irish freedom: ‘[She] was a sister of Joseph Plunkett, who was shot in 1916; her younger brothers were imprisoned and her parents were deported to England – it was all terrible.’ Ní Chuilleanáin also remembers how as a young girl, she was aware of the many researchers who came to meet her grandmother, who at that stage was an elderly lady in a nursing home, and to record her memories. Such experiences meant that Ní Chuilleanáin came to regard history not as a list of dates and facts unrelated to the present, but as a narrative involving real people and lived experiences that had a direct influence on the present.

Her understanding of both the reality of history and of the closeness of the connection between it and the present was further reinforced by her father’s stories about his involvement in the Black and Tan War and the Civil War. In a passage that





illustrates how such stories made history come alive for her, and also how Ní Chuilleanáin's alertness and attentiveness to life experiences stimulate her to write poetry, she describes her father telling her about the time when he was 'running away from the Black and Tans when he was ... about twenty or twenty-one'. He 'described to me what it felt like running away from his lorry; and he ran into a house and the lorry came and pulled up alongside the house ... He said that he never felt so well in his life as when he was running, so I've been trying to put that into a poem.' We will return to this incident again when we consider 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct', as it features in this poem.

Because of encounters such as these with people she knew and loved, Ní Chuilleanáin came to see history as operating on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the more personal and family level, where the family unit, and the individuals who belong to it, are strengthened by sharing past experiences, that is, their family history. Each time a shared experience is remembered and the memory of it is shared once again, this strengthening process takes place, making the family history, and the people and places that it involved, more meaningful. We can all recall times when the sharing of our family history was begun by someone in our family saying, 'Do you remember when ...?' This level of history features in 'The Bend in the Road'.

Secondly, history can operate at the society level. This involves the history of the social structure of a society. The term 'social structure' refers to the way in which power is divided in a society and the system of rules and customs by which people live in that society. In her poem 'Kilcash', Ní Chuilleanáin explores the radical

changes in the social structure of Irish society that occurred in Ireland between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while in 'Translations' she explores the social structure of the more recent past (the twentieth century). These two poems also highlight the fact that for Ní Chuilleanáin, history can refer to the recent past or a much more distant past.

In addition, 'Kilcash' and 'Translations' represent Ní Chuilleanáin's view that the history of Irish society influences Irish society in the present. She believes that it is necessary that we, in the present, are attentive and alert to our history because it is only then that we as a society can move 'towards a maturity impossible without some sense of the past'. She establishes an implied link between the traumatic effects of the changes in Irish society in the past, described in 'Kilcash', and the radical changes caused by the Celtic Tiger in, what was at the time of the publication of this poem, the present. Similarly, in 'Translations' she suggests that Irish society in the present must confront the injustices carried out in its past before it can progress. Indeed, the poem 'Translations' leads us into another area that she draws on when writing her poetry: the position of women in Irish society in the past and the present.

Women in Irish society and poetry

In common with a lot of young women who were leaving school in the years at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's life took a very different direction to the one that her mother had taken. This time marked the beginning of a process of radical change in the traditional roles that Irish women occupied in society. Gradually, women began to





gain greater access to education and to roles in society that were outside the home. When Ní Chuilleanáin was awarded a BA in English and History from UCC in 1962, a master's degree in 1964 and, following a period of study at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, a Bachelor of Letters in 1968, she was actively participating in a historically significant time for women in Ireland and for Irish society.

This change in the social structure of Irish society also marked a change in the relationship between Irish women and poetry. Women poets, including Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, began to find their voice. It is still not entirely clear why there was a lack of women poets in Ireland prior to the 1960s, for as Ní Chuilleanáin acknowledges, 'I think certain women were publishing and putting on plays, but what they were not writing it seems is poetry. I think that is the major part of it.' However, as she goes on to explain, what is clear is that there was a definite connection between the social change that was taking place and the emergence of new women poets in Ireland:

It was not by chance that a generation of women writers, of whom I am one, emerged in the 1960s, when pressures to allow women to have a profession, to control their lives, their finances and their fertility were mounting, eventually to bring the legislative changes of the 1970s. The politicisation of women's issues coincided with their poeticising, and they became poetic subjects both in Gaelic and English.

Later, we will consider how Ní Chuilleanáin explores the position of women in Irish society in her poems 'Following' and 'Translation'.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry received increasing attention during the 1960s, and in 1966 she won the *Irish Times* Award for Poetry for her poem 'Ars Poetica'. The year 1966 also marked her appointment to a Junior Lectureship in English, specialising in Renaissance literature, in Trinity College Dublin. She has served this college in a variety of positions since then, including Head of the Department of English, College Tutor, a member of the Postgraduate Advisory Service's panel of advisors and is now a Fellow Emeritus.

Medieval and Renaissance poetry

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's academic work on Renaissance literature and literature from the earlier medieval period allows her to link her fascination with history with her focus on language and meaning. Again, she draws on her encounters in these areas in order to convey her meaning more effectively in her poetry.

The medieval influence on 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht' is immediately obvious from the unfamiliar spellings of the words in the title. This title is a line taken from a poem written by the late medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar. A quest also features in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem. We have already discussed the quest in relation to folktales, fairytales and myths, but it also became a widely used element in medieval romance literature.

Medieval romance literature told stories about love. But rather than simply describing the knight's attempts to win the love of





a lady, these narratives compared them to the experiences he would encounter while he was undertaking a quest. In this way, the story concerning an abstract emotion of love was represented in a narrative about the concrete experience of a quest. This is known as an allegory. In the course of his quest, the knight often met real, concrete people who represented abstract human emotions or qualities. For instance, in one of the best examples of medieval romance literature that still exists today, the medieval french poem *Le Roman de la Rose*, the hero knight meets a person, Sir Mirth, happily dancing around with dancers who include people called Beauty and Youth. This idea of representing abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete ways is very important to developing an understanding of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry and we will return to it later in our consideration of her individual poems.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has also expressed her fondness for the medieval approach to storytelling: 'I like medieval narrative, the way it goes on, and on, and on, it says "and then, and then, and then, and then".' But this should not be taken to mean that she likes loose, long-winded writing. Rather, what she seems to be referring to is the way in which this style of storytelling used tightly written language constructed with carefully chosen words and vivid, concrete images to communicate layers of meaning. Kevin Ray describes this as 'an intricate layering, building, in the Renaissance fashion'.

Indeed, it is Renaissance literature that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin credits with influencing the manner in which she employs description in her poetry, commenting that she shares 'the strong belief of Renaissance poets ... in the power of ... description'.

Ireland and Italy

Although Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry draws on such a wide variety of influences and is now popular all over the world, she does admit that it is very much written from inside, and about, life in Ireland, both in the past and the present: 'I do write primarily for an Irish audience, which might have certain points of reference, and a certain kind of education.' This may well be partly due to her encounters with Irish history, language and folklore through her parents and wider family as a child. Also, her life has largely been lived in Ireland so that her focus is, naturally, on the place that is her home.

However, Italy also plays a very important part in her life and in her writing. To her, Italy is a place where 'life is much more sensible'. Ní Chuilleanáin first went to Italy with her parents at the age of twelve. She spent more time there in the 1960s when her father, due to ill health, was forced to retire and her parents moved to Rome. It is not at all surprising that Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance, appeals to her because it gives her opportunities to develop her interests in history, literature, folk customs, architecture and languages and for more encounters with people and knowledge. Her poem 'Fireman's Lift' draws on one of her memories of time spent with her mother in Italy. Today, Italy, in the form of a house in Umbria, provides both her and her husband, Macdara Woods, with a place where writing can be done: 'Macdara likes being there to write ... in fact I think that I would never manage to write finished poetry without that interval of escaping from Dublin.'





The Irish literary scene

It is understandable that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin finds the need to take some time away from Ireland in order to write her poetry because her life is busy, as she encounters the many areas of her interests with alertness and attention. One such area is the Irish literary scene. Initially she contributed to this with her poetry, as her writing career continued to flourish through the 1960s and into the 1970s. In 1973, her first collection of poetry, *Acts and Monuments*, won the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award. Her second collection, *Site of Ambush*, published in 1975, received a similarly positive response and was awarded the Book Publishers' Ireland Award. The quality of her work continues to be acknowledged and recognised up to the present.

However, her poetry is not the only contribution that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has made to the Irish literary scene. In 1975, she, along with Macdara Woods, Leland Bardwell and Pearse Hutchinson, came together to produce *Cyphers*, a literary journal that was named after a black cat, Cypher, which in turn had been named after a series of poems by Macdara Woods. Perhaps there may be some of Cypher's qualities in the cat that features in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009'. The first edition of *Cyphers* consisted of poetry alone, but in subsequent issues prose, graphics and translations have been included. Happily, the journal is still operating today so that, as Ní Chuilleanáin points out, 'The black cat is in her grave in the back garden ... but her name lives on.'

Life and death

The 1970s also proved important in her personal life as, in 1978, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin married fellow poet Macdara Woods. They have a son, Niall, who is a musician. It is his marriage that is so beautifully celebrated in 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009'. Here again, we can see how it is her life, filled with her many and varied encounters with people and with knowledge, that provides her with the images and ideas that are explored and expressed in her poetry. Indeed, this holds true even when these encounters are emotionally devastating because they involve the loss of loved ones through death.

Ní Chuilleanáin's father, who had suffered from ill health, died in 1970. Sadly, she then experienced the loss of three of her family members within a period of a few years beginning in 1990: her younger sister, Máire, died, followed by her stepfather, Vivian Mercier, and then her mother. Ní Chuilleanáin explains that she addresses death in her poetry because 'I feel that I write about these things because I don't understand them, and because we don't understand death we keep coming back to it in an effort to understand it, to come to terms with it.' Her determination to live life with alertness and attention means that she must draw on her encounters with death in writing her poetry, as in 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct', 'Deaths and Engines' and 'Fireman's Lift'.

Influences and ideas

Some critics have suggested that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry can be challenging to read and she herself admits that she is





‘very aware of the fact that [her] poetry is oblique and obscure’. However, we have already begun to develop a method for reading and engaging with her poetry as effectively and as meaningfully as possible by examining some of the key life encounters, or engagements, with people and knowledge which she draws on in creating her poetry. We know that in reading her poetry, we will find:

- Architectural images
- Deceptively straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning
- References to folktales, fairytales and myths because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that they represent truths about how best to live life
- The idea of a quest, looking for something or a task to be completed
- A story element in the narrative fragment, that is, a brief and incomplete description of an incident that often opens her poems
- References to history: personal and family history and the history of Irish society
- Irish history represented as an important influence on the present that must be confronted if Irish society is to progress
- Women in Irish society, both past and present
- Influences from Renaissance and medieval literature, particularly abstract emotions and qualities represented in concrete ways

- Poetry that is written from inside and about Ireland, past and present
- References to Italy
- References to important life experiences: marriage and death

The process of writing poetry: language and meaning – imagery and the persona

We can further develop our method for reading and engaging with her poetry as effectively and meaningfully as possible by briefly exploring the process that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin undertakes when writing a poem. She freely admits that writing poetry is ‘something I am impelled to do, an unshaped fire demanding to be organised into a sequence of words and images as nearly orderly as I can make them’. The phrase ‘nearly orderly’ is significant because it emphasises Ní Chuilleanáin’s belief that in poetry, as indeed in life, it is never possible to achieve the perfect order of a complete solution, of something fully learned and understood. For her, there is always and inevitably an unsolvable element of mystery or a puzzling enigma in both.

In considering her poems individually, we must be prepared to accept that in writing a poem she is not attempting to provide an answer or a solution for her readers. When in an interview with Ní Chuilleanáin in 2007 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh put it to her that in many of her poems ‘once you get to the centre or the core, there is still a kind of mystery’, Ní Chuilleanáin replied, ‘Oh yes, the centre is never quite there. Or if I know what is at the centre, I might well choose not to say it because I don’t think that is worth the point.’ In many ways, it is this mystery, or enigma, at





their 'centre' that gives her poems a haunting quality, so that we are drawn back to reading them again to examine once more the unresolved enigma, and by doing this, to remain actively engaged with them. Indeed, as will become clear from our brief exploration of her poetry-writing process, there is a consciousness and an intention on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's part that her poetry should facilitate an active engagement on the part of her reader.

For Ní Chuilleanáin, writing a poem begins with waiting: waiting 'for it to be really important to me to write this particular poem'. There then follows the first, largely instinctive, writing phase: 'I have a sense as soon as I get paper in my hand that I am putting words down. I think I have a sense whether it's going to be a tight or a loose one ...' This first phase of writing, once completed, is not the end of the process for her, but rather the beginning, as she then subjects the piece to a period of revision:

when I am revising, I am usually revising three or four poems at a time. I would go through one and say, 'I have gone as far as I can with this', and then stop and go back and look at another one.

As she explains, this revision process can be ruthless: 'There are a few poems that were longer that I revised to a tighter and shorter form.' We can see that an important part of this revision process is the effort to tighten and shorten her writing. This is borne out of her awareness, considered above in the 'Folklore and poetry' section, that 'the word is never uncomplicated': that the relationship between language and meaning is a problematic one. Therefore, this tightening and shortening is not a simple

reduction in the numbers of words or the lengths of the lines in a poem, but rather, it is a revisiting, over an extended period of time, of the relationship between the words that she has chosen and the meaning that she wishes to communicate. She does this in an effort to ensure that in each of her poems, this relationship between language and meaning can be made as 'uncomplicated' as possible. It is for this reason that in our reading of her poetry we need to be constantly alert and to pay careful attention to every word, phrase and image that she uses because they each contribute to the meaning that she wishes to convey.

Her revision also involves working on the imagery in the poem. To communicate a particular aspect, such as a feeling or an impression, as clearly as possible, the poet compares it to an image or a series of images to help the reader to experience and understand this aspect. For this reason, these images are called comparative images. For example, in the poem 'Following', Ní Chuilleanáin conveys the distress of the girl when she finds herself unable to keep up with her father in a crowd by using a series of nightmarish comparative images. Comparative images are not meant to be taken literally: the girl in 'Following' is not actually in the nightmare, but she is actually feeling the extreme emotion that Ní Chuilleanáin wants her readers to feel.

There are two important features about the way in which Ní Chuilleanáin uses imagery in her poetry. Firstly, drawing on her work on medieval literature, discussed previously in the section 'Medieval and Renaissance poetry', she often uses concrete images to convey abstract emotions, as with the girl's emotional distress in 'Following'. Secondly, Ní Chuilleanáin consciously





uses her imagery to encourage the reader to actively engage with her poetry: 'Quite often when I use visual imagery I am hoping that the reader will think themselves into the poem ...' She is not presenting her imagery to the reader as a passive observer. Instead, as she explains, 'When I put something in my poetry in terms of "I see something", I'm inviting the reader to imagine it. Similarly, if I put in something tactile, I hope the reader will respond to that ...' Part of Ní Chuilleanáin's careful revision of a poem's imagery is undertaken to ensure that this imagery acts as an effective invitation to each reader to become active in, and to contribute to, an encounter or engagement with the poem. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has a clear view of the type of encounter or engagement that she expects her poem to stimulate in her reader:

What I am trying to do is to suggest, to phrase, to find a way to make it possible for somebody to pick up certain suggestions and to give things like visual clues, colours, light and darkness. Those will come together for the person, even if they don't necessarily know the background. They might not be seeing what I am seeing.

Therefore, as readers of her poetry we must try to remain actively alert to the 'suggestions' in her poems and to pay attention to 'clues' so that we can add 'colours, light and darkness' to them. Indeed, Ní Chuilleanáin's frequent use of a non-gendered or vague, undefined persona in her poetry is another device that she uses to encourage her reader to become active in, and to contribute to, an encounter with one of her poems. A persona is a character that the poet creates and adopts for the purposes of the poem. Although her poetry is very personal in that, as we have

seen, she draws on her many and varied encounters with people and knowledge in each of her poems, Ní Chuilleanáin sometimes avoids allowing them to become personalised to her because then her poems would become records of her experiences and her feelings. As we now know, she does not want this, because as she has said of her readers, 'They might not be seeing what I am seeing.' By employing a persona in some of her poems, she is creating a space for her reader to enter into the poem.

The final phase of the poem-writing process involves Ní Chuilleanáin making the decision 'to put it away for a month and look at it again when I've forgotten the original impetus ... Then I can see if it makes sense.' Finally, she arrives at a point where she understands that it is time to end her work on a poem: 'there is a poem, not the one I expected to write when I began ... there may be certainty in our recognition of the finished poem, but there is also surprise.'

Reading Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry

From our consideration of the process that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin undertakes in order to write a poem, we can now complete our method for reading and engaging with her poetry as effectively and as meaningfully as possible. We know that as readers of her poetry:

- We should not expect to be presented with answers or solutions.
- We can expect some mystery or puzzling enigma in her poetry because Ní Chuilleanáin considers that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life.





- This presence of mystery and enigma at the core of her poems acts to encourage us to actively engage with her poems.
- We must be alert and pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses and the meaning that she conveys through them, as they have been produced following a long period of thoughtful revision on Ní Chuilleanáin's part.
- We should be aware that her process of revision also ensures that her use of comparative images creates imagery that communicates what she wishes to express as clearly as possible, such as abstract emotions conveyed in concrete images. She does this so that her sensory imagery will act as an invitation to us to actively engage with the poem.
- We must also understand that in her poetry Ní Chuilleanáin creates space for us to make an active contribution to our encounters with her poems by her use of 'suggestions' and 'clues' and the persona.

Accepting Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's invitation

Why, then, should we accept Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's invitation to encounter her poetry as actively engaged, alert and attentive readers? The answer to this question can be found in some of the comments that she has made about her poetry.

'I write poems that mean a lot to me but I can't expect them to mean that to other people.' This sums up the position that Ní Chuilleanáin adopts as a poet writing poetry. She does not see herself as acting in the role of poet as a wise and learned prophet leading and guiding her less wise and less learned readers. There is no expectation on her part that her meaningful encounters with

knowledge and people will be meaningful to her readers. She is not dealing in truths about life that will provide her readers with answers and solutions that will hold true in their lives.

However, what she does do is locate her poetry on her own personal values: 'I would never write a poem without, at some level, relating it to my own ideas about truth and right.' As a result, her sharing of the many and varied life encounters with people and with knowledge, which have become important enough for her to write about as poems, has integrity because in living this life, she tries to be always alert and attentive to what 'truth and right' mean to her. Her alertness about what truth means to her is evident in such descriptions as her flight into the hills away from her father's deathbed in 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct' and the young girl's distress and bewilderment in 'Following'. In addition, her representations of life as an experience that is joyful and right, as in 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009', and an experience that is heartbreaking and horrifyingly not right, as in 'Translation', speak of the attention that she gives to right in her life. It is her sense of the meaning of 'truth and right' in her life that enables her to find meanings to explore and express in her poetry.

Ní Chuilleanáin believes that this is what poetry can do: 'Poetry offers us the experience of entering meaning by a variety of passages.' Her poetry may not offer us ready-made truths, complete answers or perfect solutions, but the reading of it does give us the opportunity to create our own meanings for ideas that can help us to decide how best to live our lives: ideas such as 'truth and right'. In addition, by being alert and attentive to these





meanings and by putting them into practice in our lives, we can each create our own integrity. But this can only happen if we are prepared to encounter her poems as actively engaged readers, mindful of the influences that she uses to help her to find her own meanings and welcoming the space and the opportunity that she so carefully provides in each of her poems for us to be mindful of our own influences and to find our own meanings.

The judges who awarded Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize in 2010 described her as ‘This beguiling poet [who] opens many doors into multiple worlds.’ There is no doubt that when we read Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry, we find ourselves invited into worlds that are indeed many and varied and made meaningful to her because of her alertness and attention to her life and to her poetry. However, once we have accepted her invitation, it is up to each of us to develop our own alertness and attention in order to find the right ‘passages’ through these worlds so that we can open the door that will lead us into our own world, and to our own meanings.





LUCINA SCHYNNING IN SILENCE OF THE NIGHT

Background

The title of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht' is a line taken from a poem written by a Scottish poet, William Dunbar, who was born in the late fourteenth century and worked in the court of James IV of Scotland. Also, lines 1–2 of Ní Chuilleanáin's poem are a modern English translation of this line and another line from Dunbar's poem.

In his poem, Dunbar explains how he was very depressed one night because he was unable to obtain a benefice, that is, a secure, paid position in the Church. When he finally fell asleep, he had a dream-vision where Dame Fortune came to him and told him that he would get a benefice. However, she did say that this would not happen until a seemingly impossible incident had occurred: an abbot, the head of a monastery, covering himself with eagle's feathers and flying in the air. She then linked this apparently impossible incident to events connected to the appearance of the Antichrist, with destruction and fire, just before the Second Coming of Christ. When he woke up, Dunbar felt more positive. This is actually meant to be an amusing poem, because in it Dunbar is making fun of a man he dislikes, who did try to fly off the walls of a Scottish castle.

This sequence of feeling depressed and negative emotions, falling asleep and waking up, then feeling more positive is also evident in

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem. However, in Dunbar's poem he had a dream-vision while asleep that helped to change his emotions, whereas in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem there is no dream-vision, but there is nature.

In addition, this poem was written around the time that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's father died in 1970. She seems to draw on this here in the image of the hare 'sitting still/In the middle of the track'. Ní Chuilleanáin saw this hare at the time that her father was dying, as recounted in another of her poems 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct'.

A reading of the poem

In 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht' we encounter an almost overwhelming density of vivid, dramatic and frequently enigmatic images that stimulate our senses and provoke our thoughts. However, we also recognise some of the elements that are typical of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems:

- The use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images
- The image of a quest
- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem





because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life

- The inclusion of architectural images
- The idea of the world of nature as a source of calmness and consolation

The 'I' in this poem has been interpreted in two ways: as the poet speaking through a persona or alternatively as the poet speaking as herself. Thus, the 'I' could represent her use of a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona who tells the narrative fragment to create a space for us to enter into the poem to make our own meaning and interpretation. However, we do know that the final image of the poem, featuring the hare on the track, is connected to the time when her father was dying. Perhaps this indicates that the 'I' is the poet speaking as herself. Or perhaps it is a combination of both in that it is not wholly a persona or the poet but a blend of the two? You might like to make your own decision about this.

Lines 1–7 open the poem with a series of dramatic and vivid images. As has been noted, lines 1–2 are modern English translations of two lines from William Dunbar's poem. They create an atmosphere of stillness and quietness. As we read on, we learn that the speaker has been reading a 'book'. This seemingly usual activity is made unusual by the environment in which it takes place: 'in a ruin', lit by a 'candle', with the wind blowing in through 'the crazed window'. This brings a medieval quality to the surroundings, and perhaps this is appropriate since from the references to it in the opening lines of the poem, it would appear that the book being read was William Dunbar's medieval work.

The 'ruin' could also represent the idea that the place where she is reading was old and dilapidated. Is there a link here between the book and the ruin, suggesting that the book contains knowledge that is also old, dilapidated and therefore not able to improve the speaker's emotional state? The 'ruin' certainly does seem to represent a feeling of confinement, of being penned in.

Whether it is because of her reading or because of some unconnected reason – perhaps the death of the poet's father – it is evident that the speaker is not happy in her reading. Her abstract negative and depressed emotions are conveyed through a series of concrete images that appeal to our senses so that we can also experience them. There is the smell of the 'sour' candle and the touch of the cold air 'Blowing in the crazed window'. In addition, there is the lack of anything that might prove comforting, such as 'roast meat or music/Strong drink'. The use of the word 'crazed' introduces layers of meaning in that 'crazed' can mean 'to be made insane'. Is this window a concrete image for her intense abstract feelings that are almost driving her mad? But 'crazed' can also mean 'marked with fine surface cracks', so is this image simply explaining why the air is blowing in? Perhaps it is both. The final line suggests a change in the speaker's emotions as she feels the 'Moonlight on my head'. The use of the word 'clear' reinforces this idea that her negative and depressed emotional condition, represented by the 'rain', is beginning to improve. Again, this line conveys layered meanings. It could also be the speaker simply telling us that she feels negative and depressed emotions because she has been unable to go out for three days due to the rain.





In lines 8–11, this sense of increasingly positive emotions is again conveyed through a concrete image that appeals to the senses: the almost baptismal scene of washing in ‘cold water; it was orange’ that appeals to the senses of touch and sight. This image of the water seems to act as a link that draws the world of nature into the ‘ruin’, because as the speaker sleeps, bats fly around her room and when she awakes she sees sheep. It is significant that these creatures from the world of nature seem to contribute to the fact that she ‘slept safely’.

The speaker awakes with her abstract depressed and negative emotions ‘Behind’ her. Again, this is conveyed by the use of concrete images. She no longer feels oppressed by ‘the waves of darkness’. The image of the ‘mice, plague of beetles/Crawling out of the spines of books’ is nightmarish and could be seen as suggesting the intensity of her emotional state: when she was depressed and negative, she felt as if she was in a nightmare. But there are layers of meaning here again. This may be a reference to spontaneous generation: the medieval and Renaissance belief that life could suddenly appear from sources that were not parents, eggs or seeds, such as mud or books. If we accept this meaning, does this then suggest another link, as in line 3, between books and negative emotions, such as those that would be felt in response to a ‘plague’ of mice and beetles? Lines 15–16 also convey occurrences that would create negative and depressed feelings, with the ‘pale faces’ and ‘disease’. But happily, this is all behind her.

Lines 17–20 convey the increasingly positive emotions that the speaker is experiencing. She feels ‘relaxed’. She also feels ‘amazed’, and lines 18–20 create a striking concrete image to

convey how this amazement felt to her. It was as if she was one of the ‘mosaic beasts’ on the floor of a chapel which only saw the ‘sky growing’ for the first time when Cromwell destroyed the roof of the church. It is clear that for the ‘beasts’, the chapel represented confinement, being penned in away from the world of nature, represented by ‘the sky’. This echoes the sense of confinement that the speaker felt in the ‘ruin’ in lines 1–6.

The final stanza of the poem contains images that create a wonderful celebration of the world of nature and its power to evoke positive emotions in those who go out into it. These images contrast sharply with the architectural images of the ‘ruin’ and the chapel that convey a sense of confinement, of being penned in filled with negative emotions, away from nature. There is also the suggestion that the speaker is on a quest in these lines. However, this is a very special quest in that she does not face any challenges. Instead, in keeping with nature’s power to evoke positive emotions, she is ‘embraced’ by ‘Sheepdogs’, ‘the grasshopper’ and the ‘lark and bee’. These all contribute to her positive feelings to such an extent that the ‘hedges of high thorn’, perhaps a negative image, are ignored as she focuses on ‘the hare, absorbed, sitting still/In the middle of the track’. (This image is also used in ‘On Lacking the Killer Instinct’, where Ní Chuilleanáin carries this image in her memory as she returns to her dying father’s bedside.) But it is also a source of positive emotions here. In the final line of the poem, it is clear that the speaker has reached the end of her quest: she hears the ‘chirp of the stream running’. The use of the word ‘chirp’ says all that needs to be said about her emotions now.





Nature and positive feelings

Nature appears as a positive force in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry. As we have seen in 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht', it is being able to get out into nature that enables the speaker to put her negative emotions behind her and to develop positive ones. Nature has a similarly positive effect in 'The Bend in the Road', where the memories of loved ones who have died are recalled close to nature; in 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct', where the poet returns to her dying father's bedside strengthened by her time in nature; and in 'Translation', where it could be suggested that the Magdalene woman is absorbed into the world of nature and finds peace at last.





THE SECOND VOYAGE

Background

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin uses Odysseus as the central character in ‘The Second Voyage’ just as Homer does in *The Odyssey*. She also bases the poem on one of Odysseus’ adventures originally told by Homer in *The Odyssey*. However, in her poem Ní Chuilleanáin makes a number of significant changes to Homer’s approach to both.

Firstly, Ní Chuilleanáin’s writes about Odysseus, as a character, in a very different way to that used by Homer and generally by the myths of ancient Greece. Instead of a fast-paced action-type adventure where it is what he does that largely reveals Odysseus’ personality, Ní Chuilleanáin slows down the pace so that we find Odysseus in a moment when he is resting and thoughtful. Because of this, her poem allows us to share in Odysseus’ private thoughts and emotions so that this moment of reflection becomes a moment of revelation where the true personality of the private, inner Odysseus is disclosed.

Secondly, in Homer’s version of the narrative concerning Tiresias giving advice to Odysseus, Tiresias instructs Odysseus to stick the oar into the ground and to offer sacrifices to the god of the sea, Poseidon. Having done that, Tiresias tells Odysseus that he will be able to return home. In her poem, Ní Chuilleanáin makes no mention of Tiresias advising Odysseus; instead, it seems that Odysseus thinks of this idea himself in line 16, ‘I know what I’ll do he said’. Also, neither Poseidon nor sacrifices are mentioned in

‘The Second Voyage’. Odysseus does say that he will stick the oar into the ground but ‘as a tidemark’, that is, a marker to show where the tide reached its highest point. In this way, the quest in ‘The Second Voyage’ is driven by Odysseus himself and his personality, whereas in Homer’s ‘Odyssey’, the quest is constantly under the influence of the gods.

A reading of the poem

In our reading of the ‘The Second Voyage’, we encounter a number of key elements that often feature in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem.
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses.
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem.
- Unlike many of her other poems, the persona that features in ‘The Second Voyage’ is more defined and we learn more about his personality in the course of the poem.
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images.
- References to myths, the close relation of folktales and fairytales, which also, for Ní Chuilleanáin, represent truths about how best to live life.
- The image of a quest.
- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem





because Ní Chuilleanáin considers that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life. This acts to encourage us to actively engage with the poem.

The narrative fragment in lines 1–7 that acts as a starting point for this poem offers little detail other than the information that Odysseus is in a boat on the sea. Consequently, there is an element of mystery about what is happening to Odysseus. However, Ní Chuilleanáin does this deliberately as she wants to keep the focus of her poem on Odysseus, the man and his personality, rather than on the narrative, or story, in which he is involved.

Indeed, the way in which Ní Chuilleanáin manages the focus of this poem is very important in adding to the dramatic effect of the poem. In lines 1–7, the words seem to be spoken by an omniscient narrator, that is, a speaker who stands outside the narrative but is able to describe everything that is happening, including characters' thoughts. This is the traditional technique of storytelling used in myths, folktales and fairytales. We seem to be very much in the traditional story context as we are told that Odysseus 'rested on his oar', 'rammed/The oar between their jaws' (that is, the waves) and 'looked down/In the simmering sea'. Although not the large, dramatic actions of a hero, these actions do prove to be important in conveying some sense of his personality. His resting on 'his oar' suggests weariness and his action of ramming the oar into the 'jaws' of the waves makes it clear that he is angry and aggressive towards the 'simmering sea'. This suggests that there is a level of frustration in his looking down into the sea's 'Uncertain depth', perhaps because all of his anger and aggression have in no way affected this world or brought it under his control.

Lines 8–15 mark a subtle but significant shift in the focus of the poem. The language used in lines 8–10 becomes more emotional, with phrases that seem to come from Odysseus himself, as in 'If there was a single/Streak of decency'. It is as if the omniscient narrator is disappearing in the face of the strength of Odysseus' emotions about the sea. Suddenly, in lines 11–15, the pronouns become more personalised with 'we', 'us' and 'our'. Is Odysseus talking to his crew or to us, the readers? What has also happened in lines 9–15 is that the waves have become 'they'. There is now a situation that involves two groups that are in opposition to each other: 'we' (Odysseus and those who he considers to be with him) and 'they' (the waves and the sea). This has the effect of suddenly making us recognise that the sea is as much of a character in this poem as Odysseus.

However, Odysseus and the sea are characters with very different qualities. If we look back at lines 1–15, the description of Odysseus includes anger, aggression and frustration, but there is also a contemptuous quality suggested in his attitude to the sea. He sneers at the sea because he does not consider it to be a worthy adversary. As far as he is concerned the sea is so stupid, like 'sheep', that it does not understand the correct rules of behaviour in these situations. It does not have the 'decency' to submit to his 'battering' and to surrender its independence by allowing Odysseus and his kind to name the waves, an act that would indicate that they have power over the waves and the sea. This attitude is often adopted by those who know that they are dealing with something or someone that they will never be able to control. On the other hand, lines 1–15 link very different qualities





to the sea. It seems to be full of life and energy, as it is ‘simmering’ with ‘scribbles of weed’ and ‘slim fishes’. This is a vast, independent world that is mysterious and enigmatic with ‘Uncertain depth’, and with its own rules and codes of behaviour, suggested by shoals of fish that swim in ‘fatal formation’ to their deaths. Clearly, this is a world that Odysseus and ‘his oar’ do not have any power over.

In lines 16–30, the focus of the poem shifts entirely onto Odysseus. The pronouns become ‘I’ as we follow his thoughts outlining his response to this world. He makes the decision that for his next voyage, ‘The Second Voyage’, he will leave the sea and go on a quest on land, taking the oar with him. Significantly, the words that he uses to describe his imagined land quest are all suggestive of his ability to dominate the landscape, something that he cannot do with the sea. He will ‘face the rising ground and walk away’ and on ‘Over gaps in the hills’. This is a solid world that he imagines moving over at will, unlike the sea, with its ‘simmering’ waves. In addition, the land is a world where power can be exercised over water, even by birds, ‘Where herons parcel out the miles of stream’.

Odysseus imagines how he will stride across the land with his oar until he meets ‘a farmer’ who is his equal in courage. As a farmer, this man will know nothing about the sea so he will think that the oar is a ‘Winnowing fan’, a tool used in farming the land. Odysseus imagines how he will ‘stand still’, something that can be very difficult to do in a boat on the sea, and ‘plant’ the oar into the ground to become a ‘gatepost or a hitching-post’. In this way, the oar will become part of the farming world, a system whereby man dominates the land. Even more significantly, Odysseus declares

that the oar will also become ‘a tidemark’, that is, a marker showing the highest point that the sea and the waves can reach. Odysseus imagines a successful end to his land quest as he finally exerts his power over the sea by deciding where the limits of the sea are. In this way, the image of Odysseus planting the oar into the ground becomes a real, concrete image of a key element in Odysseus’ personality: his abstract desire to exercise power and domination. Once he has done this, Odysseus decides that he will return to ‘organise my house’, another concrete image suggestive of his abstract desire to exercise power and domination. It is clear that Odysseus’ imagined land quest is a quest for power, control and domination.

In the final section of this poem, lines 31–42, the omniscient narrator returns and we are back in the traditional storytelling framework with Odysseus now distant from us again. We are told that he is still in his boat on the sea that ‘still held him’. This phrase makes it evident that it is the sea that has power over Odysseus and that his only power is that of his control over the oar as an instrument of defence to make the ‘valleys of the ocean’ beneath him ‘keep their distance’.

Perhaps in another attempt to escape the truth of his situation, Odysseus recalls some of the places that he has known on land in lines 35–40. It is significant that in each of these images there are suggestions that the water does not interfere with activities or movements because it has been brought under some degree of control by man in ‘fountains’ and in a ‘sugarstick of water clattering into the kettle’. In fact, water on the land can be controlled to such an extent that it can help man by providing ways of moving





around easily on 'flat lakes' through 'rushes' or on 'the black canal' as well as to fill 'Horsetroughs' to water the animals that man also controls. On land, it is not only man who can live his life unrestricted by water, but also such creatures as 'pale swans' and, most embarrassingly of all for Odysseus, 'spiders and frogs'.

It is at this point, in the final two lines of the poem, that Ní Chuilleanáin creates an image that is both striking and dramatic in that it unexpectedly reveals the truth about Odysseus' personality: Odysseus cries. The reason for his tears is conveyed through the subtle but important link that is made between the saltiness of Odysseus' 'tears', the saltiness of his 'sweat' and the saltiness of the 'sea'. This link can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, these lines could be interpreted as meaning that Odysseus' face was damp with his salty tears because he was crying from exhaustion caused by his physical effort, indicated by the sweat, to control the water. This interpretation suggests that Odysseus has been broken physically by his efforts to gain power over the sea. On the other hand, these lines could be interpreted as meaning that Odysseus' face was damp with his tears that were salty, just like the sea-spray that splashed up from the sea, as if the sea was spitting 'insults' at him. This interpretation implies that he has been broken psychologically and emotionally by his efforts to gain power over the sea.

Indeed, the meanings of these two interpretations are layered in such a way that they create a skilfully constructed image that conveys how every level of Odysseus' being has been broken by his desire for power. In both interpretations his tears become a concrete image representing the abstract reality of his personality:

he is a man who craves power, domination and control and who, if he cannot succeed in gaining such power, is ultimately destroyed by his own feelings of anger, frustration and shame.

Themes

This is a dramatic poem that is packed with vivid and memorable images. The shifting of the poem's focus adds to this drama by altering the degree of connection that we have with the central character, Odysseus. Initially we are at a distance from Odysseus as the omniscient narrator tells the narrative in a traditional way. Then we find ourselves engaging directly with Odysseus himself as we follow his thoughts. The poem ends with us back in our distant position as the omniscient narrator returns. This has the effect of making our close encounter with Odysseus' thoughts and emotions all the more dramatic.

But the question still remains: what is the theme, or central idea, of this poem? We know there is the idea of opposition between two parties in this poem, represented by Odysseus and the sea. We also know that there is the idea of the desire to gain and exercise power, control and domination over another. What remains mysterious and enigmatic is the life situation into which we should slot these ideas.

Should we slot these ideas into the conservation situation? Is the theme of this poem that much as we humans, represented by Odysseus, like to think that we have control over the world of nature, the reality is that the elements of nature, such as the sea, have immense power that ultimately man cannot control? At the end of the poem, is Odysseus shedding tears both for himself and





for all human beings as he understands our vulnerability in the face of the immense power that is the world of nature?

Or should we slot it into the self-knowledge situation? In *The Odyssey* by Homer, Odysseus is a hero with a flaw: hubris, as the ancient Greeks termed it. He is a man who is proud and arrogantly confident of his abilities. According to the ancient Greek myths, it was flaws like these that led to the downfall of heroes and great men. So are Odysseus' tears at the end of the poem his downfall: his realisation that his heroic powers are limited – that he is a very small man, with a smaller oar, in a small boat on a big sea? Is the theme of this poem that we should all be mindful of our limitations as human beings?

Or should we slot it into the power and society situation? Is this exploration of the desire for power, control and domination a theme alerting us to the dangers posed by such behaviour to our society? Some interpretations of this poem have suggested that this theme can be applied to the ways in which males have historically tried to dominate females in many societies. Does Odysseus represent all that is male and the sea all that is female? Are the two opposing parties actually men and women?

Or perhaps there is another situation that you can think of, where this poem will slot in neatly and the theme becomes clear. After all, this is the opportunity that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin offers to us as readers of her poetry.





DEATHS AND ENGINES

A reading of the poem

'Deaths and Engines' was written at the time of the death of Ní Chuilleanáin's father and is underpinned by a genuinely personal tone. It also contains a number of the key elements associated with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The image of a quest
- The inclusion of architectural images, in this case 'houses', an 'airport', a 'tunnel', 'runways' and a 'blind/Alley', which situate the poem in a world that seems to be solidly familiar and ordinary.

The narrative fragment that acts as the starting point for this poem has a conversational feeling, with straightforward language and a natural arrangement of words. It is as if we have just met the poet and she is describing her arrival at Paris airport (1–3). The mood of these opening lines is calm, with no hint of anxiety or excitement. There is the sense that for Ní Chuilleanáin, these moments in the landing plane signalled an end to a quest – she was about to arrive in Paris. However, these moments actually marked the start of a quest for her as the mood was suddenly changed by what she saw

through the window of the plane. Lines 4–7 relate how, as the plane approached the airport, she caught sight of something that at first appeared to be nothing more than an unremarkable 'tunnel' leading to somewhere in the airport. Suddenly, she realised that it was actually half of a plane, 'burnt-out' against the snow.

The black and white colours suggested by 'burnt-out' and 'snow' appear again in line 9, where the 'snow-white runways' turned into dead ends 'in the dark'. This creates a striking and rather bleak visual image. Similarly, by creating an image that appeals to the sense of hearing in lines 10–12, Ní Chuilleanáin is inviting us, her readers, to actually experience this situation. Instead of the usual sounds of loudspeakers relaying announcements from the plane's captain and people chatting, there was 'No sound' apart from 'sighs' coming from 'the lonely pilot'.

Line 13 – 'The cold of metal wings is contagious' – echoes back to the coldness suggested by the 'frozen' wreckage and the 'snow'. This line could mean that touching the cold metal wings that are part of the wreckage spreads a wave of coldness up through the whole body. However, when we read on through lines 14–19, we encounter descriptions of death, an emotionally charged experience. As a result, another layer of meaning becomes apparent in the line 'The cold of metal wings is contagious'. We now recognise that there is also an emotional aspect to this coldness: the 'cold of metal wings', that is, the wreckage, not only affects people physically, but also emotionally. In the poet's case, this emotional effect caused her to think about her father and his imminent death. In this way, line 13, by referring back to the wreckage in the narrative fragment and by introducing the idea





of death, which is the central idea in the remainder of the poem, acts as a vivid and effective link between the narrative fragment in lines 1–12 and the thoughts about death in lines 14–33 that were triggered by the sight of this wreckage.

In lines 14–33, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin sets out on an intellectual and emotional quest initiated by her sight of the wreckage, and as the ‘you’ in line 14 seems to suggest, is expanded by being connected to her father’s dying. The purpose of her quest is to try to understand and to confront, intellectually and emotionally, what death means, and because it is a quest, she faces some challenges. The first challenge that she faces in lines 14–19 is an intellectual one, posed by the language and images that are generally used in connection with death. People are often afraid of using the actual word ‘death’, so they use language and images that give death a less frightening meaning. She tries using some of these images in her quest to understand what death means. Death, then, is needing ‘wings’, presumably like an angel, and is being ‘Cornered’ by ‘Time and life’ that cross like a ‘knife and fork’. This draws on the superstition that crossing a knife and fork at the end of meal is unlucky and likely to bring death. Death can also be the ‘lifeline in your palm’ breaking and ‘the curve of an aeroplane’s track’ meeting the ‘straight skyline’. Although these images do partially confront the real meaning of death by suggesting that it is something that has to be faced alone without any help (‘Soon you will need wings of your own’), that it is inevitable, as suggested by the word ‘Cornered’, and that it is final, suggested by the word ‘Breaks’, there is the sense that they are unsatisfactory and unhelpful to Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s quest to

understand and to confront, intellectually and emotionally, what death means.

The second challenge that she faces is an emotional one in lines 20–25. This challenge is posed by the emotional reluctance that people feel about accepting that someone is dying. This drives them to look for ‘images of relief’, that is, hopeful signs that the person is not dying or dead. Perhaps influenced by her experiences with her father, these ‘images of relief’ are very real and dramatic. The much-dreaded ‘Hospital pyjamas’ are welcomed, as are the ‘screens’, because they show that the person is in a hospital and not in a morgue. The man who is injured ‘with a bloody face’ still lives, ‘conversing cheerfully’. But the poet understands and acknowledges the truth about such signs: they are only temporary signs of hope, because eventually they ‘will fail you some time’.

The overall effect of the images that she uses in lines 14–25 to explore the meaning of death is to suggest that life is a fragile force, while the power of death is ever-present and inevitable.

At first, as we begin to read lines 26–33 it appears that Ní Chuilleanáin’s quest to try to understand and to confront what death means has led her to accept that death means an experience that must be undertaken alone without any help; an experience that is inevitable; and an experience that is final. Lines 26–8 echo this aloneness – ‘You will find yourself alone’ – and this inevitability and finality – ‘Accelerating down a blind/Alley, too late to stop’. It seems that her quest has culminated in a meaning that is conveyed in this intensely striking and vivid image of death being like a terrifying theme park ride.





In the face of such images, it is hard not to feel overwhelmed by the results of her quest. But line 29 unexpectedly provides a hint of comfort in that this theme park ride with a dead end also involves learning ‘how light your death is’. Worryingly, however, the image in lines 30–1 recalls the crashed plane in the narrative fragment, as Ní Chuilleanáin describes how the dead end of death will see ‘You ... scattered like wreckage’ into ‘pieces, every one a different shape’. At this point, death truly seems to mean a theme park ride that ends in a shattering dead end.

Dramatically, the final two lines of the poem suddenly shift the focus of the poem away from this image of the inevitability of death and onto two forces that, for Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, are stronger than death: love and memory. In a graphic and hauntingly beautiful image, the poet describes how the ‘pieces, every one a different shape’, do not simply pile up in the ‘blind/Alley’ of death, but instead they ‘spin and lodge in the hearts/Of all who love you’. In this way, the poet suggests that we each carry pieces of our loved ones who have died in our memories. Through the remembering of memories those who have died in the past can be brought into the present by those who are still living and in this way still have a presence in and an influence on the present and the future. Surprisingly and wonderfully, in lines 32–3, the meaning of death as a theme park ride that ends in a shattering dead end becomes a theme park ride that ends in beginnings through the power of love and memory.

Architectural images

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of architectural images in ‘Deaths and Engines’ is subtle but nevertheless plays an important part in

conveying the meaning of this poem and in inviting her readers to engage actively with ‘Deaths and Engines’.

The poem opens with the poet describing her plane coming in to land in Paris. The inclusion of the architectural images of the ‘houses’ and the ‘airport’ situates this poem in a solidly familiar and ordinary world and invites us to recall the times when we also saw houses from ‘above’ through the window of a plane about to land. In this way, we begin to experience the poem rather than simply read the words. The airport also introduces the idea of a quest, an important idea in the poem, because it is a place where many modern quests begin and end.

Ní Chuilleanáin’s reaction to seeing the next architectural image, the ‘tunnel’, from the plane verges on the dismissive: ‘Saw an empty tunnel’. It is clear that she finds nothing particularly striking or unusual about it: it is simply another built structure to fly above during the landing. However, it is her dismissing of the tunnel that makes her shock when she realises that it is in fact the ‘back half’ of a ‘burnt-out’ plane all the more dramatic. This unremarkable tunnel, with its entrance and exit that facilitate movement from one place to another, suddenly becomes the wreckage of an unmoving plane going nowhere because it has been catastrophically stopped. This sense of being stopped is echoed in the ‘snow-white runways’ that end in a wall of darkness in line 9.

The final architectural image in the poem, that of a ‘blind/Alley’ towards which the terrifying theme park ride of death hurtles in line 28, seems to be the ultimate image of being stopped, that is, death. However, as we now know from our work on this poem, it acts to create wonderful beginnings.





STREET

A reading of the poem

'Street' contains a number of the key elements of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The image of a threshold. In this poem the abstract process of change in a person from one state to another – a transition – is represented by the concrete images of passing through a doorway, or over a threshold, and climbing up a flight of stairs.
- The image of a quest, although it is a very short one in this poem
- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life
- The inclusion of architectural images such as the street, the 'lane', the 'half-open' door and 'the stairs', which position the poem in a world that seems to be solidly familiar and ordinary
- The use of a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona who relates the narrative fragment in an unbiased way and so creates a space for us to enter into the poem and engage in making our own meaning.
- Women in Irish society

Although 'Street' is quite a short poem in that it consists of only eleven lines, it is filled with layers of meaning and an overwhelming feeling of mystery and puzzling enigma. This is largely due to the fact that the narrative fragment in the poem does not offer a great deal of information about the narrative, or story, that the poem is telling. In the course of reading this poem, we learn a little about the beginning and the middle of the narrative, but there is no ending to this story and so we are left with a sense of mystery or the feeling that this poem is an enigma, a puzzle. The fact that we learn very little about the two main characters in this poem adds to the mystery. Similarly, the narrator of the poem is a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona, so this creates a space for us to enter into the poem and engage in creating our own meaning. As readers, we find ourselves trying to fill in the gaps in order to reach some understanding of the meaning of this poem. This has the effect of making the poem linger in our thoughts as we try out different meanings for the words, alternative connections between these meanings and a selection of possible endings for this poem. This is precisely the process that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin likes to stimulate in her readers because it encourages us to actively engage with the poem and to be alert and to pay attention to the words and meanings that we encounter in it.

Lines 1–2 of this poem seem to fit into the usual form of a standard introduction to a love story: we are told that a man 'fell in love with the butcher's daughter' as he watched her pass him by in her 'white trousers'. However, lines 3–4 ask us to reassess this view of the poem. The mention of 'a knife' dangling from 'her belt' is the first rather unsettling note. But it is line 4 – 'He stared at the dark





shining drops on the paving-stones’ – that destroys the illusion that this poem is in any way usual or standard. The ‘dark shining drops’, closely following the ‘knife’, are suggestive of blood, but then her trousers are white and there is no mention of bloodstains on them. Perhaps these ‘dark shining drops’ are raindrops, but would she come out into the rain without a coat or umbrella? Then again, if it is blood, she must have come out into the street, a public place, with a knife dripping blood, so she may not be the type of woman who worries about the rain. In fact, what type of woman is she? Women in Irish society do not tend to become butchers, perhaps due to their innate natures or as a result of social conditioning regarding what roles are considered suitable for women. However, women do become veterinary surgeons, so why not butchers? Ní Chuilleanáin is challenging us to examine and reassess accepted words, meanings and roles here.

Lines 5–11 do little to settle our thoughts. The man follows ‘the butcher’s daughter’ down ‘the slanting lane’. This image recalls the idea of a quest that often features in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry. The quest in this poem is over a short distance, but there is the suggestion that it is an important event in the man’s life. His following of her suggests that he wants to meet her in a more private way, or at least to learn more about her private life. In contrast to ‘the butcher’s daughter’ who strides along with a knife at her belt, this man does not seem to be very confident. Traditionally, men are supposed to be confident and in charge, the ones who do the ‘asking out’, yet this man does not make any attempt to speak to the woman.

Suddenly, we are told that he reaches a ‘half-open’ door. Doorways, or thresholds, often appear in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry

and they are usually connected to the idea of transition, that is, a process of change from one state to another in a person. The man is faced with this ‘half-open’ door and again, he appears uncertain. Perhaps it is an invitation to him to enter or perhaps she has just forgotten to close the door fully? There is the feeling that this is an important moment in the man’s life – that if he goes through this ‘half-open’ door both he and his life will change forever.

In a wonderfully vivid series of images, Ní Chuilleanáin suddenly shifts the focus of the poem away from the man and onto what he sees. We see through his eyes the stairs stretching upwards, ‘brushed and clean’. For Ní Chuilleanáin, stairs can also represent the process of transition. Again, the sense is that if the man goes up the stairs he will experience change. We then see the woman’s ‘shoes paired on the bottom step’. It would seem that in her private life this woman is, as tradition would expect, a neat and tidy housekeeper, somebody who would make a ‘good’ wife. But then we, along with the man, see that each step of this ‘brushed and clean’ stairway is marked with ‘the red crescent’, a series of curved arcs in red, perhaps paint, perhaps blood, or perhaps something else altogether, leading upwards to somewhere that cannot be seen. The final line, ‘Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top’, seems to be an answer because it tells us that the marks of ‘the red crescent’ came from her ‘bare heels’. But this is not really an answer, nor does it provide an ending to this story – all it does is add to the storm of questions. This may be a world that has a street, a lane, a door and stairs, all solid and easily understood features, but there is little else about it that is solid and understandable.





We will never know whether the man goes through the doorway and up the stairs or turns and walks back to the street, and this possibly suggests the theme of this poem. Is the theme of this poem that as we live our lives, we may have moments where we understand ourselves and the people and events around us, but there will always be other moments where we encounter mysteries and puzzles about ourselves, other people and events that we can never solve?

Mystery and enigma

The sense of mystery and puzzling enigma in this poem is increased by the way in which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin creates a feeling of tension and confusion in us, her readers. As we discussed previously in our introductory consideration of her life and work, narratives, or stories, usually follow a set of rules about what happens and to whom. Over time, we become used to these narrative rules being followed, either in the books that we read or in the television programmes or films that we see. We expect that narratives will develop in a certain way. The opening line of this poem – ‘He fell in love with the butcher’s daughter’ – leads us to expect that this poem will be a narrative about a love story. But when we read lines 3 and 4 and encounter the ‘knife’ and ‘the dark shining drops’, we realise that the rules are certainly not being followed in the telling of this love story. This creates a feeling of tension in us as readers because we do not know what to expect and we feel confused. Because it has broken away from the rules, the story becomes a mystery or an enigma, a puzzle that we want to solve but cannot because we do not have any rules to help us.

Similarly, Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of architectural images in this poem – the street, ‘the slanting lane’, the ‘door ... half-open’ and ‘the stairs’ – seems to suggest that this poem is set in the solid, familiar world where we all live our daily lives. However, Ní Chuilleanáin introduces elements into the world of the poem that we would not expect to see in the world of our daily lives. The girl butcher might be unusual, but the ‘knife on a ring at her belt’ as she walks along the street would be very unusual. Similarly, ‘the red crescent’ marks that her ‘bare heels left’ on the stairs are strange. She has taken off her shoes, so are her feet covered in blood? Does she do her work in her bare feet? Is it blood? It is questions like these that cause us to feel a sense of confusion and tension as we struggle to fit these elements into the apparently solid and familiar world constructed by the architectural images in this poem.

Why does Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin create this feeling of mystery and enigma in her poem – so that we, her readers, feel confused and puzzled? If we recall the way in which Ní Chuilleanáin would like us to engage with her poems, that is, as active readers who are alert and pay attention to the language and meaning of her poetry, then the answer becomes clear. She creates this feeling of mystery and enigma because she wants to stimulate us to think about and question aspects of our world that we would not normally think about or question: aspects such as the way in which we expect narratives to follow rules; the way in which we expect our world to be; the way in which women are expected to follow certain roles in society; and the way in which life, people and events can be mysterious and puzzlingly enigmatic.





FIREMAN'S LIFT

A reading of the poem

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin wrote 'Fireman's Lift' as her mother was dying in 1994. As with the two poems that she wrote about her father's death, 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct' and 'Death and Engines', there is a genuinely personal tone underlying this piece. However, the actual emotions expressed in the personal tone of 'Fireman's Lift' are very different to those expressed in the poems about her father.

Ní Chuilleanáin has described this poem as a 'cheering-up poem'. This may seem to be a rather surprising description given the circumstances, but there is a touchingly real quality about the odd moments of humour in this poem as they realistically reflect the warmth of the poet's relationship with her mother. Ní Chuilleanáin has also spoken of the fact that when she visited the cathedral in Parma with her parents to view the Correggio fresco for the first time in 1963, her mother did not like the way in which the original Romanesque church had been topped off by a huge Renaissance-style dome. So perhaps the humour here incorporates some of her mother's negative feelings about the cathedral.

In addition, Ní Chuilleanáin confessed that due to her lack of confidence in her descriptive abilities, she limited her description of Correggio's 'Assumption of the Virgin' in the cathedral at Parma in 'Fireman's Lift' to 'one aspect' of this magnificent fresco, 'the way it shows that bodily effort and the bodily weight'. We will return to this point later in our consideration of 'Fireman's Lift'.

Once again, 'Fireman's Lift' features a number of key elements that are familiar in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images
- The image of a threshold, a point of crossing, which is connected to the idea of transition, a process of change from one state to another in a person
- The inclusion of architectural images, in this case 'the cupola', 'the church', 'a roof', 'a capital' and 'an arch', which position the poem in a world that seems to be solidly familiar and ordinary
- The influence of the past on the present, in this case through memories from a shared family history.
- A reference to an important life experience, in this instance the death of a loved one

The narrative fragment from the past, 1963, that provides the starting point for this poem is characteristically brief regarding the details surrounding this event: 'I was standing beside you looking up' (line 1), 'we stepped/Back' (lines 8–9) and 'We saw the work entire' (line 11). As we have previously noted, this is because Ní Chuilleanáin wants to focus on the particular experience rather than on the narrative, or story, surrounding the experience. What





is most striking about this memory recalled from the poet's past is not the what, where and who of this incident, but rather the how, that is, how feelings and thoughts were affected during the experience.

In lines 2–15, the focus of the poem sweeps our eyes up into 'the cupola', where in a series of briefly worded but strikingly vivid images, the magnificent fresco is described. But this is not simply a word picture of the painted fresco. In another excellent example of the way in which Ní Chuilleanáin represents abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images, these strikingly vivid concrete images also combine to convey the abstract emotional response that this fresco evokes in those, including the poet and her mother, who look up at the painted colours and forms of the 'Annunciation of the Virgin'. Such lines as 'and how the light/ Melted and faded bodies' convey the wonder and awe that she and her mother felt as they were taken on an emotional journey to another, far more spiritual and much less solid world. This is a world filled by the sounds of 'Celestial choirs' that break through the solid familiarity of the architecture of the cathedral to let in 'the fall-out of brightness'. It is a world of 'mist and shining', of 'Melted and faded bodies', of 'Loose feet and elbows and staring eyes' that float 'Clear and free as weeds'. This is a world where physical reality dissolves.

But as well as inspiring this awareness of spiritual insubstantiality in those looking up, the fresco also evokes a sense of solid weightiness, or as Ní Chuilleanáin puts it, 'the bodily weight', as 'The Virgin' is 'Hauled' by 'Teams of angelic arms' that are 'heaving,/Supporting' her. Clearly there is humour in this paradox,

based on the contradiction between the weightless spiritual world and the weighty physical world. Usually pictures of the Assumption show Mary's body floating effortlessly upwards and so ignore how difficult it is (what Ní Chuilleanáin describes as 'that bodily effort') to lift a body that cannot help in the lifting process, and so is a dead weight. In addition, Ní Chuilleanáin's comparison of looking up into the dome to looking up into a 'wide stone petticoat' adds to this humorous tone because it is an amusing comparative image.

Lines 16–21 convey how the poet, as a result of her engagement with this fresco, comes to the understanding that the only reason why others are willing to put in the considerable effort required to lift the dead weight in a 'Fireman's Lift' is love. This is not a romantic, 'hearts and flowers' love. The imagery that she uses in lines 17–21 appeals to the senses of sight and touch so that we experience, through Ní Chuilleanáin's examples here, the physical strain that a dead weight can exert. It is clear from lines 17–21 that this love consists of pulling together the strength to take on and bear the heavy burden of something or someone completely unable to take on and bear that weight. Because of this love, such lifting becomes not only like that of a 'crane' in that it moves a heavy object, but also like 'a cradle' because it is filled with the desire to care for whatever or whoever is being lifted.

It is this connection between the images of lifting and love that carry the poem forward, in lines 22–9, into 1994, the present, when Ní Chuilleanáin's mother was dying. Here, the ideas of the solidity of this physical world and the insubstantiality of the spiritual world after death become interwoven with the condition





of the poet's dying mother. In 1994 it is nurses who lift her mother, and as the poet watches their efforts, her memory, recalled from their shared family history, enables her to understand the meaning of what she is witnessing. Ní Chuilleanáin recognises that like Mary in the fresco, her dying mother is poised on the threshold between the physical world and the spiritual world. However, to make this transition from one to the other is not easy, and consequently it requires loving support that is physical, emotional and spiritual. Ní Chuilleanáin understands that is why she, along with the nurses, is there for her mother, 'Under her weight', as she, like 'The Virgin' in Correggio's fresco, approaches 'the edge of the cloud'.

The threshold image

The idea of a threshold, a point of crossing, which is connected to the idea of transition, a process of change from one state to another in a person, features in a number of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poems. In 'Street' we saw how the man stood undecided at his threshold, the 'half-open' door. In this poem, this threshold idea is conveyed in the image of 'the edge of the cloud', the point of crossing for Mary in the fresco as she is lifted from the physical world into the spiritual one. The poet's mother is also at this point of crossing, as she is dying. Ní Chuilleanáin recognises that there is a strange paradox that is evident at this crossing point. The very time that a physical body is at the point of changing into a weightless spiritual state is also the time when it is at its heaviest because it can no longer support itself. It is this contrast between a state that is an inactive 'weight' and a state that is without weight, 'Clear and free', that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin conveys so effectively

through her use of imagery that appeals to the senses of sight and touch in this poem.

However, as always with Ní Chuilleanáin we are dealing with layers of meaning. There is another interpretation of the threshold idea that could be seen as being incorporated into this poem. This conveys the poet's own process of change from one state to another in her emotional response to her mother's dying. She is clearly witnessing what her mother is going through as she comments 'We saw them/Lifting her'. However, as she watches the nurses lift her mother in what is known as a fireman's lift, the recalled memory of being with her mother in the cathedral of Parma in 1963 enables her to move past the sadness, the horror and the pity that she feels at seeing her mother like this in 1994. Thus, she arrives at a state where she can appreciate the love that is present in such situations and also the humour that both she and her mother had discovered in the past as they looked at such a situation in the cathedral's fresco. In this way, her remembrance of a memory from their shared family history influences her in the present as she herself is engaged in crossing a threshold.





ALL FOR YOU

Alert and attentive reading

'All for You' is a short poem of only 16 lines. However, it vividly creates a sense of being in and moving through a built space. In addition, it is steeped in an atmosphere of mystery and enigma that is both fascinating and deeply irritating in that it remains unsolved. Because of this mystery and enigma, there are many and varied ways in which this poem can be interpreted. Clearly, the impact that it makes as a poem is far greater than its length. It is evident that to achieve such an impact, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has invested a great deal of time, thought and effort into her revision process, examined previously in the introductory consideration of her life and work. The words that she uses convey meaning, but it is a shifting type of meaning in that there are moments when it seems that the mystery and enigma of this poem have been solved, but then the next word or phrase dissolves that meaning. This is certainly a poem that requires alert and attentive reading.

A reading of the poem

Once again, we encounter elements that have become familiar in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's work:

- The use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses.
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem

- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images. In this case the abstract sense of feeling at home in a place is conveyed through the concrete images of movement around the castle, food and sleep
- The image of a quest
- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life
- The use of a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona who relates the narrative fragment in an unbiased way and so creates a space for us to enter into the poem and engage in making our own meaning
- The inclusion of architectural images that position the poem in a world that seems to be solidly familiar and ordinary
- Possibly the influence of the past on the present

The creation of the atmosphere of mystery and enigma begins in the opening lines of the poem. Here, the narrative fragment seems to suggest the end of a quest, as there is a strong feeling that this is an arrival. However, it is unclear what type of arrival it is, who is doing the arriving and where is being arrived at. The use of the word 'strange' to describe the stable in line 1 indicates that this place is unknown to those who are arriving. The word 'dismount' suggests that this poem may be set in the past, when people travelled on horses or perhaps the 'donkey' in line 2. If it is the donkey, then it is likely that there are only two people involved in this arrival, since that would be the most that the donkey could carry. There is a contrast between these people, vague





and insubstantial because we know so little about them, and the donkey, which is more substantial and real and is obviously familiar with the place, as he ‘walks on’ into his stable and ‘sticks his head in a manger’.

It is this contrast between the donkey’s sense of arriving home and the people who enter a ‘strange stableyard’ that seems to indicate that the people have not been in this place before. The connection that is established here between the feeling of being at home and food, as represented in the donkey’s behaviour, is significant, as it reappears again in the second and third stanzas. Also, the fact that the donkey knows what to do and the people do not implies that they are arriving in an already established world, with its own routines and customs.

In lines 4–11 it becomes clear that these people are indeed entering into an established world. The architectural images of ‘The great staircase of the hall’, ‘the vaults’ and the ‘guardroom, chapel, storeroom’ indicate that this ‘world’ is a castle. Indeed, the people do not seem to be surprised by these surroundings, so it would seem that, to them, this is a solidly familiar and ordinary world. The poet creates a vivid sense of actually physically moving through the solidity and vastness of a castle in these lines with such phrases as the ‘great staircase’ and ‘wind and warp’. It is evident that unlike the donkey, which only has the power to move as it wants when the riders ‘dismount’, the people have complete power to move about the castle. The extent of this power is conveyed in the phrase ‘It is for you’: the power to give and the power to receive this castle rest entirely with the people who have just arrived. The castle, like the donkey, is under their control.

There is also a sense of intimacy conveyed in this phrase, so it would appear that there are only two people, the giver and the receiver.

This idea of control and having power could be seen as being further reinforced in the phrases that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin uses about the castle as the people move around it: ‘their thick ribs part’ and ‘the doors ... Swing wide’. It is as if the place is magically opening up and submitting to the people. There is an increasing sense that the people are feeling more at home in this place as they register the smell of ‘the breath of ovens’ cooking food. For both the donkey and the people, there seem to be two requirements that produce the feeling of being at home: firstly, a habitation, a place that is occupied and slept in – the donkey has its stable and the people have the castle; and secondly, the availability of food, implied by the donkey’s ‘manger’ and the ‘the breath of ovens’ for the people.

In the final stanza, the people’s power over this world is again emphasised by the repetition of the phrase ‘It is for you’. The importance of food is again conveyed by the poet’s use of images that appeal to the senses of smell and sight to describe what seems to be the castle storeroom: ‘the dry fragrance of tea-chests’ and the sight of the ‘tins shining in ranks’ and ‘the ten-pound jars/ Rich with shrivelled fruit’. It is evident that there is an abundance of food for the people in this world that is now under their power. It is unsurprising, then, that in lines 14–15 there is the suggestion that this storeroom is a place where they really feel at home, relaxed and comfortable enough to sleep: ‘Where better to lie down/And sleep’. However, there are two significant implications





in the final line of the poem, ‘With the key still in your pocket?’, that unsettle this wonderful picture of arriving in a strange place and increasingly feeling more at home. The first significant implication is that sleep will be especially deep because one of the people will have the key, and the second significant implication is the question mark.

Because it indicates doubt and uncertainty, the question mark suggests that the people’s sense of being at home, in control of and having power over this place may not be as secure as it appears. The ‘key’ in the final line is clearly a symbol of the power of ownership and the control that the person who possesses it has over the castle.

However, the mention of the ‘key’ in the ‘pocket’ can be interpreted in two ways because of the poet’s use of the word ‘still’. Firstly, if we take the word ‘still’ to mean ‘even now’, this line could be interpreted as they have explored the castle freely without using the key and won’t need to use it to lock up the castle, as their power is secure. However, if this were so, why form this comment as a question? If they have confidence in their power, surely it should just be a statement of fact. Secondly, if we take the word ‘still’ to mean ‘not moving’, then this could be interpreted as implying a feeling of insecurity: the power that they have must be protected and defended by locking doors and gates, and the ‘still’ key that will not be moving from the pocket, once this locking up is done, is a reassuring reminder of this. The second interpretation does provide a link to the ‘guardroom’ in line 8, along with the ‘chapel’ and ‘storeroom’, as areas in the castle. In this castle, the sense of feeling at home seems to involve food

and religion, as suggested by the storeroom and the chapel, but also the presence of armed guards to provide defence and, by attack, to impose the power of those who control the castle on others.

So there is a link between the question mark, representing uncertainty; the key, a concrete representation of insecurity or security; and the ‘guardroom’ indicating the maintenance of security, and the elimination of insecurity, by physical force. This link also connects to lines 10–11, where two vivid images are used to describe the wood burning in the ovens: the ‘rage of brushwood’ and the ‘roots torn out and butchered’. These are violent images, suggestive of both resentful resistance and harsh oppression, ‘torn out and butchered’. It is at this point that the two rather unusual words used at the beginning of this section, in lines 4–5, perhaps reveal another layer of meaning. The words ‘slouches’ and ‘Sprawling’ could be seen as conveying a sullen form of passive resistance among the inhabitants of this established ‘world’ of the castle. If this is indeed the people’s situation, is it any wonder that their sense of being at home is rather uneasy?

What, then, is Ní Chuilleanáin inviting us to consider in our alert and attentive reading of this poem? Is she suggesting that there is a difference in the requirements that animals and human beings need in order to feel at home? After all, the donkey is content with his habitation and food, happy with his home. The people have an excellent habitation and plenty of food, yet their sense of being at home seems to be uneasy, requiring keys, guards and physical force to sustain it. Perhaps we should consider





the circumstances within which this sense of home is being established. The castle is an established world and the people who have just arrived are taking control of it. But although they have the power to move around the castle, there is no one there to greet them and to show them around. There clearly must be castle inhabitants, as the ovens are burning wood. Are these inhabitants simply doing their work, resentful and feeling ‘the rage of brushwood’ because of the new arrivals who have taken over power? Is the poet suggesting that a sense of home may seem to come with power, but it will never be secure unless that power is fairly achieved and accepted by the people who live within its range? Is the focus of this poem on the individual and personal, with apparently two people arriving at a castle, or on the wider society and its structures that the people and the castle represent?

What about the fact that this takes place in a castle, a common feature in the Irish landscape for many centuries? Should we relate these questions about a sense of home to the past history of Irish society, with its seizures of power and rebellions? Perhaps, once again, Ní Chuilleanáin wants us to recognise the influence that our past has on Irish society in the present. Are these people representative of those who, over the centuries, tried to take over control of Ireland, to make it their home through force, but never really felt secure? Is this a reminder to those who are now controlling Ireland that power and control, and a true feeling of being at home in a place or a role, are only ever secure when everyone agrees to the arrangement?

There is much that is mysterious and puzzlingly enigmatic about this poem, from the question of who the arriving people are to

whether they did in fact ‘lie down/And sleep’ on ‘the labelled shelves’ in the storeroom. But then, as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry reminds us, there is much that is mysterious and puzzlingly enigmatic not only about the sense of being at home in a place, but also about life itself.

A network of ideas

Although Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin uses her customary straightforward and conversational language in ‘All for You’, she succeeds in communicating a number of complex ideas in the poem that act to stimulate us to engage with the poem as we try to work out their meanings. This process of communication rests on a network of images that underpin this poem. We have seen this linking of images in previous poems, as, for example, with the image of the ‘books’ in ‘Following’. However, here it seems to be a particularly complex network, as the following examples indicate.

The first strand of images that we will follow begins in line 1 with the images of the ‘the gate’ and the ‘stableyard’. This then links to ‘door’ (line 2); ‘staircase’ and ‘hall’ (line 4); ‘and steps’, ‘vaults’, ‘doors’ and ‘guardroom, chapel, storeroom’ (lines 6–8). This strand, made up of architectural images, conveys the impression of an organised and solidly built environment, one that is probably set in the past as it seems to be a castle.

The second strand of images also begins in line 1, with ‘we dismount’. This is connected to ‘It is for you’ (line 5); ‘It is for you’ (line 12); ‘lie down/And sleep’ (lines 14–15); and ‘the key still in your pocket’ (line 16). The contrast between this network and the previous one is evident. Whereas the built environment is solid,





the people implied in these images are shadowy and ethereal. Does this contrast suggest that the castle is solid and enduring but the people are only temporary?

By following this strand, it becomes apparent that although the sense of the people moving through the inside of the castle is vividly conveyed in lines 4–11, there are no verbs describing the movements that they make to do this, such as ‘walk’ or ‘climb’. It is as if these people are floating, not really connecting with this environment. Is this perhaps another indication that they will only be a temporary fixture in this world?





FOLLOWING

A layering of focus

Much like the layering of meanings in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry in general, the focus of this poem initially seems to be on the personal or individual, but as we read the poem with alertness and attention, a strong sense gradually develops that it is also focused on Irish society. (We will see this layering of focus again in 'Kilcash' where she conveys the way in which consequences of a great social change become a human experience that impacts on individual people.) However, in 'Following' the impact on the individual comes from the lack of change in Irish society.

A reading of the poem

Ní Chuilleanáin employs a number of elements in 'Following' that have now become familiar to us:

- The use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images
- The image of a quest
- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life

- The use of a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona who relates the narrative fragment in an unbiased way and so creates a space for us to enter into the poem and engage in making our own meaning
- Women in Irish society

Lines 1–7 immediately bring us into the narrative fragment as a girl tries to follow her father 'through the fair' and meets a number of obstacles. The link between this image and the image of a quest is obvious, with the obstacles representing the challenges that traditionally must be faced on a quest. The first obstacle that she encounters, the 'beasts packed solid as books', is significant because it creates a connection between the size and bulk of the obstacle that the 'beasts' form and 'books' shelved closely together. This connection will be relevant in discussing the final section of the poem. An emphasis on size and bulk is also evident in the description of the second obstacle, 'the dealing men', who appear to the girl as a 'block', a 'mountain' and 'a plumber's bend'. Both of these obstacles are 'slow to give way' to the girl. The impression created in these lines is that the girl is physically much smaller than the 'beasts' and 'the dealing men' and that she is regarded by both as being of little importance, since they do not move out of her way quickly. Understandably, the girl feels vulnerable in such a situation.

Indeed, it would also appear from the images connected to the girl's father in lines 1–7 that he, too, does not seem to regard her as being very important. Ní Chuilleanáin's use of 'snapshots' of the father's clothes vividly conveys the way in which the girl at times glimpses her father in the crowd. At first, she sees his 'coat',





then 'a shirt-cuff', followed by 'a handkerchief' and 'the hard brim of his hat, skimming along'. The effect produced is of her father moving rapidly away from her so that the girl becomes more and more isolated in the crowd and feels more and more vulnerable. The link that has been established here between the father and his clothes is also significant, as it appears again in the final section of the poem.

In lines 8–15, Ní Chuilleanáin communicates the intensity of the girl's abstract feelings of isolation and vulnerability by presenting her in a series of concrete, nightmarish situations. These nightmarish situations are conveyed by images that appeal to the senses of sight and touch so that we actually experience the same feelings and are drawn into the poem. We see and feel the scenes as she is described walking at night on a bog and meeting a 'dead corpse risen' or stumbling through tree-trunks that transform into trunks of bodies and uneven water-filled bog cuttings scattered with 'Half-choked heads'. These are all scenes that evoke feelings of isolation and vulnerability. We can understand fully why her intense emotional reaction to being left behind by her father in the crowd turns the fair into a daytime nightmare, with 'Mouths that roar like the noise of the fair day'.

The opening of the final stanza is surprising because of the sudden change of location and emotions. The girl seems to have succeeded in her quest to find her father, as she 'comes to where he is seated' in 'a library' with 'whiskey poured out into two glasses'. This seems to be a much calmer and far more tranquil situation than the one in lines 8–15. In fact, the tranquillity is rather odd, given the fact that this man has left his daughter behind him

at a busy fair. He shows no sign of anxiety, as he is 'seated' and has spent his time pouring out two glasses of whiskey. Perhaps one of the glasses of whiskey is meant for the girl as a gesture of comfort from her father, but if it is meant as such a gesture then it is a rather weak one in the circumstances. It becomes clear that this tranquillity is actually emotional repression. Again, as in the first stanza, the father is described through images of his clothes, 'all finely laundered,/Ironed facings and linings'. The obvious care that the father takes with his clothes is in stark contrast to his apparent lack of care for his daughter. This focus on clean, ordered perfection, again an indication of his emotional repression, is also evident in the environment where the father obviously feels comfortable: the library has shelves of books organised in an orderly way and is filled with light that 'is clean'. This section of the poem also indicates that the father and daughter clearly come from a different level of society to the crowd at the fair because they have the money to buy books and such luxury items as handkerchiefs and to have clothes regularly washed and ironed. The implied physical distance between the daughter and her father in the library, representing their emotional distance, also contrasts with the willingness of the 'dealing men' to be squashed together with each other and the 'beasts', representing a much more relaxed attitude emotionally.

In lines 21–29 it becomes clear that the daughter has not succeeded in her quest at all in that she has not found her father in any meaningful way because they are still separated by an emotional distance. Ní Chuilleanáin uses two concrete images to represent this emotional distance between the father and





daughter, caused by the father's emotionally repressed condition. Firstly, there is the 'smooth foxed leaf' that has been 'hidden' in a 'forest of fine shufflings'. This remarkably effective image, which appeals to the senses of sight, touch and hearing, operates on two levels. On one level, the father's action of tucking the brown-stained sheet of paper, the 'foxed leaf', in between other sheets of paper, represented by the sound that they make ('fine shufflings'), conveys his concern with order rather than emotions, while on another level, this image is suggestive of a fox hiding in a 'forest', implying that the father is secretive about his emotions, that he keeps them 'hidden'. This emotional repression can be connected back to the father's lack of concern for his daughter in the crowded fair and, possibly, to the second glass of whiskey.

Secondly, there is the image of the 'square of white linen' with 'three drops' of the girl's 'heart's blood' that has also been put into 'the gatherings' of 'a book'. Although it is not clearly stated, this poem feels as if it is set in Ireland's past. The 'white linen' which seems to have been embroidered by the girl for her father, is suggestive of the past in that embroidery was one of the few occupations allowed to women in the upper levels of Irish society in the past. There is a touching quality about this image, as it conveys the girl's efforts to establish an emotional connection to her father - it would appear that at some point she embroidered a 'linen' handkerchief for him - through his concern for his clothes. Similarly, the 'three drops' of 'her heart's blood', produced by accidentally pricking her finger with the pointed embroidery needle, become a concrete indication of the love that she wanted to show her father by making the handkerchief for him. However,

the father's emotionally repressed condition is once again conveyed by his action of tucking the daughter's handkerchief embroidered with 'flowers' between the pages of a book. Like the 'foxed leaf', it too has been filed away in an orderly manner.

The poem ends on a striking but rather enigmatic note with the vivid image of the 'crushed flowers' of the daughter's embroidered handkerchief that 'crack/The spine open, push the bindings apart' of the book in which it has been filed. This concrete image dramatically represents abstract emotions breaking out of a repressed condition. As the handkerchief was an attempt by the daughter to change her sense of emotional dislocation from her father, perhaps this image represents the emotional strain and tension that she feels as she tries to get around what she perceives as the huge obstacles of his books, like the 'beasts' in the first section of the poem, and also the obstacle of his clothes so that she can locate herself in a loving relationship with her father. Alternatively, could it be the emotional strain and the tension felt by her father who, long used to repressing his emotions, can only weakly express his emotional response to his daughter's gift of love by filing it away with his beloved books?

As always with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's work, there are suggestions and clues in 'Following' that invite the reader to engage with the poem and to explore a number of different interpretations. What is perfectly clear in this poem, however, is the feeling that we are left with of the haunting sadness that accompanies the presence of such emotional disconnection in human relationships.





Women in Irish society

As we discussed in our earlier introductory consideration of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's life and work, the 1960s were very significant for her, as she began her academic career and won her first prize for her poetry in that decade. This decade was also a time when the role of women in Irish society began to change and when women such as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin were able to participate more fully in Irish society. Consequently, she has written about and spoken of the situation of women in Irish society in the past and in the present. Her poem 'Translation' has been interpreted not only as an attempt to give a voice back to the Magdalene women, but also as an example of the way in which women generally were in a more vulnerable, less powerful position than men in Irish society in the past.

Similarly, some critics have suggested that 'Following' also acts as a representation of women's vulnerability and lack of power in Irish society in the past. The reluctance of the 'dealing men' to move so that the girl can get through in line 3 and her father's lack of care for her can be interpreted as representing the lower position, relative to men, that women occupied in Irish society in the past. Indeed, there was strong resistance in many areas of Irish society to any attempt to change this social structure to enable women to gain more power. It was only in 1922 that all Irish women who were over the age of twenty-one were given the right to vote in Ireland.

In order to convey just how destructive, emotionally and psychologically, such an unjust imbalance of power can be to a society, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin condenses this wider social issue

down into an individual and personal experience. In 'Kilcash' she achieves this through the use of vibrant language but in 'Following', the girl experiences her lower position in Irish society in real and physical ways and clearly suffers emotionally and psychologically. Significantly, however, Ní Chuilleanáin does not only represent the destructive emotional and psychological effects suffered by women in the form of the girl. She also uses the father to show how this unjust imbalance in power can be emotionally and psychologically destructive for men. The father's emotional repression and his inability to relate to his daughter in a meaningful way represent the ways in which men were also damaged by this imbalance in power.

As we noted previously, 'Following' ends with an enigmatic image of 'crushed flowers' cracking the spine of a book 'open', perhaps indicating emotional strain and tension. Much of the enigma of this image lies in the question of who was experiencing this emotional strain and tension. If we read the poem as being representative of the situation of women in Irish society in the past, it would seem that this emotional strain and tension was felt by women and men and, consequently, the Irish society in which they lived. The message to us who live in Irish society in the present is clear.





KILCASH

Background

The focus of 'Kilcash' is not on the individual but on Irish society in the past and the present. 'Kilcash' is a translation of a poem-song lyric in Irish that probably originated in the eighteenth century. It was included in her collection of poetry *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, published in 2001, when Ireland was in the midst of the Celtic Tiger years. Consequently, 'Kilcash' should be seen as a comment on the rapid and profound changes that were occurring in Irish society at that time.

The original Irish poem-song lyric, 'Caoine Cill Chaise' ('A Lament for Kilcash'), lamented the death, in 1744, of Margaret Butler, Viscountess Iveagh, the wife of Colonel Butler of Kilcash, the local landowner. Colonel Butler belonged to one of the Anglo-Norman families who had taken over control of the lands of Ireland in the twelfth century. Over the centuries, these Anglo-Norman landowners became integrated into Irish society so that they came to be regarded by the Irish people as being 'Irish'. Many of these Anglo-Norman families were very supportive of the local community, the Catholic religion and cultural arts, particularly in their patronage of bards, or poets. However, by the time that 'Caoine Cill Chaise' was composed, the power of the Anglo-Norman families had steadily diminished due to the political and military upheaval that Ireland had experienced over the centuries. New landowners, considered 'English' by the Irish people, came to Ireland and introduced new ways of living. Thus, the old Anglo-Norman social system ended. The bards were no longer

employed by the landowners and many of the poems and song lyrics written in the eighteenth century tell of the difficulties that these unemployed bards experienced and lament the passing of the old way of life.

Allegory

Although the original 'Caoine Cill Chaise' did lament the death of Margaret Butler, it was more concerned with the consequences of the great social change that Irish society experienced at that time. It is this relationship between great social change and the consequences that it creates for Irish society that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin wished to highlight in publishing this poem during the time of the Celtic Tiger. In this way, the consequences of the great social change that are described in 'Kilcash' become an allegory for the consequences that could very easily happen, and some would say did happen, as a result of the Celtic Tiger.

An allegory is often described as an extended metaphor. Simply put, a metaphor is where you compare one thing to another without using the words 'like' or 'as': an example of a metaphor is 'the soldier was a lion in battle', with the lion acting as a metaphor for the soldier. An allegory is an extended metaphor because it tells a narrative, or story, that works as a narrative in itself, with characters and settings, but it also conveys messages about abstract ideas. In the introductory consideration of Ní Chuilleanáin's life and work, consideration was given in the 'Medieval and Renaissance poetry' section to *Le Roman de la Rose*, which is a medieval allegory. You may find it helpful to refer back to this section. In the case of 'Kilcash', the narrative of the poem





concerning the death of Margaret Butler, a member of the fading Anglo-Norman families, and the consequences for her local society is an allegory for Irish society in the Celtic Tiger years.

‘Kilcash’ was intended to encourage Irish people to become more aware of and more thoughtful about the consequences for Irish society of the great social change produced by the Celtic Tiger. In this way, Ní Chuilleánáin is using this translation of a poem that described Irish society in the past to influence those who live in the Irish society of the present. Therefore, although we will be reading words that describe Irish society in the past, Ní Chuilleánáin is encouraging us to apply their meanings to the Irish society of the present.

A reading of the poem

Usually we consider the key elements that are familiar in Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin’s poetry that feature in a poem before we engage in a reading of it. However, because ‘Kilcash’ is a translation of an already existing poem, the structure, the bard and the images in the poem are largely those of the original author.

The opening lines of ‘Kilcash’ immediately convey fear and uncertainty: ‘What will we do now for timber/With the last of the woods laid low –’. This image of the loss of ‘the woods’ was significant in the eighteenth century, when these lines were originally composed in Irish. At the beginning of the 1600s, over twelve per cent of Ireland was still covered by forests of broad-leaved trees, but by the beginning of the 1800s this had dropped to between 1–2%. As this period of rapid deforestation roughly coincided with the ending of the Anglo-Norman way of life in

Irish society and the arrival of the new ‘English’ landowners, the two became linked in the collective memory of Irish society at that time. So it is that many of the poems and songs composed in the late 1700s and into the 1800s firmly placed the responsibility for the loss of the forests on the shoulders of the new ‘English’ settlers.

Consequently, in the question that opens ‘Kilcash’, the image of the ‘woods laid low’ represents the way in which the old Anglo-Norman way of life had vanished, along with all the social structures that it involved. Lines 2–8 make this clear as they describe how the ‘household’, the ‘lady’ and the close links with religion, ‘Their bell’ and ‘Mass, are gone. Although this poem laments the death of one individual, Margaret Butler, it is clearly signalled in the opening that it is also lamenting the dramatic loss of a way of life that structured Irish society for many centuries.

In the second stanza, these feelings of fear and uncertainty are increased by the disorder that is evident in the estate of the old Anglo-Norman landowner, who is now gone. Line 16 emphasises that the destruction of the social structures established by the Anglo-Norman way of life included the Catholic religion, as implied by the reference to the dead bishop (‘The Bishop and the Lady I veagh!’). The bard paints a picture of an Irish society that changed radically and fundamentally in that all the traditional leaders, both religious and secular, and all the traditional social rules and values were gone. Is it any wonder that the poem is filled with uncertainty?





In stanzas 3–6, the bard extends his description of the disorder caused by this loss of the old way of life. In stanzas 3 and 4, this disorder spreads out into the section of the world of nature that formerly had been under the control of the old Anglo-Norman landowner. This is an interesting connection in that it echoes beliefs from earlier times in the history of Irish society. The Celts believed that there was a connection between the leader of a social group and the health of the natural world around them. If the leader was a good one, then the world of nature flourished; if he was a bad leader, then the world of nature suffered. Again, the sense of what was once ordered falling into a terrifying disorder is evident in these stanzas.

In stanza 5, fear and uncertainty become terror as this disorder affects the wider natural world: the weather has changed ‘Mist hangs low’; there is a drought ‘streams all run dry’; there is no growth ‘No hazel, no holly or berry’, just ‘Bare naked rocks and cold’; the few trees that remain are ‘leafless’; and the animals and birds once managed by the Butlers for hunting have ‘gone wild’. This is like the end of the world, and indeed, line 35 ‘Darkness falls among daylight’ recalls the Vikings’ belief that it was the dark days of a terrible winter that would signal that the world was about to end.

It is as if many of the greatest fears that haunted centuries of Irish society have appallingly become real for the bard and his fellow human beings because of the dramatic changes that have swept through Irish society. In stanza 6, the bard returns to images that convey just how greatly the local society felt the loss of Margaret Butler and, perhaps implied in lines 42–4, the other leaders of

Anglo-Norman descent, such as Patrick Sarsfield and the ‘Wild Geese’ who left Ireland for Europe.

In the final stanza, the bard turns to one of the key social structures in the old way of life, the Catholic religion, and prays to ‘Mary and Jesus’ that the second key social structure of the old way of life, the Anglo-Norman system that included the wealthy and caring ‘lady’, as represented by Margaret Butler, will once more be at the heart of Irish society. Then, he is certain, order will return to Irish society. Is it any wonder that he predicts celebrations?

Language

A comparison between Ní Chuilleanáin’s English translation of ‘Caoine Cill Chaise’ and that of Thomas Kinsella’s equally fine translation reveals that in her images and words, Ní Chuilleanáin brings an immediacy and vibrancy to her translation of the poem. The following examples illustrate the differences in approach.

Lines 33–6 in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s ‘Kilcash’:

*Mist hangs low on the branches
No sunlight can sweep aside,
Darkness falls among daylight
And the streams all run dry;*

Thomas Kinsella’s translation of these lines:

*A mist on the boughs is descending
neither daylight or sun can clear.
A stain from the sky is descending
And the waters receding away.*





Thomas Kinsella's translation has a mythical, fairytale atmosphere, created by the 'boughs' and the 'stain from the sky'. There is a restrained elegance in the way in which the 'mist' and the 'stain' are 'descending' and 'the waters receding away'. This is a world that is indeed undergoing change, but it is a world that seems to be far away from the real world.

On the other hand, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's world is very real and the change is frighteningly sudden as the 'Mist hangs low', the 'Darkness falls' and 'the streams all run dry'. There is immediacy and vibrancy in her lines. This is a world where change has an impact, where one would feel fear and believe that the end of the world is near. It is also a world that is described in the language of everyday speech, making it feel very close to our world.

In Ní Chuilleanáin's translation, change in a society becomes a human experience in that it impacts in real terms on individual people and their emotions expressed in words that we, the readers, know and understand. This is a testimony to her skills as a translator, but it is also another example of the way in which she builds 'invitations' to her readers into her poems. Just as her vivid imagery that appeals to the senses draws readers in so that her poems become an experience, in 'Kilcash' the vibrancy of her carefully constructed language draws readers in so that even in the heady and exciting days of the Celtic Tiger, they would pause and reflect on the consequences of this great social change in Irish society.





TRANSLATION

Background

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin wrote 'Translation' for the reburial of 154 women who, over the previous 100 years, had suffered and died in the harsh conditions that prevailed in the Magdalene laundries in Ireland. She also read this poem at the reburial ceremony.

Magdalene laundries were operated by nuns and had as their workers women and girls, some as young as 12 years old, who had been committed to these institutions for a variety of questionable reasons. They lived and worked, isolated from the outside world, in an environment where their identities and their dignity as human beings were destroyed through exploitation and abuse. Many of the women remained in these institutions until they died. Ní Chuilleanáin has explained that in writing this poem, she tried to give back to these tragic women the voices that had been taken from them for most of their lives. She undertook this task because the survivors and the families of those survivors and of those who did not survive 'are insisting on the stories of these places – their loneliness, hardship, and not infrequent cruelty – being told'.

The title of this poem, 'Translation', is particularly appropriate in that the word 'translation' can be used to describe being moved from one place to another, as with the remains of the 154 women that were taken from unmarked graves in a convent graveyard in Dublin and reburied in Glasnevin Cemetery. In addition, 'Translation' can also be used to describe changing words in one language into another language. As we know from our earlier consideration of her life and work, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is very

aware of the problematic link between language and meaning and she recognises that the link between silence and meaning is even more challenging.

For in this poem, by trying to give voices back to women who spent much of their lives in enforced silence, Ní Chuilleanáin was attempting to translate their silence into meaning and that meaning into language. Consequently, she was conscious that the words and images that she used should not in any way change what this silence represented and communicated about the lives of these women. The words and images that she does use here are not only the result of her demanding revision process, previously discussed in our consideration of her life and work, but also of her determination to remain true to what was expressed by Magdalene women in their silence.

A change of focus and approach

In 'Translation', there is a broadening out of focus from the personal to societal. While in some of Ní Chuilleanáin's earlier poems we explored the influence of the past on the present through personal or individual memories drawn from family history, 'Translation' examines the way in which the past of a society affects its present.

There is also a change of approach in Ní Chuilleanáin's use of the narrative fragment, usually employed as the starting point for a poem. The narrative fragment in this form is absent from this poem, perhaps to represent the fact that the narratives, or even the narrative fragments, concerning these women were erased in the laundries and in the history of Irish society.





In addition, there is an evident change of approach in her use of two speakers in this poem. The first speaker speaks in lines 1–15, and given that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin read this poem at the reburial ceremony, it is probable that she is speaking here. The lines that are spoken by the first speaker are as we would expect in one of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems: constructed from straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning through vivid imagery. There is, however, an element of mystery and enigma in some of the images employed in these lines. The lines that are spoken by the second speaker, a persona, are very different. Visually, they are reminiscent of words on a gravestone. These short phrases are powerfully thought provoking because of their very different appearance and also because of the mysterious and enigmatic meanings that they communicate. Are these the words of one of the reburied Magdalene women who, silent for so long, can now at last speak only in a broken language that struggles to communicate meaning?

The third change is in the element of mystery and puzzling enigma that appears in both sections of this poem. As we have noted previously, their appearance in some of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems indicates that for her, there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life. In this poem, however, there is the suggestion that the element of mystery and enigma surrounding the Magdalene women was caused deliberately by the operation of an appalling and widespread injustice in Irish society. Just as the narratives of these women were erased, so too were mystery and enigma wrapped around what remained of their lives and, in many cases, their deaths.

A reading of the poem

There are some enigmatic or puzzling images and phrases in 'Translation', but there are three key aspects that are addressed in this poem:

- The dreadful conditions endured by these women during their lives in the Magdalene laundries
- The women being deprived of a voice and a place in their Irish society
- How the Magdalene women have been treated as part of the history of Irish society and what this means for those of us who live in Irish society in the present

Firstly, there is the aspect of the dreadful conditions endured by these women during their lives in the Magdalene laundries. This is conveyed in a series of briefly worded but dramatically vivid images in lines 3–6 and 10–11. These images describe the dreadful working conditions in the laundries: the bright light, the heat, the steam, the harsh soap and the sore hands. They also communicate the way in which the laundries were places where self-expression, suggested by the phrase 'The high relief of a glance', was eliminated as if it were a stain to be 'bleached out'. Sadly, in these laundries it was only the 'steam' that 'danced' and 'giggled' because it had a way of escape down the 'stone drains'.

Secondly, there is the aspect of the women being deprived of a place and a voice in their Irish society. As line 8 vividly conveys, for these women that meant being dehumanised: the fundamental elements that give each of us a sense of our own identity as a unique human being were taken away from them. They were





removed from their ‘parents’, and by implication from their families, and their ‘names’ were changed when they first entered the laundries. This dehumanisation also led to the taking away of their voice metaphorically, in that they no longer had a role or any power in their society. But in lines 11–13, the literal loss of voice is conveyed in a horrifyingly dramatic image. Speech, another form of self-expression, was strictly controlled in the Magdalene laundries, and much of the lives of these women was spent working hard in silence. Ní Chuilleanáin depicts the terrible emotional and psychological effects of such deprivation in the ‘one voice’ that rises above the only sounds allowed in the laundries: the ‘shuffle’ of the feet of these unfortunate women and the hum of the machinery.

Thirdly, there is the aspect of how the Magdalene women have been treated as part of the history of Irish society and what this means for those of us who live in Irish society in the present. It is clear from this poem that the history of Irish society has, until recently, not considered these women at all. Lines 2–3 of the poem convey the enormity of the gap that has existed in the history of Irish society because of their omission from it. In these lines we learn what the phrase ‘evens the score’ means: the women who have been reburied in Glasnevin Cemetery come ‘from every county’, as did all the women in the Magdalene laundries. There are twenty-six counties in Ireland and up until the late twentieth century, each of these counties had a gap in their history where the Magdalene women should have been. In this way, the omission of these women and their neglect by the history of Irish society was spread evenly throughout the country.

It was not until the late twentieth century that this omission and neglect began to be rectified. The opening line of the poem – ‘The soil frayed and sifted evens the score’ – refers to the reburial in 1993 of the 154 women in a well-tended grave in Glasnevin Cemetery: the first recognition by Irish society of the existence of these Magdalene women as victims of wholly unacceptable treatment.

In line 7, Ní Chuilleanáin is adamant that what this means for those of us who live in Irish society in the present is that we have to do all that we can to restore each of these Magdalene women to her own unique humanity and to her own individual personhood. Each of them must be helped in their search ‘for their parents, their names’. Similarly, in line 11, we have to hear the ‘one voice’ that was never heard before now. For as we know from our previous exploration of her life and work, this is not just the right thing to do, it is also the thing that we as a society must do to move ‘towards a maturity impossible without some sense of the past’.

As we discussed in the section ‘A change of focus and of approach’ above, a persona, probably one of the Magdalene women who was reburied, speaks in broken phrases in lines 16–21. There are only six lines in this section of the poem, yet the layers of meaning in each of these six lines are so complex that they create a degree of mystery and enigma in this section that leaves space for a number of possible interpretations.

This is one interpretation that can be developed from lines 16–21, although it is possible that there are other equally valid interpretations. In lines 16–17, the opening phrases spoken by





the woman – ‘Washed clean of idiom’ and ‘the baked crust/Of words that made my temporary name’ – suggest that through this reburial, this woman has finally been released from the name that was imposed on her when she entered the Magdalene laundry. Names such as these were usually religious in origin and they forced a meaning of what the girl should be like onto her. It was this enforced meaning about what type of person she was that was like a ‘parasite’ inside her: it ate away at her sense of her own identity.

In lines 18–19 there is another phrase that can be interpreted as representing release: ‘that spell/Lifted’. This release may be connected to the image of her lying ‘in earth sifted to dust’, an image that might suggest that prior to the reburial, research was done during which all the historical details of her life were ‘sifted’, that is, discovered and acknowledged. This sense of release could also be connected to another interpretation of this image: that it represents the level of care in the sifting of the soil for her reburial in Glasnevin Cemetery that was clearly absent during her first burial in an unmarked grave. Another image of release can be read into the ‘bunched keys’ that ‘slacken and fall’.

The first image in the final line of the poem – ‘I rise and forget’ – again implies release. It is followed by ‘a cloud over my time’. Perhaps this cloud can be linked to the ‘steam’ in the laundry in line 5 and the ‘steam’ that ‘rises’ in line 15. If so, we could interpret the final line of this poem as an image of release into the world of nature: the spirit of the woman, like water vapour, forms a cloud that rises above the society that treated her so badly, and so released she can ‘forget’ such things.

At this point, it is worthwhile recalling one of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s intentions in writing her poetry: she wants to leave space in her poems so that we can enter into that space to make our own meanings. Perhaps you might like to do this with ‘Translation’ now?





THE BEND IN THE ROAD

A reading of the poem

'The Bend in the Road' contains a number of key elements that often feature in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images
- The influence of the past on the present, in this case through a shared family history
- The use of a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona who relates the narrative fragment in an unbiased way and so creates a space for us to enter into the poem and engage in making our own meaning
- References to important life experiences, in this instance the deaths of loved ones
- The idea of nature as a source of calmness and consolation.

The opening six lines of this poem form the narrative fragment that acts as a starting point. This narrative fragment concerns an incident when 'the child' felt car sick and 'they' stopped at a bend in the road to allow him to recover. We are also told that

the people in the car waited 'in the shadow of a house' and saw a tree 'like a cat's tail', and that it was a quiet place where 'nothing moved'. However, we are not told the full story with all the details, only this fragment of it. The language in these lines is straightforward and conversational, as if we were chatting with the speaker. However, this is not a chat because we do not know who this speaker is. It does not seem to be the poet but rather a persona, that is, a character created and adopted by the poet. This is a very vague persona – is it male or female? Is it related to the child? This is not the only mystery in these lines: 'the child' and 'they' are not described, nor is the relationship between them. Also, the tone (the emotion in the voice) of these lines is oddly lacking in emotion. It is almost as if the speaker is listing objective historical facts. This suggests that the 'place', when they stopped there for the first time, did not mean anything to the people. It was simply a convenient location to stop at until 'he was better'.

In stanza 2, the persona explains that this incident with the car-sick boy happened in the past, 'Over twelve years' ago, and we are now in the present. During this twelve-year period, a number of changes have occurred. The people now refer to 'the place' as the 'the place/Where you were sick one day on the way to the lake'. This suggests that this place now means something to them because of the shared memory that they have of stopping there. It also means something to them because each time they see this place, they are reminded of the changes that have occurred in this twelve-year period. The boy is now 'taller than us'; the 'tree is taller' and the house is 'covered in/With green creeper'. The attention that they pay to the changes in the tree and the house





also indicates that it has become a place that matters to them. The use of the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘us’ suggest that the people are sharing this story together, rather like we all do with groups that we belong to, especially the family group. This shared memory has become part of their shared history and in this way it connects the people together. The tone of these lines reflects this sense of connection because it is much warmer, emotionally, than in the first section. It would also appear that this ‘place’ has become a regular stopping point for them on their ‘way to the lake’ because they have the time to notice the ways in which the ‘house’ and ‘tree’ have changed and how this bend is ‘as silent as ever it was on that day’.

In lines 13–14 of the final stanza of the poem, we seem to be in the stopped car, looking out of the window at a magnificent ‘cumulus cloud’. However, when we read lines 15–16 it turns out that this cloud is a comparative image. This is because the persona speaking in the poem compares the way in which the abstract memories have been ‘softly packed’ inside the minds and hearts of the people in the car to this real, concrete cloud. Lines 17–20 convey to us that these memories are of loved ones who have died in a series of vivid images. Again, the use of the pronoun ‘we’ in line 20 suggests that these memories, like the memory of the boy being car sick, have become part of their shared history and so connect them together and also connect them to the dead people. There is a genuine tone of regret and sadness in lines 16–20, which indicates that they all probably belong to the same family group.

The final line, line 21, suggests that ‘the place’ has become very meaningful to them because when they stop there in the quiet of nature and look at ‘the tree’ and breathe in ‘the air’, they all remember not only their shared memory of the boy being car sick but also some of their other shared memories of loved ones who have died. Thus, the connections between them as a family are strengthened, as are their connections to those who have died, because by stopping in this tranquil place that is part of the world of nature, they can remember their loved ones’ ‘presence’ when they were alive. In this way their past history as a family influences their present as a family.

Imagery

The term ‘imagery’ refers to where the poet uses images that appeal to the reader’s senses in order to clarify what he/she wants to express and so make it more meaningful and memorable for the reader. To communicate a particular aspect, such as an emotion or an impression, as clearly as possible, the poet compares it to an image or a series of images to help the reader to experience and understand this aspect. For this reason, these images are called comparative images.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin carefully uses the imagery in this poem to help convey her meaning. The most important meaning established by the imagery in this poem is the connection between the real, concrete car journey and the abstract idea of life. This connection only becomes apparent when we have read the final section of the poem, where the persona thinks about the ways in which shared memories bring people closer together, both





those who are living and those who are dead. Once we understand this, we can then see that the car journey in lines 1–12 can be seen as representing the life of a family as they travel through time together. This is an excellent example of the way in which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's language, although apparently straightforward and conversational, conveys layers of meaning.

As a family, they experience change over the years – they change physically and the world around them also changes. But the best change is the way in which they grow closer together and their relationship as a family unit is strengthened. It is their shared memories of incidents from the past that help to strengthen their family unit. Because of this, it is good for the family to stop at times during their life together and to take the time to share their memories. Just like stopping the car at 'the bend/In the road' helped the boy to feel better, so sharing memories help the people in the family to feel better as a family.

Making time to remember shared memories also helps the people in the family who are still alive to feel close to their loved ones who are dead. This also strengthens their link as a family. In this way, a family's past history can influence its present.

Abstract emotions and qualities and concrete images

In our exploration of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's life and work earlier, we examined how her interest in medieval literature led her to use the device of comparing abstract emotions and qualities, that is, things that we cannot touch or feel, such as emotions, to real and concrete objects. We have already considered how in this

poem Ní Chuilleanáin uses the real, concrete image of a family car journey to represent the abstract idea of a family living life.

Another example that we mentioned was that of the real, concrete 'one cumulus cloud' being used to represent the way abstract memories are stored inside human hearts and minds. By making this comparison, Ní Chuilleanáin creates a vivid image that appeals to our senses and this helps us to understand how she imagines memories being stored. It also makes this a very meaningful image, so we are likely to remember it and to think about it.

By choosing a cloud, she appeals to the reader's sense of touch: we have all had the experience of walking through low cloud or misty drizzle, so we can remember how the tiny droplets seemed to dissolve as we moved through them. Similarly, the phrase 'softly packed like air' again appeals to the sense of touch in that it recalls soft balls of cotton wool or candyfloss, carefully 'Piled high'. All these images suggest that memories are delicate and fragile and need to be treated with care. In this way, we are encouraged to actually feel what memories are like, as if we could touch them, and this makes them more meaningful and memorable to us. The phrase 'one cumulus cloud/In a perfect sky' appeals to the sense of sight, suggesting the colours of blue and white, like a wonderful summer's day. This reminds us of days like this that we have experienced, usually very happy and special days, so we understand that memories can also be happy and special.





ON LACKING THE KILLER INSTINCT

A reading of the poem

'On Lacking the Killer Instinct', like 'Deaths and Engines', was written at the time of the death of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's father, so there is a genuinely personal tone underlying this piece. However, there are also familiar elements in this poem:

- Her use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem.
- The influence of the past on the present, in this case through a shared family history
- The image of a quest
- References to important life experiences, in this instance the death of a loved one, her father
- The idea of the world of nature as a source of calmness and consolation

As we have seen in our reading of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, she often uses a narrative fragment as a starting point for her poems. This narrative fragment is sometimes a memory from the past, as in 'The Bend in the Road', and it often illustrates how the past can influence the present. In 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct' we meet a more complex version of this relationship between the past and the present.

In lines 1–4, we find ourselves transported back into the past, to 1970, standing on a track with the poet looking at a 'hare, absorbed, sitting still'. The stillness of the hare connects the world of nature to a sense of calmness, as in 'The Bend in the Road', and is in stark contrast to the poet's agitated state. We learn that she has 'fled up into the hills' away from her father's deathbed in a quest for escape from having to face his imminent death. Suddenly, this memory is interrupted: the poet's use of a dash at the end of the line 4 is much more effective in conveying this jolting change than, say, a full stop.

Lines 5–10 bring us into the present as the poet explains that a photograph of a hare in 'the morning' newspaper caused her to recall this memory of the hare on the track in 1970. Using a few carefully chosen words to create a vivid description of the newspaper photograph, Ní Chuilleanáin makes it clear that the hare in this photograph is behaving very differently to the hare on the track. The photographed hare has 'fear' in 'her bright eye' because she has almost been caught by two 'greyhounds', but luckily they have gone 'tumbling over' and she is making her escape by running away from them.

The past memory from 1970 (the narrative fragment in lines 1–4) is connected to the newspaper photograph in the present (lines 5–10) in three ways. Firstly, a hare features in both. Secondly, the imminent death of her father in the past is linked to the fact that the hare in the present clearly came very close to death. Thirdly, the frantic quest to escape from the arrival of death, suggested by the poet's flight into the hills in the past, is echoed in the hare's





attempt to escape from the greyhounds in the present. In the final line of this section (line 10), the poet suggests that the hare, having had such a narrow escape from the greyhounds and death, must feel a heightened sense of being alive, that she is invincible, 'a glad power', because she knows that she has cheated both of them. The introduction of the idea of power in the phrase 'a glad power' is important and we will return to it later in our reading of this poem.

One of the ideas that links the past of the 1970s in lines 1–4 to the present in lines 5–10 is the idea of running away to escape from death. It is this idea that also forms the link from lines 5–10 to lines 11–14, where the poet recalls a story that her father had told her about an incident when he ran away to escape from death. This story was from her father's youth and so it is much further back in time than 1970: it is from 1921. In lines 11–14, she describes how her father, who was a republican, ran away on a quest for escape from a 'lorry-load of soldiers'. His capture could well have meant death for him.

Another link between the past in 1970 (lines 1–4) and the present (lines 5–10) that we have considered earlier is a hare. It is an image of a hare that also creates a link from the present (lines 5–10) to the past in 1921. This is evident in lines 15–16, where Ní Chuilleanáin compares her father as a young man running away from the 'soldiers' to the 'hare' in the newspaper photograph in the present, running away from the greyhounds. It is this comparison that brings us back to the idea of 'power' introduced in line 10. From our reading of the poem so far, we know that in the newspaper photograph, there is one hare which was chased by

two much bigger and more vicious greyhounds, in the same way that the poet's father, a young man in his early twenties who was on foot, was chased by an armed 'lorry-load of soldiers'. In the two situations, the hunters or those with 'the Killer Instinct', that is, the 'greyhounds' and the 'soldiers', seemed to be in the more powerful positions and very likely to succeed in bringing death to the less powerful 'hare' and her father.

But lines 17–29 tell us that the hare and the poet's father had a quality that enabled them to change this balance of power: they were 'clever'. The hare was clever enough to 'double back' and it was this unexpected movement that left the greyhounds 'tumbling over', making their power and ruthlessness 'absurdly gross' and turning them, and the rest of the pack, into nothing more than 'stupid dogs' clumsily 'labouring up'. Similarly, Ní Chuilleanáin's father outwitted the soldiers by darting into 'an open kitchen door'. This cleverness made the hare and the poet's father more powerful than those who have 'the Killer Instinct'. It gave them the power to escape death and to celebrate being alive: the hare feels 'a glad power' and the poet's father walks 'Into a blissful dawn'.

However, it is significant that in lines 29–32 the poet acknowledges that in her father's case, the action of running into a house on his quest for escape may not have been the right option for 'those that harboured him'. Had the soldiers recognised him, they could well have burned down the house and killed the people who had 'harboured him'. His cleverness had saved him, but it could have easily meant that a group of innocent people would have faced death at the hands of those who had 'the Killer





Instinct', the 'soldiers'. The important point here is that sometimes, running away to escape death is not the right thing to do. It might be 'clever' and it might involve feeling a sense of power because survival has been grasped out of the jaws of death, but it might not be the right thing for a person to do.

In the final four lines of the poem, Ní Chuilleanáin, in the present, recognises that her action of running away from her dying father in 1970 was not the right thing to do: 'And I should not/Have run away'. She explains that at that time, what made her go 'back to the city' was not the understanding that what she had done was not right, but the calming influence of the world of nature, represented by the hare 'sitting still', into which her quest for escape had brought her. In 1970, having spent time in nature, she 'washed in brown bog water', an image that is suggestive of a form of baptism. Then, feeling strengthened, she returned to her father's bedside, carrying the calming image of the hare on the track 'in her hour of ease' in her memory to help her to cope with the distressing situation.

However, in the present, because 'the morning paper's prize photograph' triggered memories from 1970 and 1921, her shared family history, she now understands the reason why she should not have run away from her father's deathbed. Ní Chuilleanáin recognises that unlike the world of animals, where survival is the most important rule of behaviour, in the world of human beings the most important rule is behaving in a way that is right. Therefore, the hare in the photograph is clever because, driven by her instinctive and selfish urge for survival, she uses her wits to escape. The poet seems to imply that the greyhounds and the

'soldiers', those who have 'the Killer Instinct', are also driven by a selfish urge for survival and self-preservation.

But as far as Ní Chuilleanáin is concerned, in the world of people this selfish instinct for survival should be of lesser importance than the codes of right behaviour: that is, such codes as concern for our fellow human beings, an awareness of our responsibility for others and our loyalty to those whom we love. In the present, through recalling memories from her family history, she understands why she ran away from her dying father's bedside in 1970: she was afraid and her survival instincts took over, just as they did with the hare in the photograph and her father as a young man. Now, she understands that the reasons that should have motivated her to return to her father's bedside in 1970 were her responsibility for him as a member of her family and her loyalty to him as a loved one.

For Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, being 'clever', as a person, involves thinking carefully about the rightness of our actions as we live our lives. It is this type of cleverness that truly transfers power to those who are 'Lacking the Killer Instinct'.

The past and the present

As we discovered previously in our consideration of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's life and work, she has a strong sense of the close relationship between the past and the present. In 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct', she conveys the closeness of the past and the present by the arrangement of the printed words on the page and the abstract meanings of the words.

If we look at the arrangement of the printed words of this poem on the page, there are four physical gaps apparent in this





arrangement. The first section that is defined by a gap extends from lines 1–10. This section describes the poet's memory of running away from her dying father's bedside in 1970 and the newspaper photograph in the present that triggered this memory.

There are three further gaps defining four additional sections, but significantly these three gaps contain two- or four-word phrases that seem to act like physical bridges between the sections. In the gap between section 2 and section 3, there is the phrase 'The hare' on line 15. Similarly, in the gap between section 3 and section 4, there is the phrase 'The lorry was growling' in line 22. Finally, the phrase 'And I should not' in line 33 bridges the gap between section 4 and section 5. These phrases are not full lines of poetry and they do not fill the gap completely; instead, they create a slender link between the sections. In this way they are concrete, physical representations of the way in which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin perceives the workings of the past and the present. For her, they are held together by slender bridges created by memories, remembrance and recognition.

If we return to look at section 1 from the point of view of meaning, we can see that lines 1–4 are concerned with the poet's memory from 1970 of running away from her dying father's bedside and seeing a hare. This is then linked to the present by a dash, where the newspaper photograph featuring a hare running away is described. This ends with a comma, suggestive of a pause rather than a stop, in line 10. Together, these two experiences – one recalled from the past and one situated in the present – trigger the connection between the past and the present into action.

This active connection between the past and the present is then sustained by the poet's process of remembrance that begins in section 2: with her remembering her father's story about how he ran away from the 'soldiers' in the more distant past of 1921. This is then linked by the phrase 'The hare' to section 3. It is no accident that it is the words 'The hare' that act as a bridge here because Ní Chuilleanáin makes a comparison between her father's actions in 1921 in section 2 to the hare's actions in the present in section 3. The concrete, physical appearance of the words 'The hare' and their abstract meaning in the poem combine to convey the close relationship between the past and the present.

The phrase 'The lorry was growling' operates in the same way, physically connecting section 3, which describes the hare's actions in the present, back to her father's action in 1921 in section 4 in a way that reflects the meaning of the two sections: the hare is chased by the dogs in section 3 and the phrase 'The lorry was growling' both echoes the sounds of the dogs in section 3 and introduces, in a threatening way, the 'soldiers' who chased her father in section 4.

Finally, the phrase 'I should not' physically bridges the gap between the father's action of fleeing from his hunters and hiding in a house in 1921 in section 4 and the poet's own actions of fleeing from his bedside in 1970 in section 5. Ní Chuilleanáin now recognises that both of these actions 'should not' have been done.

In this way, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin uses both the concrete, physical arrangement of her printed poem on the page and the abstract





meanings that she explores in the poem to produce a masterpiece of poetic communication regarding the way in which human memory, when it is brought into play, operates by creating links or bridges between the fragments of experiences from the past which it contains.





TO NIAL WOODS AND XENYA OSTROVSKAIA, MARRIED IN DUBLIN ON 9 SEPTEMBER 2009

A reading of the poem

'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009' is clearly a poem that is connected to Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's family life, as it was written to celebrate her son's wedding. Because of this we will notice some differences in her approach:

- Unlike some of her other poems where there is only a fragment of the narrative describing an incident with few details, in this poem we have a full narrative with a beginning, middle and an end to the story, based on her hopes for how her son's marriage will develop. We are also given specific details, such as her son's name
- Again unusually, Ní Chuilleanáin does not use a persona, but speaks as herself, the mother of the groom. This is reflected in the genuinely personal and affectionate tone of this poem

Nevertheless, there are familiar elements here:

- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses.
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem.
- References to folktales and fairytales because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that they represent truths about how best to live life.

- The influence of the past on the present, in this case through folktales and fairytales
- The image of a quest
- References to important life experiences – in this instance, a marriage
- Perhaps a reference to history – in this case, family history with the image of the cat

The opening five lines of this poem read like the beginning of a folktale or fairytale, as we enter into a world where two people decide to go on a 'journey' when they 'both see the same star', bringing 'half a loaf' and a 'mother's blessing' with them. Of course, the poet does not expect us to take this meaning literally. She makes this comparison between her son's marriage and a 'journey', or quest, to convey the idea that the young couple are setting out on an adventure to find a new life together. This is a particularly charming use of imagery by Ní Chuilleanáin to describe her son and his new wife beginning their married life. These lines establish two clear links to two ideas that she wants us to connect to the marriage of her son and daughter-in-law: the first is to folktales and fairytales and the second is to the idea of a quest, a common event in folktales and fairytales.

Lines 6–21 are the middle part of the narrative of the poem, as the poet describes what will happen to the couple on their quest, that is, their life as a newly married couple. Ní Chuilleanáin admits that they will be journeying into new experiences and leaving their old familiar lives as two individuals, 'the places that you knew', behind. She understands that this is rather daunting for the couple, so she





reassures them by saying ‘All that you leave behind you will find once more’. It comes as something of a surprise when, in line 8, she explains to them that ‘You will find it in the stories’.

This seems to be a strange piece of advice to give to a newlywed couple: that they should read and listen to folktales and fairytales. However, it is based on Ní Chuilleanáin’s belief that although over the centuries such tales have become regarded as nothing more than old-fashioned stories suitable for children, they actually carry important messages about how people can live life in the best way. For folktales and fairytales, no matter where they originate in the world, always tell stories that examine the differences between types of human behaviour such as good and evil, true love and false love, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal. By doing this, these tales communicate to those who are listening to them, or reading them, which one to choose in order to achieve a life that is lived well and in a worthwhile way. Because of this, Ní Chuilleanáin believes that the messages that lie in the narratives of folktales and fairytales from the past are still relevant to people in the present.

In lines 9–16, Ní Chuilleanáin refers to examples of some of these tales so that those listening to or reading her poem can think about the messages that they carry. There is the ‘sleeping beauty’, a good person imprisoned in sleep because of the curse of an evil fairy, with her ‘talking cat’, representing loyalty, lying ‘Solid beside her feet’. The ‘talking cat’ is a common character in folktales, such as the old Irish story about the ‘King of the Cats’ visiting Ireland and the more widely known story of ‘Puss in Boots’. Given the

fact that the poet is writing this poem for a happy occasion – the celebration of her son’s wedding – she takes the opportunity to create an amusing image of the couple owning a very special talking cat with the ability to ‘speak in Irish and Russian’ and to tell stories from Ireland, her son’s birthplace, and from Russia, the birthplace of his new wife. Perhaps this cat may be a reference to a family cat, such as Cypher, which we mentioned earlier in our introductory consideration of Ní Chuilleanáin’s life and work. If it is, then this cat image can also be seen as a suggestion of the importance of shared memories that form a family history, which helps to create a strong family group. We encountered this idea previously in our exploration of her poem ‘The Bend in the Road’.

The Russian folktale about ‘the firebird’, a bird with wonderfully glowing red, orange and yellow feathers, involves a journey as a prince embarks on a quest to find the bird. The adventures or challenges that he experiences explore the consequences of behaving in good and evil ways. The Irish folktale about the ‘King of Ireland’s Son’ and his quest as he meets, loses and searches for Fedelma, ‘the Enchanter’s Daughter’, also describes similar adventures faced by the hero.

It is interesting that Ní Chuilleanáin describes the ‘Book of Ruth’, from the Old Testament, as the ‘story the cat does not know’. This may be suggesting that animals, such as the cat, are more directly linked to the pre-Christian world that produced the original folktales than to the relatively more recent world of the Bible. However, what is important is that this is another story that carries messages about how to live life well because Ruth is a young





widow who, motivated by loyalty to her mother-in-law, moves to a new country and courageously copes with the challenges of her new life there.

Ní Chuilleanáin's advice to her son and daughter-in-law is clear: while on their quest as a married couple, they should remember the important messages from the folktales and fairytales, first created in the long distant past, about how they should live their life together in the best way. When we reach the final line of this poem, it seems natural that we should expect the poet to provide an ending to her story of this young couple's quest through married life, and there is indeed one.

If we have been alert and paying attention to what her carefully chosen words tell us about the influences that she has drawn on in the course of this poem, then the ending that she produces will come as no surprise. For in each of the folktales that she has mentioned, the quest ends in the same way: the sleeping beauty is freed by a kiss from a prince who truly loves her and lives happily ever after; the prince in search of the firebird meets and marries a beautiful princess and they live happily ever after; the king of Ireland's son eventually marries Fedelma and they live happily ever after; while Ruth meets and marries Boaz and according to the poet 'she lived happily ever after'. And a 'happily ever after' is just what Ní Chuilleanáin wishes to be the ending to the quest that her son, Niall, and her daughter-in-law, Xenya, have begun on their wedding day.

Imagery

As we discovered earlier in our introductory consideration of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's life and work, she explains that with her poetry 'I feel that I write about these things because I don't understand them'. In this case, it is clear that she fully understands what her son is doing and also what she wishes for the newlyweds in their future. Because of this, there is very little that is mysterious or enigmatic about this poem.

In the first lines of the poem, the imagery that is central to the meaning of this poem is established: the comparison of the marriage of her son and daughter-in-law to a quest, such as is found in folktales and fairytales. She uses words and phrases that suggest images often found in folktales and fairytales: 'the same star', 'the point of the steeple', 'half a loaf' and 'mother's blessing'. This comparison is continued by the imagery in lines 9–21. Here, Ní Chuilleanáin describes short scenes from folktales and fairytales that appeal to our senses of sight, hearing and touch. By doing this, she encourages us, her readers, to recall our memories of stories such as these and how much they meant to us when we were children. As a result, these images become more meaningful to us and more memorable. By the time we read the final line, we are very much involved in this world of folktales and fairytales and so the poet's use of the phrase 'lived happily ever after' seems to be the perfect ending to her poem.





Language and meaning

Earlier in our reading of this poem we noted that we would find a feature that recurs in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, that is, straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses. Although we have come to understand that she establishes a clear comparison between the marriage of her son and daughter-in-law and a quest, such as is found in folktales and fairytales, we need to recognise that if we did not read this poem in an alert and attentive manner we might easily miss this meaning that Ní Chuilleanáin wishes to convey to us.

Reading lines 1–5 for the first time, the phrases and images that she uses, 'the same star', 'the point of the steeple', 'half a loaf' and 'mother's blessing', could appear to be a little puzzling, particularly the 'half a loaf' and 'mother's blessing'. It is only when we read on with alertness, looking out for clues and suggestions, that we discover her reference in line 8 to 'the stories'. It is this reference that helps us to understand how the phrases and images in lines 1–5 relate to the meaning that she wishes to convey to us. In this way, the layers of meaning that lie under the straightforward and conversational language of lines 1–5 are revealed to us because we have been actively engaged in the poem as readers. And as we discussed previously in our introductory consideration of her life and work, this is exactly what she would like us to do.





IDEAS AND IMAGES IN EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN'S POETRY

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has said of her poetry:

I find that American poets, particularly, are very programmatic. They set out to write twenty-five poems about this or that. Mine would not be like that. I have a definite feeling that each poem will stand up on its own ... when I am revising, I am usually revising three or four poems at a time ... Probably images carry from one to another.

Ní Chuilleanáin seems to have a strong sense that her poems are not held together by themes, but that each poem is a separate piece exploring aspects of her many and varied encounters with people and knowledge. Therefore, the list below groups the poems that we have considered according to the ideas and the images that they share.

The following elements will not be included in this list as they occur in all her poems:

- The use of a narrative fragment as a starting point for the poem.
- Straightforward and conversational language that expresses layers of meaning, requiring us to be alert and to pay careful attention to the words and phrases that she uses.
- Vivid imagery to communicate what she wishes to express and to encourage us to actively engage with the poem.
- The representation of abstract human emotions and qualities in concrete images.

- An element of mystery and puzzling enigma in the poem because Ní Chuilleanáin believes that there are always elements of mystery and enigma in life. The exception to this is 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009', where we learn a lot of detail about the narrative.

The influence of the past on the present

- 'The Bend in the Road': family memory
- 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009': folktales and fairytales
- 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct': family memory
- 'Fireman's Lift': family memory
- 'Translation': past and present society
- 'Kilcash': past and present society

The image of a quest

- 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009'
- 'The Second Voyage'
- 'Street'
- 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct'
- 'Deaths and Engines'
- 'Following'
- 'All for You'
- 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Night'





Non-gendered vague persona

- 'The Bend in the Road'
- 'Street'
- 'Translation'
- 'Following'
- 'All for You'

The poet speaking as herself

- 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009'
- 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct'
- 'Deaths and Engines'
- 'Fireman's Lift'

Important life experiences

- 'The Bend in the Road': deaths of loved ones
- 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009': a wedding
- 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct': death of a loved one
- 'Fireman's Lift': death of a loved one

Nature as a source of calmness and consolation

- 'The Bend in the Road'
- 'On Lacking the Killer Instinct'
- 'Translation'
- 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht'

Architectural images

- 'Street'
- 'Deaths and Engines'
- 'Fireman's Lift'
- 'All for You'
- 'Lucina Schynning in Silence of the Nicht'

The image of a threshold

- 'Street'
- 'Fireman's Lift'

Women in Irish society

- 'Street'
- 'Translation'
- 'Following'

This is not an exhaustive list, you may make additions or changes as depending on your interpretation of a poem.





QUESTIONS

1. Read 'The Bend in the Road' and answer the following questions.
 - (a) Do you think that this is a happy or a sad poem? Explain your answer.
 - (b) Comment on the bold word in one of the following lines:
 - 'A tall tree like a cat's **tail** waited too.'
 - 'This is the place of their **presence**: in the tree, in the air.'
 - (c) Imagine that you are the boy in the car. Read lines 1–6, then describe the incident from your point of view.
2. Read 'To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaia, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009' and answer the following questions.
 - (a) Which is your favourite section in this poem? Explain why you like it.
 - (b) Do you think that this is a good title for the poem? Why?
 - (c) Which of the following statements suggest the poet's attitude to her son and daughter-in-law:
 - She feels sorry for them
 - She is fascinated by them
 - She is happy for themExplain the reasons for your choice.
3. Read 'Street' and answer the following questions.
 - (a) Imagine you are to make a short film of 'Street'. Describe the sound effects, music and images that you would use.
 - (b) Imagine that you are a friend of the man in this poem. You see him standing at the threshold and he explains what has happened to you. What advice would you give him about whether or not he should go in the door and up the stairs? Write a piece explaining the advice that you would give him.
 - (c) Suggest a new title for this poem. Give reasons for your suggestion, supporting them by reference to the poem.
4. 'In her poetry Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin offers her readers an invitation to engage actively with her poetry that is hard to resist.' Give your response to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in light of this statement. Support your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.
5. 'Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's language is deceptively straightforward and conversational and an alert and attentive reader will see layers of meaning in her poetry.' Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems on your course.
6. 'Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin once commented on poetry, "The last line is the most important ... it allows you suddenly to see the poem as a whole."' Do you think this comment can be applied to her own poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.
7. 'The poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin often presents us with a non-gendered, vague and undefined persona and a mysterious and enigmatic world.' Write a response to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in light of this statement, supporting your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.





8. 'For Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin the past is always influencing the present, both in the lives of individuals and in society.' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment of her poetry? Support your points with reference to the poetry on your course.
9. 'Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Women in Irish Society.' You have been asked by your local radio station to give a talk on the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Write out the text of the talk that you would deliver in response to the above title. Support your points by reference to the poetry on your course.
10. 'For Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, many of life's experiences can be seen as a quest.' Write your response to this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.





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**EAVAN
BOLAND**
Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2020	OL 2020
HL 2021	OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

Introduction

The War Horse

Child of Our Time

The Famine Road

The Shadow Doll

White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland

Outside History

The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave Me

This Moment

The Pomegranate

Love

Overview of the issues in this selection of Boland's poetry

Developing a personal response to the poetry of
Eavan Boland

Questions

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INTRODUCTION

A literary life

Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944. Her mother was the painter Frances Kelly and her father was the diplomat Frederick Boland, whose career moves resulted in her roving childhood and youth. From the age of six to twelve she lived in London, then in New York for a number of years, returning to Dublin when she was fourteen.

She was educated at Holy Child Convent, Killiney, County Dublin, then went on to Trinity College, first as a student and later as a lecturer in the English department. After a few years she embarked on a career as a literary journalist with the *Irish Times* and she also presented a regular poetry programme for RTÉ Radio.

New Territory

New Territory, her first book of poetry, published in 1967, contains the early poems, written between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, which were critically acknowledged at the time as talented, well-crafted work. Among its main concerns, this volume showed a preoccupation with the role of the poet in pieces such as 'The Poets' and 'New Territory'. It also contained the first of her poems about paintings and so introduced what was to become an important theme of Boland's work: the stereotyped view of women in art and literature. 'From the Painting *Back from Market* by Chardin' shows a peasant woman, defined by love and domestic duties, 'her eyes mixed/Between love and market'.

The poet feels that artists throughout the centuries have ignored the real lives of women:

I think of what great art removes:

Hazard and death, the future and the past,

This woman's secret history and her loves ...

In general, this volume is in the mainstream of the Irish political-romantic poetic tradition, with its themes of exile ('The Flight of the Earls') and political martyrdom ('A Cynic at Kilmainham Jail'); poems about Irish poets ('Yeats in Civil War' and 'After the Irish of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille'); and the retelling of legends ('Three Songs for a Legend' and 'The Winning of Etain'). But her outlook was soon to change, under pressure of the unfolding political situation.

Religious and political antagonism in Northern Ireland exploded into violence from 1969 onwards. Few people were unmoved or unaffected by this. The violence spread southwards with the bombing of Dublin and Monaghan in May 1974. Eavan Boland conducted a series of interviews in the *Irish Times* with Northern writers concerning their views on the situation, its effects on the work of the writer and the function of art in a time of violence. In a seminal article on 7 June 1974 entitled 'The Weasel's Tooth', she questioned the whole notion of cultural unity and accused Irish writing, influenced by Yeats, of fostering lethal fantasies for political activists:

Let us be rid at last of any longing for cultural unity in a country whose most precious contribution may be precisely its insight into the anguish of disunity ... For there is, and at last I recognise it, no unity whatsoever in this culture of





ours. And even more important, I recognise that there is no need whatsoever for such a unity. If we search for it we will, at a crucial moment, be mutilating with fantasy once again the very force we should be liberating with reality: our one strength as writers, the individual voice, speaking in tones of outcry, vengeance, bitterness even, against our disunity but speaking, for all that, with a cool tough acceptance of it.

The War Horse

Boland's second volume of poetry, *The War Horse*, published in 1975, reflects her concerns with violence and conflict in both private and community life. She deals with many types of conflict: the Irish–English struggle, worrying families and the conflict between lovers. The development of this theme ranges from a recognition of the killer instinct inherent in all nature, however domesticated ('Prisoners'), to a consideration of notorious historical public moments of conflict and death ('The Famine Road', 'The Greek Experience' and 'Child of Our Time', which was written after the Dublin bombings of 1974) and the archetypal deadly conflict of fathers and sons ('The Hanging Judge' and 'A Soldier's Son'). The latter poem, in which a father kills his own son, has been read as 'an image of a society at war with its own inheritance and future'. 'The War Horse', both a private and a political poem, brings a vivid personal awareness of destruction and war to leafy Dublin suburbia.

The feminine vision and view of the world is also a force in this volume. In 'The Famine Road', Boland equates the callous official lack of understanding of the famine victims with the offhand, male

medical attitude meted out to a contemporary woman suffering from sterility. Racial suffering is equated with female suffering. In 'Suburban Woman' and 'Ode to Suburbia' she deals with the daily grind of the housewife and the conflict between a woman's traditional role and her identity as a poet and creative artist:

Her kitchen blind down – a white flag – the day's assault over, now she will shrug a hundred small surrenders off as images still born, unwritten metaphors, blank pages; and on this territory, blindfold, we meet at last, veterans of a defeat no truce will heal, no formula prevent breaking out fresh again. Again the print of twigs stalking her pillow will begin a new day and all her victims then – hopes unreprieved, hours taken hostage will newly wake, while I, on a new page will watch, like town and country, word, thought look for ascendancy, poise, retreat, leaving each line maimed, my forces used.

Defeated we survive, we two, housed together in my compromise, my craft – who are of one another the first draft.

By this time Boland had married and moved from her city flat and literary lifestyle to the Dublin suburb of Dundrum, where she was rearing her two daughters. These poems and others such as 'The Other Woman' and 'Child of Our Time' reflect an attempt to find and bring together her identity as wife, Irishwoman, poet and mother with her life in the suburbs.

In this volume there are also some beautiful and honest personal poems on family, love and friendship – 'Sisters', 'The Laws of





Love' and 'The Botanic Gardens' – all demonstrating peaceful alternatives to conflict.

In Her Own Image

In 1976 she began to work simultaneously on her next two volumes of poetry, *In Her Own Image*, published in 1980, and *Night Feed*, published in 1982. *In Her Own Image* deals with individual private female identity, 'woman's secret history'. The poems explore taboo issues: anorexia, infanticide, mastectomy, menstruation, masturbation and domestic violence. Here is a cry to look at the reality of woman, her sexuality, desires, feelings of degradation and failure to be understood.

'Anorexia' explores female suffering; 'Mastectomy' and 'In His Own Image' explore feelings of degradation and see the female body as the object of man's desire and of his need to control and shape:

*He splits my lip with his fist, shadows my eye with a blow,
knuckles my neck to its proper angle.*

What a perfectionist!

*His are a sculptor's hands: they summon form from
the void, they bring me to myself again.*

I am a new woman.

'Solitary' suggests that only a woman knows the real sensual rhythms of her own body. 'Tirade for the Mimic Muse' and 'Witching' undermine the accepted conventional image of woman. 'Tirade' in particular deflates the traditional male-created image of the muse as a beautiful girl, choosing instead to deal with the less picturesque reality:

*I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout.
So here you are fumed in candle-stink
Its yellow balm exhumes you for the glass.
How you arch and pout in it!
How you poach your face in it!
Anyone would think you were a whore –
An ageing out-of-work kind-hearted tart.
I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:
Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse –
Our Muse of Mimic Art.*

These are angry poems, featuring degraded states of women in a sort of anti-lyric verse, yet they goad the reader into considering the reality of woman, not the image.

Night Feed

If *In Her Own Image* featured the dark side of 'woman's secret history', *Night Feed* features the suburban, domestic and maternal: the ordinary, traditional, everyday aspects of woman's identity. The main sequence of poems, 'Domestic Interior, I – II', focuses on the close bond between mother and child and explores the intensity of that maternal experience. It includes the now familiar 'Night Feed':

*This is dawn.
Believe me
This is your season, little daughter.
The moment daisies open,
The hour mercurial rainwater
Makes a mirror for sparrows.*





*It's time we drowned our sorrows.
 I tiptoe in.
 I lift you up
 Wriggling
 In your rosy, zipped sleeper.
 Yes, this is the hour
 For the early bird and me
 When finder is keeper.
 I crook the bottle.
 How you suckle!
 This is the best I can be,
 Housewife
 To this nursery
 Where you hold on,
 Dear life.
 A silt of milk.
 The last suck.
 And now your eyes are open,
 Birth-coloured and offended.
 Earth wakes.
 You go back to sleep.
 The feed is ended.
 Worms turn.
 Stars go in.
 Even the moon is losing face.
 Poplars stilt for dawn
 And we begin
 The long fall from grace.
 I tuck you in.*

Also in this volume is a group of poems examining artistic images of women: 'Degas Laundresses', 'Woman Posing', 'On Renoir's *The Grape Pickers*' and 'Domestic Interior'. These women are either defined in relation to their work in field or kitchen or else are putting on a false, decorative pose, fulfilling the stereotyped image man created for them. Woman's perceived need to comply with this idealised image of timeless beauty is satirised in such pieces as 'The Woman Turns Herself into a Bush', 'The Woman Changes Her Skin' and 'A Ballad of Beauty and Time'. In this last poem, plastic surgery is under the poet's satirical knife:

*A chin he had re-worked, a face he had re-made.
 He slit and tucked and cut.
 Then straightened from his blade.
 'A tuck, a hem,' he said –
 'I only seam the line,
 I only mend the dress.
 It wouldn't do for you: your quarrel's with the weave.
 The best I achieve is just a stitch in time.'*

These fake images of woman and romanticised stereotypes are set against the real defining moments in a woman's history in the 'Domestic Interiors' sequence. On the one hand, Boland is saying that it is these family relationships that are real and important, that identity can be found among the washing machines and children's toys in suburbia. But she is also protesting that traditionally, a woman has not had a choice about this. She has been imprisoned at hearth and home and so kept to the margins of society, removed from the centre of historymaking and power. Boland seeks a more equitable balance between 'hearth and history'.





Our way of life
 has hardly changed
 since a wheel first
 whetted a knife.
 Maybe flame
 burns more greedily,
 and wheels are steadier
 but we're the same
 who milestone
 our lives
 with oversights –
 living by the lights
 of the loaf left
 by the cash register,
 the washing powder
 paid for and wrapped,
 the wash left wet:
 like most historic peoples
 we are defined
 by what we forget,
 by what we never will be –
 star-gazers,
 fire-eaters.
 It's our alibi
 for all time:
 as far as history goes
 we were never
 on the scene of the crime.
 So when the king's head

gored its basket –
 grim harvest –
 we were gristing bread
 or getting the recipe
 for a good soup
 to appetise
 our gossip ...
 (from 'It's a Woman's World')

The Journey

Boland's fifth collection, *The Journey*, was published in 1982 and republished in *The Journey and Other Poems* in 1986. Prominent among its many and complex themes is the quest for identity: the poet's national identity, suburban identity, feminist identity and identity as mother and wife. Childhood memories in England and the feeling of being different in such poems as 'I Remember', 'An Irish Childhood in England: 1951' and 'Fond Memory' provoked a consciousness of the poet's own nation and how language defines a person:

... the teacher in the London convent who when I produced
 'I amn't' in the classroom turned and said – 'you're not in
 Ireland now.'
 ('An Irish Childhood in England: 1951')

This consciousness of language as part of one's identity prevails throughout the volume. Yet her relationship with her history and the women of history is not an easy one, and she resists going back to it in 'Mise Éire'. She finds the grim reality of Irish women in history, soldiers' whores or helpless immigrants, difficult to confront:





*No. I won't go back.
My roots are brutal:
I am the woman –
a sloven's mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut
in the precincts of the garrison –
who practises
the quick frictions,
the rictus of delight
and gets cambric for it,
rice-coloured silks.
I am the woman
in the gansy-coat
on board the 'Mary Belle',
in the huddling cold,
holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts East
and North over the dirty
waters of the wharf
mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that
a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before.*

Yet these are the real women of the past, not those images created by many previous male poets, who idealised women and moulded them into metaphors of national sentiment and so created mythic national female figures.

Outside History

Outside History (1990), Boland's sixth volume, is divided into three sections: 'Object Lessons', 'Outside History: A Sequence' and 'Distances'. The object lessons, in the main, are what woman has learned about life. Some poems, such as 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' and 'The River', reflect on the puzzling, almost inexplicable relationship between men and women and on their different perspectives on the world ('Mountain Time'). Couples growing apart and breaking up are the focus of 'Object Lessons'. We are made to feel in this sequence how fragile and transient all human interaction is, particularly in 'We Were Neutral in the War' and 'Mountain Time'.

*... darkness will be only what is left of a mouth after kissing
or a hand laced in a hand
(Mountain Time)*

The female speaker senses that she is not regarded as significant, that she is marginalised, forced to the sidelines and excluded from the centre of happening history in 'We Were Neutral in the War':

*Your husband frowns at dinner, has no time
for the baby who has learned to crease three
fingers and wave 'day-day.' This is serious,
he says. This could be what we all feared.
You pierce a sequin with a needle.*





*You slide it down single-knotted thread
until it lies with all the others in
a puzzle of brightness. Then another and another one.*

The female voices in these poems resemble 'The Shadow Doll', a mere replica of a bride, a protected image locked in a vacuum. But the speaker is a poet, with her own recognised space, metaphorically represented as a room, and she reaches out to other women writers, trying to imagine 'the rooms of other women poets'. She knows that the literary and creative world has been male dominated, but the gift has passed into her hands.

*I take it down
from time to time, to feel
the smooth path of silver
meet the cicatrice of skill.
These scars, I tell myself, are learned.
This gift for wounding an artery of rock
was passed on from father to son, to the father
of the next son;
is an aptitude
for injuring earth
while inferring it in curves and surfaces;
is this cold potency which has come,
by time and chance,
into my hands.
(from 'Bright-Cut Irish Silver')*

Boland's response to being marginalised as a woman poet is to explore alternative history:

*So much that matters, so much that is powerful and frail in
human affairs seems to me, increasingly, to happen outside
history: away from the texts and symmetries of an accepted
expression. And, for that very reason, at a great risk of being
edited out of the final account.*

(Poetry Book Society Bulletin, winter 1990)

Boland feels that significance is also to be found in the margins of life, that the unrecorded history of individuals is important too. It is this alternative history that is the focus of the central section of the volume *Outside History*. In it she explores her own history, but this operates at both a personal and a universal level. Her own history can be read as a metaphor for the unrecorded female history of the nation. She explores her own personal history as a developing writer and poet. She is the young immature poet in 'The Achill Woman' who does not fully comprehend the significance of what she has experienced. She attempts to understand her developing self and to make connections between her present persona as a woman poet and her student past in 'A False Spring'. She is forging an identity as a woman poet in 'The Making of an Irish Goddess' and she is the suburban woman seeking to re-establish contact with her natural and cultural roots in 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland'. She finds real significance in moments of human experience, not in symbolic happening, in 'We Are Human History. We Are Not Natural History'.

She feels trapped by time, and as a woman she is alienated from the male-dominated version of history in 'An Old Steel Engraving'. She feels powerless and unable to influence history in 'We Are Always Too Late'.





Many of the poems record a sense of incompleteness, such as 'A False Spring', which records the failure to find again her younger, student self and integrate that phase of her life with the embodied now. The lost cultural heritage, passed from mother to daughter but forgotten, is recorded in 'What We Lost'.

There is a keen sense of displacement in the poems. The au pair girls in 'In Exile' signify displaced woman, isolated by the barriers of language and by age and cultural differences. In the sequence we see Boland attempting to recover a sense of belonging and completeness by making connections with her personal history and her cultural history, but also by shedding the myth and the stereotyped image:

*out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal ...*

The third section, 'Distances', focuses mostly on the past – the distant past of her childhood memories and the more recent past of occasional moments of insight.

These memories are connected to the present, as if the poet is at last achieving a kind of quiet wholeness in her life. She is linked to the past, to family, to moments of love and insight, even to the future, in 'What Love Intended', where she imagines herself coming back like a ghost to a radically altered suburb.

In a Time of Violence

In a Time of Violence, Boland's seventh collection, was published in 1994. It is divided into three sections, the first of which is entitled 'Writing in a Time of Violence'. The poems in this section

touch on specific national and historical issues and events, such as the Famine ('That the Science of Cartography is Limited' and 'March I, 1847. By the First Post'), agrarian violence and the Peep o' Day Boys ('The Death of Reason'), the Easter Rising ('The Dolls Museum in Dublin'), nineteenth-century women emigrants ('In a Bad Light') and language and nationality ('Beautiful Speech'). Each is examined from an interesting and unusual angle, such as the unsympathetic and insensitive view of the Famine from a woman of the ascendancy class in 'March I, 1847. By the First Post'.

Many of the meditations are inspired by a visit to a museum or an exhibition. For example, the dress in a museum in St Louis featuring the work of Irish dressmakers sparked off thoughts of women's servitude in exile in the nineteenth century ('In a Bad Light'). But each event is recreated with authentic realism and each tale narrated with sympathy and affection. The poems offer fresh insights into old history as the poet focuses on the human experience behind these historical artefacts.

The poems in the second section, 'Legends', focus for the most part on women as mothers. The fierce protectiveness and the maternal side of women are portrayed in poems such as 'This Moment' and 'The Pomegranate'. Woman as mother is playing an age-old role and has universal significance. The ageing woman features in 'Moths', 'The Water Clock' and 'Legends'. Some of the poems stretch back to the poet's own mother and grandmother through remembrance of a particular skill ('The Parcel') or a link with an heirloom ('Lava Cameo'). Some, such as 'Legends', establish continuity with the next generation:





*Our children are our legends.
You are mine. You have my name.
My hair was once like yours.
And the world
is less bitter to me
because you will re-tell the story.*

The main work of the third section is the title poem, 'Anna Liffey'. In the words of the author, it is 'about a river and a woman, about the destiny of water and my sense of growing older'. This section concludes with four poems examining the unsatisfactory portrayal of women in myth, art and literature. The idealised images and the stereotypes are false and suffocating.

She appeals for realism and release in 'A Woman Painted on a Leaf':

*This is not death. It is the terrible
suspension of life.
I want a poem
I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in.*

Object Lessons

Her prose collection, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, appeared in 1995. In autobiographical mode, Boland traces her own development as a woman poet, recounts her search as a woman for some kind of arrangement with the male-dominated concept of the nation and reviews the status of women in poetry and history.





THE WAR HORSE

Themes and issues

The poem stems from an encounter with a roving horse and also the excerpt from *Object Lessons* (pages 607–09), which occurred, coincidentally, during an upsurge of disruption and violence in Northern Ireland. The poet's response is a metaphor poem with political overtones. The horse became the poetic incarnation of all those statistics of violence and death that were pouring nightly from the television screens.

The poem operates on a number of levels of significance. At an immediate level it confronts the issue of violence. We notice the seeming casualness of it, the arbitrary nature of this violence: 'the clip, clop, casual/Iron of his shoes as he stamps death/Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth'. The treatment of the violence may be metaphorical, yet there is an awareness of the reality of death and wanton injury, which is carried in the imagery. The beheaded crocus is 'one of the screamless dead', the uprooted vegetation 'Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated', and the eaten leaf merely 'Of distant interest like a maimed limb'. The ungainly and often directionless nature of violence is suggested in the motion of the animal as he 'stumbles on like a rumour of war'. The overtones of the language become more overtly political as the poem proceeds: the rose is 'expendable ... a volunteer', while 'atavism', 'cause' and 'betrayed' are the verbal coinage of revolutionary groups.

Could we read this poem as reflecting a Southern view of the Northern conflict – a middle-class, slightly nationalist Southern view? The speaker feels threatened by the 'casual/Iron of his shoes', vulnerable, with 'Only a rose' to form 'a mere/Line of defence against him', and afterwards breathes a sigh of relief that this only partly understood phenomenon is gone:

*But we, we are safe, our unformed fear
Of fierce commitment gone*

Lack of interest in this intrusive violence is at first feigned by the speaker. Others pretend he isn't there, 'use the subterfuge/Of curtains'. Yet for all that danger and disruption, the speaker faintly admires the beast:

*I lift the window, watch the ambling feather
Of hock and fetlock*

She is also slow to blame him: 'No great harm is done./Only a leaf of our laurel hedge is torn'. But most significantly of all, at the end of the poem he stirs her race memory ('my blood is still/With atavism') of colonial injustice, English aggression and the cycle of failed rebellions:

*Of burned countryside, illicit braid:
A cause ruined before, a world betrayed.*

The speaker's attitude to the animal is a complex one and is perhaps contradictory at times, incorporating fear, resentment and relief but also furtive admiration. Examine what Boland has to say about political poetry in the extract from *Object Lessons* on pages 608–09. On another level the poem demonstrates how





history impinges on the domestic and the artistic, which are frail in comparison. We are made aware, forcefully, of how fragile the domestic is. Boland herself has described the tension in the poem as that of 'force against formality'. The race memory of fighting against imposed order is conjured up by the modern parallel of conflict in a suburban garden, where wild nature reasserts itself over humankind's attempts to tame it. And the speaker can empathise. The rebel is not far beneath the surface of the psyche, despite the suburban veneer.

'The War Horse' is among the first of Boland's poems of the suburbs. The irony is that suburbia was really designed as slumberland, but even in safe, leafy, middle-class dormer territory, the 'rumour of war ... stumbles down our short street', awakening age-old conflicts. Boland is legitimising suburbia as a place of real experience and insight, a fit location and subject matter for poetry.

'The War Horse' is a private 'coming to awareness' of public violence, an intimate 'thoughts inside the head' reflection on the theme. In this it differs from the more public scrutiny of violence in 'The Famine Road' and 'Child of Our Time'.

These notions concerning the influence of history, the relationship between art and society and the search for meaning in suburbia become important and frequently examined issues in Boland's poetry.

Features and style

Versification

The poem is composed in open rhyming couplets. Unlike closed couplets, the sense here often runs from one couplet to the next. This gives a flowing rhythm and fluid energy to the verse, which might be said to reflect the unpredictable energy and purpose of the horse. For example, the sequence of lines from 'I lift the window' to 'his snuffling head/Down', ending two couplets further on, must be read in one breath and might suggest the animal's forward momentum. Following that, the speaker's short gasp of relief ('He is gone') makes an effective contrast and also highlights Boland's use of rhythm for effect.

The rhyming is casual, composed of half-rhymes and off-rhymes for the most part: death – earth, fear – care, limb – climb, huge – subterfuge, street – wait, etc. This offhand casualness accords well with the beast's casual destruction.

Sound effects

This poet is not deaf to the music of language. Everywhere there are echoes and internal rhymes: 'hock – fetlock', 'Blown from growth', 'fear/Of fierce', etc. The alliteration of 'stumbles down our short street' emphasises the ungainly movement in the confined space. The unobtrusive musical assonance of 'Then to breathe relief lean', with its long *e* sounds, effectively conveys the speaker's sense of release, of escape.

Sound effects are an integral part of the animal portraiture here. The onomatopoeia of 'breath hissing' and 'snuffling head' conveys the threatening unfamiliarity of this beast that has invaded the suburban garden.





Imagery

The poet employs vivid graphic visual imagery, whether to convey fearsome destructive power ('Iron of his shoes ... stamps death') or beauty ('ambling feather/Of hock and fetlock'). Similes and metaphors are often striking and unusual: the torn leaf is 'Of distant interest like a maimed limb'; the broken crocus is 'one of the screamless dead'. These comparisons are disturbing and have a nightmarish quality, which brings to consciousness the suppressed terrors that have been unleashed in the speaker by this violent visitation.

Altogether, the imagery and the language are vigorous and muscular, as befits the scene: 'stamps death/Like a mint'. Notice also the violence of the verbs: stamps, smashed, uprooted, stumble, etc.

Boland's recollections on the origins and significance of the poem

This extract is taken from Boland's prose collection, *Object Lessons* (1995) (Chapter 8):

It was the early seventies, a time of violence in Northern Ireland. Our front room was a rectangle with white walls, hardly any furniture and a small television chanting deaths and statistics at teatime.

It was also our first winter in the suburb. The weather was cold; the road was half finished. Each morning the fields on the Dublin hills appeared as slates of frost. At night the street lamps were too few. And the road itself ran out in a gloom of icy mud and builders' huts.

One evening, at the time of the news, I came into the front room with a cup of coffee in my hand. I heard something at the front door. I set down the coffee, switched on the light and went to open the door.

A large, dappled head – a surreal dismemberment in the dusk – swayed low on the doorstep, then attached itself back to a clumsy horse and clattered away. I went out and stood under the street lamp. I saw its hindquarters retreating, smudged by mist and darkness. I watched it disappear around a corner. The lamp above me hissed and flickered and finally came on fully.

There was an explanation. It was almost certainly a traveller's horse with some memory of our road as a travelling site and our gardens as fields where it had grazed only recently. The memory withstood the surprises of its return, but not for long. It came back four or five times.

Each time, as it was startled into retreat, its huge hooves did damage. Crocus bulbs were uprooted. Hedge seedlings were dragged up. Grass seeds were churned out of their place.

Some months later I began to write a poem. I called it 'The War Horse'. Its argument was gathered around the oppositions of force and formality. Of an intrusion of nature – the horse – menacing the decorous reductions of nature which were the gardens. And of the failure of language to describe such violence and resist it.

I wrote the poem slowly, adding each couplet with care. I was twenty-six years of age. At first, when it was finished,





I looked at it with pleasure and wonder. It encompassed a real event. It entered a place in my life and moved beyond it. I was young enough to craft and want nothing more.

Gradually I changed my mind, although I never disowned the poem.

In fact, my doubts were less about it than about my own first sense of its completeness. The poem had drawn me easily into the charm and strength of an apparently public stance. It had dramatised for me what I already suspected: that one part of the poem in every generation is ready to be communally written. To put it another way, there is a poem in each time that waits to be set down and is therefore instantly recognisable once it has been. It may contain sentiments of outrage or details of an occasion. It may invite a general reaction to some particular circumstance. It may appeal to anger or invite a common purpose.

It hardly matters. The point is that to write in that cursive and approved script can seem, for the unwary poet, a blessed lifting of the solitude and scepticism of the poet's life. Images are easily set down; a music of argument is suddenly revealed. Then a difficult pursuit becomes a swift movement. And finally the poem takes on a glamour of meaning against a background of public interest.

Historically – in the epic, in the elegy – this has been an enrichment. But in a country like Ireland, with a nationalist tradition, there are real dangers. In my poem the horse, the hills behind it – these were private emblems which almost

immediately took on a communal reference against a background of communal suffering. In a time of violence it would be all too easy to write another poem, and another. To make a construct where the difficult 'I' of perception became the easier 'we' of subtle claim. Where an unearned power would be allowed by a public engagement.

In such a poem the poet would be the subject. The object might be a horse, a distance, a human suffering. It hardly mattered. The public authorisation would give such sanction to the poet and the object would not just be silent. It would be silenced. The subject would be all-powerful.

At that point I saw [that] in Ireland, with its national traditions, its bardic past, the confusion between the political poem and the public poem was a dangerous and inviting motif. It encouraged the subject of the poem to be a representative and the object to be ornamental. In such a relation, the dangerous and private registers of feeling of the true political poem would be truly lost. At the very moment when they were most needed.

And yet I had come out of the Irish tradition as a poet. I had opened the books, read the poems, believed the rhetoric when I was young. Writing the political poem seemed to me almost a franchise of the Irish poet, an inherited privilege. I would come to see that it was more and less than that, that like other parts of the poet's life, it would involve more of solitary scruple than communal eloquence. And yet one thing remained steady: I continued to believe that a reading





of the energy and virtue of any tradition can be made by looking at the political poem in its time. At who writes it and why. At who can speak in the half-light between event and perception without their voices becoming shadows as Aeneas's rivals did in the underworld of the Sixth Book.

In that winter twilight, seeing the large, unruly horse scrape the crocus bulbs up in his hooves, making my own connections between power and order, I had ventured on my first political poem. I had seen my first political image. I had even understood the difficulties of writing it. What I had not realised was that I myself was a politic within the Irish poem: a young woman who had left the assured identity of a city and its poetic customs and who had started on a life which had no place in them. I had seen and weighed and struggled with the meaning of the horse, the dark night, the sounds of death from the television. I had been far less able to evaluate my own hand on a light switch, my own form backlit under a spluttering street light against the raw neighbourhood of a suburb. And yet without one evaluation the other was incomplete.

I would learn that it was far more difficult to make myself the political subject of my own poems than to see the metaphoric possibilities in front of me in a suburban dusk. The difficulty was a disguised blessing. It warned me away from facile definitions. The more I looked at the political poem, the more I saw how easy it was to make the claim and miss the connections. And I wanted to find them.





CHILD OF OUR TIME

Background

The poem was inspired by a press photograph showing a firefighter carrying a dead child out of the wreckage of the Dublin bombings in May 1974.

A reading of the poem

First and foremost, this is an elegy for the untimely death of a child. It bemoans the senselessness and irrationality of the child's slaughter in an act of public violence:

*This song, which takes from your final cry
Its tune, from you unreasoned end its reason,
Its rhythm from the discord of your murder*

In the second stanza, the keen sense of loss is encouraged by the mournful litany of the literary rituals of childhood, naming again the associations of intimate moments, the rituals around sleeping and waking:

*With rhymes for your waking, rhythms for your sleep,
Names for the animals you took to bed,
Tales to distract, legends to protect*

This sense of loss is compounded by guilt in that it is the adults who should have been the guardians and guides of the child: 'We who should have known how to instruct'.

The elegy finishes in a prayer that adult society will learn from this horror, expressed in the paradox 'And living, learn, must learn from

you, dead' and so construct a better method of social interaction so that the death will not have been in vain ('find for your sake whose life our idle/Talk has cost, a new language'). The poem is also a searing condemnation of violence. Society stands accused ('our times have robbed your cradle') of this barbarous irrationality ('your unreasoned end', 'the discord of your murder'). The only hope is that society would awaken to the reality of its actions and that the child might 'Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken'.

The poem could also be read as a comment on the failure of communication. The entire poem is couched in language terminology. It is a 'lullaby', a 'song', inspired by a 'final cry', a 'tune' with 'rhythms'. In the second stanza, loss is expressed in terms of language deprivation and childrearing is seen in terms of fostering language: 'rhymes for your waking', etc. The only way forward from this conflict and violence is described as 'a new language'.

Thus, the failure of language is associated with death and destruction. But language is the only bulwark against chaos, and this is the positive message of this bleak poem. Poetry, the most artistic expression of language, can be created out of this pain – this 'tune' from 'your final cry'. It signals a victory of order over chaos, reason 'from your unreasoned end', rhythm from 'discord'. It offers a chance to rebuild broken images and visualise a better society.

Feelings

A delicate balance of emotions is achieved in this poem. The brutal reality of the killing is never denied and the fact of death is faced squarely, as in 'And living, learn, must learn from you,





dead', where the placing of the last word in the line gives it finality and emphasis. But the references to death are sometimes veiled in poetic terms – 'your final cry' and 'your final sleep' – or they are intellectualised, as in 'the discord of your murder'. Here, the aspect of death dwelt on is its discordance, its out-of-tuneness, the disharmony of death. Or the child's broken body is rendered as 'your broken/Image'. The inversion of the natural order of life and death, in the killing of a child, is expressed in the paradoxes 'from your final cry/Its tune', 'from your unreasoned end its reason' and 'Its rhythm from the discord of your murder'. Consideration of this death is poeticised or intellectualised to some degree.

But this is no anodyne reaction. Feelings of grief, loss, guilt and resolution to learn a better way are all conveyed. Yet there is a delicacy and gentleness to the mourning, made all the more poignant by the fact that the poem is a sort of final lullaby, so the slightly euphemistic treatment is appropriate. Death is a kind of sleep: 'Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken'. Altogether, the poem seems to be an interesting combination of dirge and lullaby.





THE FAMINE ROAD

A reading of the poem

Boland is drawing parallels between certain aspects of the famine experience and the experience of woman today. The famine road, symbol of purposeless, thwarted lives, is equated with female sterility. She sees the supercilious treatment of the suffering people as akin to the unfeeling arrogance meted out to the childless woman:

*You never will, never you know
but take it well woman, grow
your garden, keep house, good-bye.*

Boland feels that being a woman gives her a unique perspective on Irish history, as she elaborated in response to the question, 'What does being Irish mean to you?'

*Apart from the fact that it connects me with a past, I find
it a perspective on my womanhood as well. Womanhood
and Irishness are metaphors for one another. There are
resonances of humiliation, oppression and silence in both
of them and I think you can understand one better by
experiencing the other.*

(From the interview in Sleeping with Monsters)

If we explore the poem's comparison in detail, we find that both the Irish in history and women in society are generalised about and so misunderstood: 'Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones/these Irish'. The woman in the monologue is a mere faceless statistic ('one out of every ten'). Neither are treated rationally ('could/they not ... suck/April hailstones for water and for food?'). The

cruel indifference of these people's treatment is linked to the nonchalant lack of medical explanation ('anything may have caused it, spores ... one sees/day after day these mysteries'). Both groups are different, physically or mentally segregated, condemned to an isolated life or death:

*They know it and walk clear. He has become
a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although
he shares it with some there...*

*Barren, never to know the load
of his child in you, what is your body
now if not a famine road?*

Boland links this oppression and humiliation of the sterile woman with that of the famine people. Their blood too is wasted ('could/they not blood their knuckles on rock'). This image is an impotent echo of that authoritative gesture of Trevelyan's ('Trevelyan's/seal blooded the deal table') as they too put their seal on their work.

The following bleak, humorous image conveys their humiliations, showing the primitive state to which they were reduced: 'cunning as housewives, each eyed –/as if at a corner butcher – the other's buttock'. Both woman and famine people are silent sufferers. Disenfranchised, they are allowed to make no contribution. The superior discussion is carried on above their heads and is quite dismissive: 'Might it be safe,/Colonel, to give them roads' and 'grow/your garden, keep house, good-bye'.

The lack of understanding, the unfeeling treatment, the callous oppression, the silent suffering, the feelings of humiliation, of uselessness, the pointlessness of it all, the sense of failure – these are the links between womanhood and Irishness in this poem.





THE SHADOW DOLL

A reading of the poem

This poem has similarities with 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' in that it too uses a symbol to tease out some truths about the image of woman and the nature of the male–female relationship. We are offered the bride's perspective, a female insight on the wedding, which is portrayed in all its turmoil, an occasion to be survived.

Boland uses the symbol of the doll to highlight the discrepancy between the image of woman, particularly nineteenth-century woman, and the less glamorous reality. The manufactured image is elegant, in virginal white ('blooms from the ivory tulle', 'oyster gleam', etc.), a model of discretion and sensitivity, devoid of sexual appetites ('discreet about/visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts'), certainly too polite to talk about these taboo subjects. The reality is that of real-life emotional woman ('feeling/satin rise and fall with the vows') and nervous repetition of vows amid the chaotic clutter of wedding preparations.

There may even be a slight envy of the doll's calmness, yet somehow the fevered reality is more appealing than the 'airless glamour' that is 'less than real', like the stephanotis. However, speaker and doll share a sense of confinement: the doll 'Under glass, under wraps', the speaker restrained by vows and, like the suitcase, pressed down and locked.

Views of woman

- The false image versus the reality: the pure, asexual creature of 'airless glamour' is set against the emotional and physical turmoil of the reality.
- Oppressed woman is emphasised: woman confined, repressed, under glass, under vows, locked in.

Imagery

The imagery mediates the theme very effectively. The delicacy of 'blooms from the ivory tulle' and the 'shell-tone spray of seed pearls' helps create the notion of frail beauty, elegant if bloodless. The unreality is reinforced by the flowers ('less than real/stephanotis'). The colours (ivory and oyster) also help to create this lifeless perfection.

And of course the symbolism of the doll, which is a mere replica, underlines the falsity of this image of woman. Both the glass dome and the locked case carry, in their different ways, suggestions of oppression, secrets to be locked away and a lack of true freedom.





WHITE HAWTHORN IN THE WEST OF IRELAND

A reading of the poem

This is one of a group of poems from the volume *Outside History*, in which the poet is attempting to ‘make connections’ with her world – to establish continuity in her personal life, family traditions and lore, to find a working relationship with her cultural history and, here, to re-establish the age-old connection with the natural world.

In this poem she is going back to nature, fleeing ‘suburban gardens./Lawnmowers. Small talk.’ This toy-house neatness and inconsequential chatter of suburbia is contrasted with the wild, uncultivated beauty, the primitiveness and the naturalness of life in the west:

*Under low skies, past splashes of coltsfoot,
I assumed
the hard shyness of Atlantic light
and the superstitious aura of hawthorn.*

She identifies immediately with the naturalness and is at home with the earth. Her enthusiasm is communicated in the energetic rhythms of the language, the flowing, run-on lines:

*All I wanted then was to fill my arms with
sharp flowers,
to seem, from a distance, to be part of
that ivory, downhill rush. But I knew ...*

Contrast this enthusiasm with the minimalist staccato phrases of lines 3 and 4: ‘I left behind suburban gardens./Lawnmowers. Small talk.’ The hawthorn is associated with supernatural forces, primitive beliefs, the strange sub-rational powers of the earth. The power underneath the ordinary, benign face of nature fascinates the poet here. Like hawthorn, water has a gentle fluency combined with enormous power (‘able/to re-define land’), a power that is usually veiled under the river’s more usual appearance of a recreational amenity or a landscape bearing for lost travellers. Nature dominates all human exchange – ‘the only language spoken in those parts’.

Themes

- The poem contrasts two ways of life: the ‘cultivated’ suburban versus the natural primitiveness of life in the country.
- The superiority of the natural is proclaimed, with its excitement and energy.
- This is an ‘earth poem’, exploring the power beneath the ordinary face of nature, the hidden sub-rational depths.
- It might also be read as a symbolic journey of the deracinated poet, the suburban dweller, searching for her real roots – her roots understood in both a geographical and a metaphysical sense. She is searching for a place and also for a philosophy. The undefined time of year, the ‘season between seasons’, seems to highlight the poet’s sense of ‘out-of-placeness’, her unsettled state of mind.





OUTSIDE HISTORY

A reading of the poem

Boland rebelled against the mythicisation of Irish history: the songs, the ballads, the female icons of the nation, the romantic images. Myth obscures the reality, manipulates history. It is outside real lived history, a remote, unchanging image, a false construct.

Here, Boland, as a poet, rejects myth in favour of real history as the proper authority for her poetry and her idea of nation. The stars are symbolic of outsiders, remote and unreal, 'whose light happened/thousands of years before/our pain did'. Paradoxically, though they appear unchanging and are symbols of eternity, their illumination is thousands of years out of date when it reaches us. Ironically, it is the light that is an illusion: the darkness is real. The stars' unrelenting, cold, hard wintry light is shown in direct contrast to human vulnerability ('our pain'). The alternative to this remote, unchanging mythical framework for viewing life is the vantage point of human history, with its real suffering and mortality:

*... Under them remains
a place where you found*

*you were human, and
a landscape in which you know you are mortal.*

It is necessary to choose between the two outlooks. Boland has chosen to move 'out of myth into history', to be part of the real pain and suffering of life. Only now does she begin to experience the real torment of lives endured by countless people throughout

the years. In a nightmarish, Armageddon-type image suggestive of famine disaster ('roads clotted as/firmaments with the dead'), she invites us in to comfort all the dying in history, real history:

*How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.*

The critic Jody Allen-Randolph has described it as follows: 'In a moment of power and dignity, the dead are finally allowed to die, however slowly and painfully, as both poet and audience move in to whisper the rite of contrition. Their deaths are not manipulated to serve any cause beyond their suffering which survives in the poem as a moment of collective grief.' It is a final laying to rest of the nationalist dead. But it is too late ('And we are too late. We are always too late'). This melancholic ending echoes an awareness of the suffering caused by this mythical view of history and realises that it cannot be undone fully.





THE BLACK LACE FAN MY MOTHER GAVE ME

A reading of the poem

The poem focuses on courtship and deals with the messy and sometimes enigmatic relationship between the sexes. Just as the blackbird engages in its courtship ritual, human lovers also participate in a sort of courting dance:

... She was always early.

He was late. That evening he was later ...

She ordered more coffee. She stood up.

The staccato rhythms of the verse here, created by the short sentences, draw attention to a choreographed sequence of movements as a ritual to be played out. There is evidence too of disharmony, never the perfect entry together but rather of fretting and bad timing. If the weather is a barometer of the emotions, then the indications are of a stormy relationship, oppressive and explosive: 'stifling', 'A starless drought made the nights stormy', 'the distance smelled of rain and lightning', 'An airless dusk before thunder'.

The fan is seen as a symbol of courtship, both with humans and in nature. It is a thing of beauty associated with sensual allure, a romantic symbol. And so it functions here, but it also has darker associations of plunder and violation. The tortoiseshell has been pillaged from its natural habitat, killed off, and 'keeps ... an inference of its violation'. As Boland herself saw it, 'a sign not for triumph and acquisition but for suffering itself' (*Object Lessons*). It

becomes a symbol of pain rather than an erotic sign. Still, in nature it retains its sensual overtone, 'the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.' So it carries these contradictory associations, reflecting the real-life complexity of the love relationship, not some stereotyped romantic image.

It is an unusual love poem in other ways too. There is no clear perception of the lovers, no clear recollection of the emotions, no detail of the moment:

And no way to know what happened then –

none at all – unless, of course, you improvise

It is an oblique love poem that focuses on the love token that has lost much of its particular significance, yet is somehow still linked (by means of the blackbird) to their perennial courtship in nature. Its most positive statement is to assert the eternity of courtship, of love gestures. It makes no claims about eternal memories or the triumph of love against time, but rather the opposite, as the particulars of the emotional encounter are lost, eroded by time. Time erodes significance and even cherished keepsakes lose their importance. There is also emphasis on the darker undertones of love, the tempests and the suffering.

Imagery and symbolism

The style of communication in this poem is somewhat oblique. Nothing is actually said; rather, we gradually come to apprehend the nuances and feelings. The core of meaning is communicated through the connotations of the images and symbols, and these images manage to transmit something of the complexity of the emotions and relations.





The fan itself, as the poet has mentioned, is not just an erotic object but also carries some notion of the violations of love, 'through the pain and plunder of its past, so the symbol deepens the understanding of love in the poem. The parallel image of the blackbird's wing restores some of the sensuality to the love symbol.

The tempestuous nature of the relationship is suggested in the weather imagery, as the atmosphere parallels the emotion: 'An airless dusk before thunder'. It is interesting too that all the references are to dusk or night, not the romantic kind but 'A starless drought'. The poem explores the darkness of the emotions more than the starry insights of love.

Some ideas in the poem

- The love relationship is mysterious, inaccessible to outsiders and to history.
- The sensual courtship gestures in a love affair are universal, common to humans and nature.
- But here the symbol of courtship is not just an erotic object, but also a sign of pain.
- What remains are the gestures; the particular emotions are forgotten, eroded by time.
- History and memory fail us in the search for truth: we are forced to invent.
- Yet nature remains flirtatious always.





THIS MOMENT

A reading of the poem

At one level this is a simple nature lyric celebrating the moment of dusk in the suburbs. The scene is filled with the usual furniture of a suburban evening: darkening trees, lighted windows, stars, moths, rinds, children and mothers calling them in. It is a romantic evocation of suburban twilight, creating an atmosphere of calm, of continuing growth, ripeness and natural abundance: 'One window is yellow as butter ... Moths flutter./Apples sweeten in the dark.' Boland is celebrating the ordinary, having discovered that even banal suburban routines can stimulate the poetic in her.

Yet for all its outward ordinariness, there is a hint of the mysterious:

*Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.*

This might refer simply to nature's continuing growth in the secrecy of night ('Apples sweeten in the dark') or to some deeper significance of this scene.

Notice that the really significant part of the moment is the reuniting of mother and child. There is a subtle dramatic build-up to this, with intimations that something is being held back slightly: 'Things are getting ready/to happen ... But not yet.' The intervening images serve to heighten the wait for the finally revealed moment:

*A woman leans down to catch a child
who has run into her arms
this moment.*

This stanza is emphasised by having the only significant activity in the poem: 'leans', 'to catch', 'run'. With that activity, 'this moment' has arrived. The moment celebrated is maternal, a physical demonstration of the bond between mother and child, with all its connotation of love, security and protection.

The fact that this is happening everywhere, in suburbs all over the world, gives it a universal significance and lends a mythic quality to the gesture. The woman in the poem is connected to all women in history who must have performed a similar action.

So the poem is about dusk, a moment of transition in nature, but it is also about a universal moment in woman's experience: the confirmation of maternal love.

Ideas in the poem

- The ordinary beauty and richness of nature at the mysterious hour of dusk
- The suburbs can be poetic
- Significant moments are moments of human encounter
- A woman sharing in the universal experience of motherhood





THE POMEGRANATE

A reading of the poem

This poem deals with the value of myth to life, with the universal truth of legend. The poet explores this theme by recalling the interlinking of life and legend in her own experience.

She first encountered this particular legend when she was a child in exile in London, 'a city of fogs and strange consonants'. The story of separation and confinement in an alien world must have resonated powerfully with her own experience then. Another facet of the legend's theme, the mother's anguish for her lost child, struck a chord with the poet at a later stage in her life, when she 'walked out in a summer twilight/searching for my daughter at bed-time'. She also takes to heart one of the myth's bitter truths: the ravages of time and the seasons on nature and humankind:

*But I was Ceres then and I knew
winter was in store for every leaf
on every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.
And for me.*

The legend assists the poet in understanding her daughter. Insights so gained vary from the startlingly banal fact that 'a child can be/hungry' to the deeper understanding that she must allow her daughter space, the freedom to grow up: 'I will say nothing.' The stories of legend are archetypal and run parallel to human experience in all ages, and it is a worthwhile experience, an

enrichment, to move in and out of the different worlds and time zones through 'such/beautiful rifts in time'.

The poem also explores the relationship between mother and daughter. It paints a picture of intimate moments, as the mother views the teenage clutter with eyes of love:

*my child asleep beside her teen magazines,
her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.*

The poet shares with Ceres that fierce maternal protectiveness. Moving through the 'beautiful rift in time', the images of Persephone and her own daughter fuse and the poet's maternal instinct is to warn and protect the child then and the child now:

*... I could warn her. There is still a chance.
The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled stars are above ground.
It is another world.*

Yet she realises that the girl must experience the truth of the legend for herself, must be free to experience the temptation ('the papery flushed skin in her hand'), to make mistakes, to suffer pain. If the mother protects her too much, the wisdom of the legend ('the gift') will mean little: 'If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.' And what better inheritance can a mother bequeath than the eternal wisdom of myth and legend?

*... But what else
can a mother give her daughter but such
beautiful rifts in time?*





Issues raised in the poem

- The value of myth to life: how legend embodies universal truth, conveys vital understanding and illuminates the present
- The relationship between mother and daughter: the intensity of the bond, the fierce protectiveness, but also an awareness of the independence of the child and her need to experience life, truth, love and passion for herself

Imagery

Some images are used in a symbolic way. The pomegranate, for instance, has mythological significance, a fruit sacred to the underworld, drawing those who eat it down into darkness. Here it fulfils a similar function, with overtones, perhaps, of sexual temptation:

*... She will hold
the papery flushed skin in her hand.
And to her lips.*

Does the uncut fruit also have connotations of the temptation and loss in the Garden of Eden? Is the mother attempting to protect her daughter from the griefs associated with sexuality?

Much of the imagery is of darkness, twilight, the underworld, etc.: 'hell', 'the crackling dusk of/the underworld', 'a city of fogs', 'twilight', 'It is winter/and the stars are hidden', and 'The road is flint-coloured'. This motif of darkness is associated with both the legend and the poet's present experience and creates a somewhat bleak atmosphere. But it is a fitting setting for the poet's anxiety and the pain she suffers in conferring freedom on her daughter.

The modern bedroom, if not 'the place of death' as in the legend, is still 'full of unshed tears'.





LOVE

Background

'Love' is one of a sequence of poems entitled 'Legends' that explores parallels between ancient myths and modern life. In some of the poems, such as 'Love' and 'The Pomegranate', the exploration of myth is used to deepen an understanding of woman as mother. Other poems explore themes of faithfulness, the creation of images of love, the fragility of all life, etc. In general, the point being made is that legends, myths and such stories highlight the similarity of human experience throughout the ages and show a line of continuity from present days to ancient past.

Towards the end of the sequence, Boland examines the end of this continuum line, her own family history, when she is prompted by personal memories or significant objects, such as an heirloom brooch or other keepsake.

In classical Greek and Roman mythology a number of the stories feature visits by the living to the underworld, Hades, the kingdom of the dead. So 'the hero' who 'crossed on his way to hell' might be the hero Odysseus, who conjured up the spirits of his dead companions by offering sacrifice on the banks of the River Ocean. But it is even more likely that the speaker refers to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, a tale of the anguished separation of ardent lovers found in Virgil's fourth 'Georgic'. Orpheus went down into Hades to rescue his beloved Eurydice, who had been killed by a snake bite. His songs to her on his lyre had held all spellbound, and he was allowed to leave with her on condition that he did not look back. But:

*He halts. Eurydice, his own is now on the lip of
Daylight. Alas! he forgot. His purpose broke. He looked back.
His labour was lost, the pact that he had made with the
merciless king
Annulled. Three times did thunder peal over the pool of
Avernus
'Who,' she cried, 'has doomed me to misery, who has doomed
us?'
Thus she spoke: and at once from his sight, like a wisp of smoke
Thinned into air, was gone.
Wildly he grasped at shadows, waiting to say much more,
But she did not see him; nor would the ferryman of the Inferno
Let him again cross the fen that lay between them.*

The story goes on to chart the months of weeping and mourning suffered by Orpheus, wandering through caves and forests, where his sorrow touched even the wild animals and the trees. Boland uses the myth as a framework for exploring ideas of love and loss and the impossibility of recovering the passionate intensity of first love.

Layers of meaning

As with many of Boland's poems, this has a number of layers of significance. At one level it is a love poem in which the speaker reflects on her present loving relationship with her husband but still yearns for the intensity of their early love, when they first lived in this American town with their young family many years before. But the speaker's thoughts are drawn continually to classical myths and legends in which she finds experiences parallel to her own. She uses these mythical allusions to explore the infant's





brush with death, the nature of her relationship with her husband and her female consciousness and role. She identifies with the female voice in the myth, thereby establishing the continuity and importance of the female experience throughout the ages. This is a poem about love, about family, about female experience and about the centrality of myth to our lives.

The poem has a number of overlapping timeframes: present, recent past and ancient time.

Themes and issues

Love

Different facets of love are touched on in this poem. The passion and delicacy of first physical love is most keenly registered:

*... And we discovered there
love had the feather and muscle of wings
and had come to live with us,
a brother of fire and air.*

The bird metaphor conveys the elemental nature, the naturalness, the strength and grace of love. Indeed, there is an almost nostalgic yearning for the intensity of this early love: 'Will we ever live so intensely again?', etc. With great honesty she admits her need to cast her lover in a heroic mould, to see the beloved as hero. Here she is creating myths, manufacturing an image of love and lover, a classical hero in suburban America: 'I see you as a hero in a text', 'with snow on the shoulders of your coat/and a car passing with its headlights on ... the image blazing and the edges gilded'. The love she speaks of in the present tense is described in terms of language – love seen as communication:

*We love each other still ...
we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.*

Yet a problem is hinted at here. We have less than perfect communication:

*But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.
You walk away and I cannot follow.*

The underlying mythical allusions augment this sense of failure, as they all deal with separation and loss and the creation of insufferable barriers between lovers. Thus, the love between speaker and husband here carries connotations of failure, of unheard words.

She also deals with love in a family context, amid kitchen tables and threatened tragedy:

*We had two infant children one of whom
was touched by death in this town
and spared*

This is the quiet familial love of the suffering mother who can only watch and wait.

The significance of myth and legend

Human affairs are seen in the long tradition of history, even prehistory and mythology. Love, death, pain and separation are the universal human experience. The poet uses mythical allusions to create an awareness of the continuity of human experiences and to deepen an understanding of some of them. For example, the threatened loss of her child is explored through a parallel myth. The sense of loss, the separation of death, the awful failure of





communication and the waste of life's opportunities are all evoked by reference to myth.

*... and when the hero
was hailed by his comrades in hell
their mouths opened and their voices failed and
there is no knowing what they would have asked
about a life they had shared and lost.*

Is the effect of this to distance and lessen the mother's anguish?

The experience of love is seen in the heroic terms of myth and legend, as we have seen: 'I see you as a hero in a text', etc. It is as if the ordinary, everyday reality of love is insufficient and there is a need for the heroic, the superhuman, the extraordinary quality of myth in human lives. She imagines the hero-husband edged with an aura like a god of mythology, though it is merely the effect of car headlights behind him – 'the image blazing and the edges gilded'. But perhaps the most significant aspect of myth is that it allows the speaker to tap into female experience and the universal female voice.

The female voice

The secondary role of woman is much in evidence here, yielding precedence and importance to the male hero, viewing her partner as a 'hero in a text', etc. She is silent, voiceless, but longing 'to cry out the epic question/my dear companion'. She is the unheard voice of woman throughout myth and history: 'But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.'

Even her role as mother here is essentially powerless in the face of the threatened death of her infant. She adopts a passive, stoical

attitude, as if life and death are completely in the hands of fate. The child 'was touched by death ... and spared ... Our child is healed.' Perhaps this episode could be seen as referring back to an earlier theme of Boland's in 'The Journey': the fears of women with sick children.

Overall, the poet is asserting the universality of female experience, whether it be in ancient Greece and Rome or modern America, on the banks of the mythical River Styx or a bridge over the Iowa River. By identifying with female voices of myth, and particularly with that of the abandoned Eurydice in the last lines ('You walk away and I cannot follow'), she again registers the powerlessness of women.

Imagery

The poem opens and closes with images of darkness and shadow. The prevailing darkness and Stygian gloom of the first stanza ('Dark falls ... Dusk has hidden the bridge ... hell') recurs in the final lines ('words are shadows'). The poem is bracketed by gloom, which qualifies and balances the enthusiasm of the love theme. In contrast to this darkness, the hero is silhouetted in light ('the image blazing and the edges gilded'), so we get a primal contrast of colours, reflecting love and death, good and evil. Family love and life are mediated in images of ordinary domesticity: an 'old apartment', a 'kitchen', 'an Amish table', 'a view'. References to speech and dumbness abound. Death is pictured as voicelessness, love as plain speaking, and the failure of love as a failure of speech.

Perhaps the most exciting metaphor is that of love as a bird, communicating the natural energy and beauty of the emotion ('love had the feather and muscle of wings').





Form

The poem is written in loose, non-rhyming stanzas, in which the natural rhythms of speech are employed to carry the reminiscences and the personal narrative. Might it be significant that the stanzas gradually diminish in size? The first three are of six or seven lines, then one of five lines, three stanzas of four lines, and finally a two-line stanza to finish. Might this mirror the diminishing scope of love as treated in the poem?





OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES IN THIS SELECTION OF BOLAND'S POETRY

Boland's view of Irish history and the idea of nation

- Boland deals with the reality of Irish history, the familiar story of oppression, defeat and death ('The Famine Road'). The sense of national identity that comes across from 'The Famine Road' speaks of victimisation, being downtrodden and living out pointless lives: see also the suffering in 'Outside History'.
- Opposed to that view is the male-created myth, involving heroic struggle, battle and glorious defeat: see the image of the dying patriot immortalised by art in 'An Old Steel Engraving'. The woman poet feels excluded from that cultural tradition – 'One of us who turns away'.
- Boland resists this mythicisation of history and instead insists on the necessity of confronting the reality, facing the unburied dead of history and laying them to rest ('Outside History').
- She shows concern for the unrecorded history, for the significance of lives lived on the margins of history, away from the centre of power, far from the limelight of action. She mourns the forgotten lives in 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited'.
- In her prose writings, Boland explores the idea of nation and the difficulties it produces for her as a woman poet.

So it was with me. For this very reason, early on as a poet, certainly in my twenties, I realised that the Irish nation as an existing construct in Irish poetry was not available to me. I would not have been able to articulate it at that point, but at some preliminary level I already knew that the anguish and power of that woman's gesture on Achill, with its suggestive hinterland of pain, were not something I could predict or rely on in Irish poetry. There were glimpses here and there; sometimes more than that. But all too often, when I was searching for such an inclusion, what I found was a rhetoric of imagery which alienated me: a fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both. It was not a comfortable realisation. There was nothing clear-cut about my feelings. I had tribal ambivalences and doubts, and even then I had an uneasy sense of the conflict which awaited me. On the one hand, I knew that as a poet I could not easily do without the idea of a nation. Poetry in every time draws on that reserve. On the other, I could not as a woman accept the nation formulated for me by Irish poetry and its traditions. At one point it even looked to me as if the whole thing might be made up of irreconcilable differences. At the very least it seemed to me that I was likely to remain an outsider in my own national literature, cut off from its archive, at a distance from its energy. Unless, that is, I could repossess it. This proposal is about that conflict and that repossession and about the fact that repossession itself is not a static or single act. Indeed, the argument which describes it may itself be no more than a part of it.





Violence in society

- 'The War Horse' explores suburban, middle-class attitudes to political violence. It is really a psychological exploration of the theme 'how we respond to violence'.
- Race memory and the old antagonisms to English colonial rule still exist just beneath the surface ('The War Horse').
- The real human consequences of political violence are portrayed in 'Child of Our Time'. The poet acts as a conscience of our society here.
- Violence is seen as the result of a failure of language, an inability to communicate ('Child of Our Time').

The significance of myth

- In one sense, myth is seen to play a positive and enabling role, even in modern life. It gives the poet a framework for exploring human truths such as themes of love and death ('Love'). The wisdom of myths enables her to deal sensitively with her growing daughter ('The Pomegranate'). Mythical stories demonstrate the universality of human experience. The poet sometimes feels part of this tradition by doing ordinary things and so shares in the long history of woman's experience and becomes a part of myth or universal truth ('This Moment').
- But created images can be false, limiting and confining. Idealised or mythicised images of woman are fixed in time, unable to love, breed, sweat or grow old (see 'Time and Violence').
- Boland often challenges the image of woman in mythology (as well as in art and literature), particularly when it shows

woman as marginalised, silenced or subservient to her husband the hero, as in 'Love'.

- History is laced with myths. The unreality, the coldness and the distance of myth from real lives is symbolised in the stars of 'Outside History'.

The experience of being a woman

Boland's strong feminine perspective lends an extra dimension of insight to all her themes. But she also considers specific issues relating to the portrayal and the treatment of women.

- The image versus the reality: 'The Shadow Doll' explores that false image of woman, specifically nineteenth-century woman, but it has universal relevance. The image is one of elegance, dignified control of emotions ('an airless glamour') and suppressed sexuality ('discreet about/visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts'). Women are forced to conform to a false image, repressed, metaphorically enclosed in glass, locked away.
- The image of woman in art, literature and mythology is often idealised or stereotyped. The mythological allusions in 'Love' conjure up an image of woman as powerless and silent, yearning in vain for a heroic love.
- The sufferings of woman are equated with the oppression of the nation ('The Famine Road').
- The traditional role of woman is validated in such poems as 'This Moment', which show woman as mother. That maternal gesture of catching the child in her arms is the key to the poem. The protectiveness of mothers features in 'The





Pomegranate' and her wisdom is displayed in allowing the daughter the freedom to learn for herself.

- Woman as lover features in 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me' and 'Love'.
- Suburban woman features in many of the poems, e.g. 'The War Horse' and 'This Moment'.
- The puzzling relationship between men and women features in 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me': the mistimings, the tempests of love, the sensual allure. Love diminishes in time, like the importance of the fan. This makes an interesting alternative view to the blinkered one of idyllic romance.
- Boland challenges the patriarchal tradition of Irish poetry. In *Object Lessons* she elaborated on her objections to the images of woman in literature:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture.

The trouble was [that] these images did good service as ornaments. In fact, they had a wide acceptance as ornaments by readers of Irish poetry. Women in such poems were frequently referred to approvingly as mythic, emblematic. But to me these passive and simplified women

seemed a corruption. For they were not decorations, they were not ornaments. However distorted these images, they had their roots in a suffered truth. What had happened? How had the women of our past – the women of a long struggle and a terrible survival – undergone such a transformation? How had they suffered Irish history and rooted themselves in the speech and memory of the Achill woman, only to reemerge in Irish poetry as fictive queens and national sibyls?

The more I thought about it, the more uneasy I became. The wrath and grief of Irish history seemed to me, as it did to many, one of our true possessions. Women were part of that wrath, had endured that grief. It seemed to me a species of human insult that at the end of all, in certain Irish poems, they should become elements of style rather than aspects of truth.

Ageing

In the later poems, such as 'The Pomegranate', Boland is conscious, in a personal sense, of the ageing process.

Representation in art

In other poems, Boland is particularly concerned with the representation of women in painting.

Striving for truth

In all the areas explored – history, art and love – Boland is striving for truth and searching out the reality rather than the glittering image.





Poetry in the suburbs

- A good deal of her poetry is set in the suburbs, a setting not traditionally associated with poetic aspiration.
- The fragile nature of the beauty and order created in the suburbs is brought out in 'The War Horse'.
- The toy house neatness of suburbia is no match for the wild, elemental attractions of nature in 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland'.
- In the later poems we encounter a romantic evocation of a suburban twilight ('This Moment'). Nature has colonised the suburbs ('Stars rise./Moths flutter' and 'One window is yellow as butter').
- But the real bleakness of the suburban street is not hidden: 'The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured' ('The Pomegranate').





DEVELOPING A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE POETRY OF EAVAN BOLAND

Think about the following points and make notes for yourself or discuss them in groups.

1. Which of Boland's poems do you particularly like?
2. On reading Boland, what were the main issues the poems raised for you?
3. What settings, colours and moods do you associate with Boland's poetry?
4. What general understanding of the poet did you form?
 - What is important in her life?
 - How does she see herself?
 - Is she a happy or a sad person? etc.
5. Did reading her poetry add anything to your understanding of Irish history? What, and in which poems?
6. Consider her thoughts on the treatment of women in society and in history. Do you think she makes an important contribution to feminist thinking?
7. What insights did she give you into suburban life?
8. Would you consider her a radical poet? Explain your views.
9. Why do you think we should read her poetry?
10. What aspects of Boland's poetry strike a chord with you: particular themes, settings, point of view on the world, the images she creates, the feeling and tones in the poems? What appeals to you?





QUESTIONS

1. Outline three significant issues dealt with in the poetry of Eavan Boland. Explore in detail the poet's treatment of any one of these issues.
2. Do you find the poet's view of Irish history particularly bleak? Comment.
3. 'The attempt to shed the constricting husk of myth and enter the nightmare of history is an important theme in Boland's poetry' (R. Smith). Discuss.
4. 'Boland's poetry shows a consciousness of the sustaining power of cultural heritage, whether through primitive Irish superstition or classical mythology.' Discuss this statement in light of the poems you have read.
5. 'Boland's poetry shows how idealised images of women need to be set beside the reality.' Discuss.
6. 'While she takes a feminist line, maternity and suburbia feature prominently in Boland's poetry.' Consider this statement in light of at least two poems you have read.
7. 'The relationship between mother and daughter is an important preoccupation in Boland's' poetry.' Discuss, with reference to at least two of the poems you have read.
8. 'Boland is always conscious of the natural context in which human events occur.' Consider Boland as a nature poet.
9. 'Boland's imagination thrives in the shadows.' Would you agree?
10. 'Finding significant moments of human experience is the goal of much of Boland's poetry.' Discuss this statement with reference to at least three poems.





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PAUL DURCAN

Notes and Explorations: John G. Fahy

HL 2020

OL 2020

HL 2021

OL 2021

POEMS PRESCRIBED FOR BOTH HL AND OL IN GREEN

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The Difficulty that is Marriage

Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail

Parents

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"Windfall", 8 Parnell Hill, Cork

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Durcan was born in Dublin to parents from County Mayo: John Durcan, a barrister and judge, and Sheila MacBride Durcan, a solicitor. He was raised between Dublin and Turlough, County Mayo, where his aunt ran a pub.

He began to study law and economics in UCD but left in 1964. For a number of years he lived between London, Barcelona and Dublin. When he worked for the North Thames Gas Board in London he used to visit the Tate Gallery at lunchtime to view the paintings of Francis Bacon in particular.

He married Nessa O'Neill. They settled in Cork in 1970 and have two daughters. She worked as a teacher in a prison and he completed a degree in archaeology and medieval history at UCC. The marriage ended in 1984.

Durcan has travelled widely, as the titles of his volumes demonstrate. He has been writer in residence in universities, including the University of Ulster and Trinity College Dublin. He has collaborated with artists and musicians. He was commissioned to write poetry in response to paintings by the National Gallery of Ireland (*Crazy About Women*, 1991) and by the National Gallery, London (*Give Me Your Hand*, 1994). He held the Irish Chair of Poetry from 2004 to 2007. As a performing poet, he is known for the mesmeric quality of his readings.

Among his many volumes of poetry are the following: *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor* (1975), *The Berlin Wall Café* (1985), *Going Home to Russia* (1987), *Daddy, Daddy* (1990), *Greetings to Our*

Friends in Brazil (1999), *The Laughter of Mothers* (2007) and *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have My Being* (2012). A selection of his work, *Life Is a Dream: 40 Years Reading Poems 1967–2007*, was published in 2009.

Paul Durcan has won many awards for his poetry, including the Patrick Kavanagh Award, the Irish American Cultural Institute Poetry Award, the Heinemann Award and the Whitbread Poetry Award for *Daddy, Daddy*.





NESSA

A reading of the poem

This is an autobiographical poem about the poet's first meeting with Nessa O'Neill, to whom he was later married. It attempts to recreate the experience of falling in love. He may be falling, but it is she who takes the initiative in a meeting that is highly charged with sexual suggestiveness:

*She took me by the index finger
And dropped me in her well.*

He obviously falls for her, as is reported in the refrain of the first two stanzas:

*And that was a whirlpool, that was a whirlpool,
And I very nearly drowned.*

The metaphor of the whirlpool catches the confusion of swirling emotions and thoughts he eventually abandons himself to: 'And I hopped into the Irish Sea'.

The third stanza explicitly mentions falling. It also moves on from the frantic movement of the first two stanzas (hopping and dropping) to a still image of them lying side by side and to that serious, reflective moment when he recognises the depth of his feelings:

*I'd have lain in the grass with her all my life
With Nessa*

This simple rustic image of love carries all the sense of genuine commitment without any of the public social displays of

engagements, weddings, etc. It is also worth noting that the whirlpool is personalised in this stanza; he recognises that she is the whirlpool: 'She was a whirlpool, she was a whirlpool'.

The growing personalisation and the deepening of involvement continues in the final stanza. Up to this Nessa has been addressed in the distant third person – 'I met her', 'she fell down', 'she was a whirlpool'. But in the final stanza she is addressed directly and personally with caring endearments – 'O Nessa my dear'. He pleads with her to stay with him:

*Will you stay with me on the rocks?
Will you come for me into the Irish Sea
And for me let your red hair down?*

At one level this is a personal sensual statement in language that reminds one of a ballad. But the references to the Irish Sea and letting her red hair down could be read as giving Nessa an almost cultural, mythical significance with other famous Irish female figures. The final appeal to happiness ever after has connotations of American romantic films:

*And then we will ride into Dublin City
In a taxi-cab wrapped up in dust.*

Is there a suggestion here that he is aware of the fragile nature of this romantic moment after all if he thinks of it as a screen image? However one reads it, it is clear that he is submerged in love: 'And I am very nearly drowned'.

The slight alterations to the refrain over the course of the poem carry the story of the relationship as it is personalised and





deepened. Indeed, there is an echo of Patrick Kavanagh here, who was a friend at this time and was quite influential on Durcan's poetry. Kavanagh also used the changing refrain not just as a musical feature, but also to carry and develop ideas. This is the first stanza of Kavanagh's poem 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town':

*If ever you go to Dublin town
In a hundred years or so
Inquire for me in Baggot Street
And what I was like to know.
O he was a queer one,
Fol dol the di do,
He was a queer one
I tell you.*

The refrain changes over the poem; here is the last stanza:

*O he was a lone one,
Fol dol the di do
Yet he lived happily
I tell you.*

Perhaps Durcan is paying tribute to Kavanagh.

In terms of imagery, this is a highly visual, even cinematic poem. The whirlpool image carries the maelstrom of emotions that is love, but it is an image that changes subtly but significantly as the poem progresses in order to carry the developing story. A succession of unexplained concrete images flicker across the screen of this poem, carrying the narrative in a visual mode – the index finger, the well, the pants, the sea, the field, the rocks, the sea, the red hair and finally that taxi-cab. Just as in a film, the

images carry the narrative as much as the dialogue/commentary does.

The sea is a recurring image in Durcan's poetry. Images of water generally – sea, rivers, rain – occur often. He finds water therapeutic and a positive force, as he said in an interview in the *Irish Times* (10 February 1990): 'To me everything that is good is water connected or based, even attitudes to life, glowing into things ... I'm a fish between the lines.' Water is associated with baptism and with birth, so it is connected with new life and new beginnings, and here with new love.

It is worth reading this romantic love poem in conjunction with "'Windfall", 8 Parnell Hill, Cork', which records the later stages of the relationship and finally, the end of the marriage.





THE GIRL WITH THE KEYS TO PEARSE'S COTTAGE

A reading of the poem

At one level this is a poem about a teenager's infatuation with a girl he met when he was 16. She had a dark beauty and an easy smile: 'Her dark hair was darker because her smile was so bright'. He found her physically alluring as she

*used linger on the sill of a window;
Hands by her side and brown legs akimbo*

Watching her from a distance, from 'below in the field', he used to sit in the rushes and compile 'poems of passion for Cáit Killann'.

There is a sense of distance about her. She is observed from afar. In the poem there is no record of them actually speaking. She is at a distance from the world of Connemara, as if she doesn't understand it or indeed belong, as she sat 'Looking toward our strange world wide-eyed'. And of course, she will not belong and shortly will be at an even greater distance:

*Our world was strange because it had no future;
She was America-bound at summer's end.*

Despite her bright smile there was a sorrow in her eyes that marked her out: 'El Greco eyes blaze black'. Yet she was real, not a figure of myth, and the poet celebrates her rural, working-class family origins and the proud reality of her mortal existence: 'your Connemara postman's daughter's proudly mortal face'. In language that has echoes of the traditional Irish lament for the

departing exile, Durcan records his own sorrow at her necessary departure:

*O Cáit Killann, O Cáit Killann,
You have gone with your keys from your own native place.*

Cáit Killann is a real girl, but she is also many an Irish girl of the 1960s, indeed of Irish history. Thus, this is also a political poem. Pearse's Cottage was a political shrine to one of the founding fathers of modern Ireland, one of the executed leaders of the 1916 rebellion against British colonial rule. The Spartan simplicity of the early twentieth-century rural dwelling is recorded, as is the sense of peace experienced by Durcan:

*I recall two windows and cosmic peace
Of bare brown rooms and on whitewashed walls*

But it shows signs of neglect when seen up close – 'I recall wet thatch and peeling jambs', just as the hopes and dreams of that first Provisional Government in 1916 to 'pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation, cherishing all the children of the nation equally' have also fallen into neglect. It is painfully ironic that Cáit Killann, the girl with the keys to Pearse's Cottage, metaphorically the keeper of his memory and his dreams and one of the children of his nation, will be forced to emigrate for a livelihood 'at summer's end'. Durcan is keenly aware of the contradictions involved in ostensibly venerating the founding fathers and yet failing to fulfil their ambitions for the children of the nation almost fifty years later. Underlying this poem is a layer of criticism of the political hypocrisy and double-think that Durcan felt was prevalent in Irish society.





THE DIFFICULTY THAT IS MARRIAGE

A reading of the poem

This is a poem about the difficulties of marriage, but it is also a love poem. Altogether it is an interesting, deep and thoughtful look at the complexities of marriage.

As the title says, the poem does deal with the difficulties of marriage. The depth and pervasive nature of disagreement is laid out clearly in the first line in a precise, emotionless, almost mathematical formulation – ‘We disagree to disagree, we divide, we differ’.

We can discern the differences in their personalities as they lie in bed. She is ‘faraway curled up in sleep’. In an almost feline image, like a sleeping cat, she is tranquil in sleep, separate and distant, self-sufficient, content. He, on the other hand, is wide awake, worrying at ideas, evaluating himself, questioning: ‘I array the moonlit ceiling with a mosaic of question marks’.

The artistic formulation of this image (‘array the ceiling’, ‘mosaic of question marks’) attempts to hide or soften the trauma of self-questioning but doesn’t really succeed as he carries on relentlessly: ‘I have my troubles and I shall always have them’ (probably a reference to the depression he suffered from and has written openly about; see the poem ‘Sport’). He explores his philosophy of life, which is a spiritual one: ‘I am no brave pagan proud of my mortality’. He also refers to ‘this changeling earth’. From a religious perspective, life on earth is an imperfect form or poor substitute (‘changeling’) for the perfection of Eternal Life,

but he would prefer to live with her than ‘exchange my troubles for a changeless kingdom’. This is his dilemma; his decision is this compromise. He would prefer to be with her and be troubled than to have an untroubled life without her. These are weighty thoughts for a sleepless night.

On the other hand, his feelings for and thoughts about her are clear and unambiguous, as he says, ‘How was it I was so lucky to have ever met you?’ He addresses her as ‘my sleeping friend’, which implies a close social and emotional supportive relationship. His view of her is balanced. He doesn’t worship her blindly, but neither does he think that she has any faults:

*But I do not put you on a pedestal or throne;
You must have your faults but I do not see them.*

Twice he asserts that he wishes to live with her forever and concludes that living with her would be his ideal Eternal Life: ‘If it were with you, I should live for ever.’

So the difficulty or dilemma that is marriage is that they disagree constantly, yet despite this he wishes to spend his life with her. This is the difficulty with all marriages (as the title implies) – how to accommodate difference, whether in the form of disagreements, personality differences, etc.

A comparison with ‘Nessa’ may serve to clarify an understanding of this poem. ‘Nessa’ is madly energetic, sexy, zany, humorous and full of impetuosity. What they have in common is emotional transparency and honesty. But this poem is more rational, more contemplative, indeed, more spiritual. Perhaps they should both be seen as marking different stages in a relationship. ‘Nessa’





catches the uncontrollable, headlong excitement of falling in love. 'The Difficulty That Is Marriage' explores the everyday, ordinary, more mature stage of the relationship and provides a more realistic yet still hopeful account.

This is neither a standard love poem nor a standard sonnet, but the openness, honesty and insight that Durcan brings to his writing about family life and marriage was new to Irish poetry of the time.





WIFE WHO SMASHED TELEVISION GETS JAIL

A reading of the poem

Durcan is known for his provocative titles. Consider some of the other such titles he has used: 'Making Love Outside Áras an Uachtaráin', 'The Head Transplant', 'The Married Man Who Fell in Love with a Semi-State Body' and 'The Woman Who Keeps Her Breasts in the Back Garden'. Many of them read like the more lurid and exaggerated headlines of tabloid newspapers and their main purpose is to catch readers' attention. This poem is structured as a piece of court report journalism, much of it in the form of direct quotation from the husband's evidence (which includes the reported speech of his wife) and also the judge's verdict statement.

It is obviously a spoof, a parody of a courtroom scene. The humour comes from the cleverly crafted writing, particularly in the way the style of the speeches are made to resemble real courtroom dialogue while the content of the speeches and the situation itself are edging towards the absurd. This disconnection is at the heart of the comedy.

The husband is careful to use the most obsequious form of court address, 'my Lord', every time he speaks to the judge. He cleverly, if ungrammatically, tries to paint himself in the best possible light: 'Me and the kids were peaceably watching *Kojak*'. Notice that he is careful to introduce the term 'peaceably'. In contrast, through the imagery and language he uses, the husband portrays

the wife as unreasonable, violent and aggressive: 'she marched into the living room and declared ... She'd put her boot through the screen ... and smashed in the television'. He portrays himself as most reasonable, the one who is discommoded by all this: 'I had to bring the kids round to my mother's place'. He introduces the irrelevance about his mother's liking for *Kojak*, probably to suggest, obliquely, that if the grandmothers of Ireland were fond of *Kojak*, there couldn't be much wrong with it. This is a clever manipulation of the incident to show himself as the wronged party. To give his account added veracity, he is able to give the exact time of the incident; he can even quote the words of *Kojak*! His corroborating evidence is linked to a police detective, albeit a fictional one. How surreal is that? But it is also very humorous.

The wife's reported speech is exaggerated to appear ludicrous and daft:

*... I didn't get married to a television
And I don't see why my kid's or anybody else's kids
Should have a television for a father or mother*

She finishes by making a sensible point about the need for real communication and shared family activity:

*We'd be much better off all down in the pub talking
Or playing bar-billiards –*

But the judge completely misses the point, saying 'wives who preferred bar-billiards to family television ... Were a threat to the family'. Again, the humour in the judge's speech comes from the disconnection between the pretentious or serious-sounding phrases and the actual sense of the content, which is nonsense.





We expect to hear phrases from a judgment such as ‘threat to the family’ or to hear the family described as ‘the basic unit of the society’, as these convey the establishment’s conservative social philosophy. But in the particular combinations used, they constitute utterly hilarious nonsense: ‘As indeed the television itself could be said to be the basic unit of the family’. Ironically, he doesn’t seem to realise that he is breaking up the basic unit of the family by sending the mother to jail!

The judiciary is the target of Durcan’s lethal satire here. In a patriarchal system the judge is completely taken in by the husband’s manipulation and doesn’t give due consideration to the serious point made by the wife. The pretentious language he uses is revealed as utter nonsense. His arrogance is clear: ‘Leave to appeal was refused.’ The power of the state, even over family, is absolute. This judge identifies with the new Irish nation, as indicated by the use of the Irish version of his name. The judiciary, as the oppressive arm of a conservative Irish state system, is a favourite *bête noire* of Durcan’s. At one level this is personal, as he had a difficult relationship with his father, who was a judge, but he also feels that the political system of the state stifles the free expression of individuals and enforces conformism.

Behind the fun is a piece of serious social criticism. The growing availability of early social media such as television in the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland brought American popular culture to Irish people and it had a significant impact. American expressions entered the everyday language. The husband can quote *Kojak* verbatim. Also, TV has replaced a good deal of human interaction and active family engagement in sports and other activities.

Carried to extremes, this is now regarded as a serious issue in the healthy development of individuals and families. Durcan is casting a keen critical eye over social developments in Ireland at the time. Behind the humour is a moralist promoting family values.





PARENTS

A reading of the poem

Caring for a newborn child is both a beautiful and a scary experience. Merely to hold such a tiny person is scary. Because communication is primitive and basic, parents are extra vigilant, constantly checking on the child even when he or she is asleep. Durcan is attempting to articulate the strangeness of this experience of a new independent life in the house, for the parents and also for the child. To do this, he makes it more strange still; he exaggerates the barriers between parents and child. He uses the sea metaphor to constitute this barrier. She is under the sea and they are above it. This is not a totally unconnected leap of the imagination, as the child has had a type of fish-like existence in the womb. He uses this metaphor to explore the different perspectives of parents and child, as viewed from above and beneath the water: 'A child's face is a drowned face'.

This dramatic opening line, shocking because of its suggestions of death rather than new life, sets the scene for the notion of the strangeness of this experience. First shock over, it does have an element of truth, as the child has come from the sea of the womb.

Let's first consider the experience from the parents' perspective, as the title of the poem directs us. They feel 'Estranged from her'. She was inside one of them, now she is outside both, a separate being, uncommunicative in sleep. They cannot reach her, cannot access her. It is as if they are 'locked out of their own home'. If she looked up she would see 'Their mouths open'. Is this in awe

of this new life or in confusion? 'Their foreheads' are 'furrowed'. Does this suggest worry or are they merely thinking, processing information about her and this entirely new situation? 'Through the night, stranded, they stare'. 'Stranded' suggests that they have no option but to be there, such is the strength of the parent/child bond. But to remain through the night is extreme, an indication of the intensity of their feelings.

If she looked up through the sea she would see 'Pursed-up orifices of fearful fish', a grotesque and frightening image. The world must be very strange and indeed frightening to a new child. Sometimes they get frightened by an unaccustomed face; it is referred to as 'making strange'. 'Their big ears are fins behind glass' – it is as if she sees the parents as fish in a tank, an upside down view of the world. There is much paediatric truth in the distorted view described here, as babies do not develop clear, focused vision for many months. Not only is her vision distorted, but her vocal communication is not effective either, as her plaintive dream calls indicate:

And in her sleep she is calling out to them

Father, Father

Mother, Mother

But they cannot hear her

The poem attempts to convey the strangeness of having and being a newborn child. The inability to communicate is a major factor in this experience; the parents feel themselves excluded from her world and she has a distorted view of theirs. The central metaphor of the sea as a barrier to sound and vision – imaginative, original in





the context and somewhat distressing – is central to creating this experience.

This is a most unusual poem but one that carries real insights into the helplessness of parents as they look at their sleeping child.





EN FAMILLE, 1979

A reading of the poem

Despite its brevity, this epigrammatic poem manages to convey a great depth of feeling about the poet's bleak memory of childhood. It concerns childhood in the family setting, 'en famille', yet the images used are of school, which suggests how he feels about his family childhood.

It is a 'dark' school, so no bright interesting ideas, no illumination there, no sense of fun or enjoyment, not a happy place. Usually in a school life is highly organised, controlled, regulated. Students are forced to engage with a set curriculum over which they have no control. It is not a place to chill out, relax or be yourself, 'where tiny is tiny, and massive is massive'. This carries connotations of feeling insignificant, vulnerable, threatened, kept down, even frightened. It is certainly not a place where he felt fostered and encouraged. Altogether, the memory is of a bleak, controlled family environment where he felt insignificant and under threat.

But this could be read in other ways. What do you think?





MADMAN

A reading of the poem

At a certain stage of young people's lives, parents are often felt to be a source of embarrassment to them. While local eccentric or even more 'individual' adults can be viewed dispassionately or with amusement, the perceived eccentricities of one's own parents can make one squirm with self-consciousness. But the term 'madman' is at the extreme end of the scale and gives us a clue about the depth of the writer's feelings. However, the humorous formulation of the epigram lightens this somewhat. How do you read it?





“WINDFALL”, 8 PARNELL HILL, CORK

A reading of the poem

In the first section (lines 1–37), Durcan outlines the importance of this home to him and how he feels about it: how privileged and lucky he is; the creative impulse of the view; the perfect family atmosphere it enables; the tranquillity it enables him to experience despite the inequalities in society; and how it is a lifeline for a family:

*I felt elected, steeped, sovereign to be able to say –
I am going home.*

He feels privileged, made independent, but most important of all, lucky (‘steeped’). That’s why they named their home ‘Windfall’, in contrast to the neighbours, who named theirs as religious tributes or for romantic aspirations. It was, for him, a dream come true – ‘Dreaming that life is a dream which is real’. The views foster the creative impulse. The power station and the car assembly work may not be what inspired Cézanne, but nevertheless, ‘The industrial vista was my Mont Sainte-Victoire’.

His family make the perfect, relaxed picture:

*While my children sat on my knees watching TV
Their mother, my wife, reclined on the couch*

The tranquillity he feels is similar to that experienced by Buddhist monks in their meditation ‘In lotus monasteries high up in the Hindu Kush’, even though he is aware of the violence in the city and the financial inequality in the country:

*Having a home of your own can give to a family
A chance in a lifetime to transcend death.*

This is an enormous claim to make. Perhaps he means that it gives a sense of identity not just to a family, but also to generations of that family. Future members will have a sense of their origins, their *áit dúchais* – who and where they are from. Home gives a sense of family identity that lives on. Certainly the sense of place has been important in his conceptualisation of home in this first section. He has included a great deal of detail on this, whether it be the view from the window, the character of the city (‘as intimate and homicidal as a Little Marseille’) or the significance of the neighbours’ house names.

The second section (lines 38–75) also opens with a focus on the sense of place – on the commercial aspect of the river and the airport but also on the romantic, natural beauty of the scene:

*Skylines drifting in and out of skylines in the cloudy valley;
Firelight at dusk, and city lights*

But the view swiftly pulls back to the living room and the family. This section is mainly about family and family history; there is a sense that family consists of generations. The poet is poring over family photograph albums that record his history:

*A room wallpapered in books and family photograph albums
Chronicling the adventures and metamorphoses of family life*

His life has been chronicled, almost always as part of family: a photograph of his baptism with Mammy, excursions in Ireland and the UK with Granny, a group photo in First Infants, holidays in





France with Mammy and Daddy, seaside holidays in Ireland, trips to Irish sites of historical interest, and finally back to France, where, probably independent of family, he visits cultural sites and is seen weeping at Auvers, possibly at the grave of Vincent van Gogh. His was a well-travelled, cultured childhood and youth, recorded in family photos. All this reminiscing happens in the context of his current family:

*My children looking over my shoulder, exhilarated as I was,
Their mother presiding at our ritual from a distance –
The far side of the hearthrug, diffidently, proudly.*

In the third section (lines 76–101) the aspect of the home that is explored is that of an uninhibited place, a private space of freedom from conventions:

*In which climbing the walls is as natural
As making love on the stairs*

Here, the adults don't answer the phone:

*Initiating, instead, a yet more subversive kiss –
A kiss they have perhaps never attempted before –*

It is a place where the children are as safe and supported as in the womb:

*Our children swam about our home
As if it was their private sea,
Their own unique symbiotic fluid
Of which their parents also partook.*

These children are not reared to be inhibited, as, through the banisters,

*The pyjama-clad children solemnly watching
Their parents at play, jumping up and down in support*

He concludes that 'The most subversive unit in society is the human family'. In the uninhibited privacy of the home, the family can overturn or ignore the accepted social conventions of the time and so achieve a sense of freedom that is psychologically liberating and more healthy for people. He has already made specific reference to the psychological complexity of family life earlier in this section:

*Sifting the sands underneath the surfaces of conversations,
The marine insect life of the family psyche.*

In this development of the sea metaphor, the nuances of conversations are compared to marine insect life, tiny but vital to the health of the whole system. Durcan's use of sea imagery is varied and complex. Here, the sea is as life-supporting as the womb. The home is a sea of symbiotic (amniotic?) fluid for children and parents, nurturing and supporting. Indeed, home is equated with the sea – 'A home of your own – or a sea of your own'.

The fourth section (lines 102–13) consists of a litany or ritual chant of all the common phrases we use in referring to home. These are chanted in a type of religious litany of praise. Durcan is listing the many aspects of home: as a place of safety, a comforting space (lines 102, 113); it provides a sense of place and locates a family (103); a daily link back to family (104, 111, 112); a place of commitment (105); the place we are drawn to (106, 108, 109); too long a separation is unhealthy (107); and a place of happiness, perhaps romance (110). The entire voice collage is





really a hymn to home, where Durcan consciously uses catholic liturgical prayer form to emphasise the sacredness of the space and the concept.

The sudden, catastrophic loss of all this comes in three bare, spare lines at the beginning of the next section:

*But then with good reason
I was put out of my home:
By a keen wind felled.*

He is now the windfall, dropped from the tree. There is no rationale, no explanation apart from the admission ‘with good reason’. The focus is entirely on the effect of this on the speaker. The sense of homelessness is conveyed by the many references to ‘homeless’, ‘without a home’, ‘homesick’, ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’. All these register the shock of separation, which is rendered most poignantly in the line ‘To be homesick knowing that there is no home to go home to’. Instead, we find images of furtive movement around cheap hotels – ‘Moonlighting, escaping ... Hostels, centres, one-night hotels’. He uses the windfall metaphor again to convey his inability to control his life:

*Homeless in Dublin,
Blown about the suburban streets at evening*

He is haunted by the romantic image of family round the fire, glimpsed through the windows as he wanders by, an outsider – ‘Peering in the windows of other people’s homes’. For a moment, this is given a universal perspective as he makes reference to the significance of family fire to all cultures and classes: ‘Apache or

Cherokee or Bourgeoisie’. His complete aloneness is registered in that final, personal, unanswered mayday call:

*Windfall to Windfall – can you hear me?
Windfall to Windfall ...*

He is now the windfall, calling home and finding only silence. The last line is an echo from previous family life in which the children are being reassured and home was a place of security and refuge: ‘We’re almost home, pet, don’t worry anymore, we’re almost home.’ The raw emotion here, the sense of loss and longing and loneliness, is painful to read. We can appreciate the truth of Durcan’s comment about this poem in an interview for the *Sunday Independent* on 18 October 2009: ‘That poem is a recollection of all that they gave and all that they were to me. I left this poem out of other selections because at the time I just couldn’t face the hurt and the pain of it.’

In that interview he also spoke about the ending of the marriage, but he has no simple answer for it. ‘Hardly a day goes by that I don’t think about our marriage. Though our marriage ended at the beginning of 1984, when I’m talking to myself, which is what I mainly do, I put the breakdown of our marriage down to my stupidity. I was simply plain stupid and not mature enough as a human being or as a young man. Ever since Sarah and Siabhra were humans, I could see that they were infinitely more mature than I was ... Even now, I see myself making the wrong choices. I don’t know what it is. It ranges from ridiculous, naïve, to culpable.’

In an earlier interview in 1986, in the *Irish Times*, Durcan is quoted as saying:





I will rue for the rest of my life the fact that I put my work before my family ... Poetry is an incredibly isolated activity ... Heaven is other people: a house where there are no women and children is a very empty house.

As we saw, the poem “Windfall” explores many aspects of home and family life: the traditional, the personal, even the subversive. It also deals with the pain of loss for him when the marriage ended. Durcan is writing about intimate family life; his work is transparent and personal. Despite the personal focus of the work we still get flashes of social criticism, one of Durcan’s trademarks. The three prevailing metaphors and images that echo through the work are taken from the natural elements of fire, water and wind.





SIX NUNS DIE IN CONVENT INFERNO

A reading of the poem

Part I

Part I of the poem is structured as a dramatic monologue by one of the nuns, in which the account of the tragedy is interspersed with reminiscences on significant issues and moments in her life. The narrative style resembles a cinematic technique. Throughout the poem there are frequent changes of shot and location. Scenes from the distant past are cut into recent experience as in a film montage and the entire narrative is linked by stream of consciousness connections.

The first section of part I (lines 1–62) is really an introduction in which the main themes and issues of the poem are presented. We are introduced to the city environment of the convent, the nuns' philosophy of life (i.e. the rationale for religious vocation), their attitude to death, the physical frailty of the old nuns in the dormitory and, as a passing thought, how they would cope in the event of a fire.

We are first introduced to the location and environment of the convent: St Stephen's Green, Dublin city centre. We see it through the eyes of the nun as she is 'scurrying' to mass in the Carmelite Church in Clarendon Street, off Grafton Street:

*... round the base of the great patriotic pebble of
O'Donovan Rossa,
Knelt tableaux of punk girls and punk boys.*

This pejorative sideswipe at our revolutionary heroes (it does actually look like a giant pebble) is the first indication that we are hearing a strikingly individual voice here. But she is much more interested in the punks. She displays not only human sympathy for them, but deep insight that sees past 'the martial garb/And the dyed hair-dos and the nappy pins' (body piercing). She realises that they are actually really conventional, in the sense that they adhere strictly to the conventional punk dress code. Whereas many people would have found their appearance threatening, she realises that they are actually vulnerable and weak in that they need the group identity: 'Clinging to warpaint and to uniforms and to one another'. So already we know the speaker as a perceptive and individual voice.

We trust her imaginative logic as she asserts 'I knew it was myself who was the ultimate drop-out'. As a nun, she has no home of her own (a vagabond) and she rejects the conventional way of life (so she is subversive). We are introduced here to the concept of a religious vocation as a radical life choice as she says:

*To opt out of the world and to
Choose such exotic loneliness,
Such terrestrial abandonment*

This radical, exotic choice didn't lead to an exciting lifestyle, but rather to the banal bric-a-brac of ordinary daily routines, as she wryly refers to a 'lifetime of bicycle lamps ... of umbrellas drying out in the kitchens'. With appealing honesty, she admits that she was terrified of her 'other-worldly' choice – 'Appalled by my own nerve ... My apocalyptic enthusiasm'. At the end of this first





section of the poem she is more specific about the human cost of her religious vocation – no intimate physical and emotional life, no children, no home of her own:

*For we had done the weirdest thing a woman can do –
Surrendered the marvellous passions of girlhood ...
Never to know the love of a man or a woman;
Never to have children of our own;
Never to have a home of our own*

They have given up these elements of human love and comfort to devote themselves to a spiritual ideal, to bring a broader ‘other-worldly’ perspective on life and on death. This religious ideal is centred on Christ. The human aspect of God is emphasised here: ‘To follow a young man’. It is not without irony, and she is aware of it (‘would you believe it’), that they are giving up young men in order to dedicate themselves to ‘a young man ... Who lived two thousand years ago in Palestine’. The speaker has outlined the ideals, dilemmas and paradoxes of a religious vocation in a voice replete with sympathy, insight and flashes of humour.

We are also introduced to the old nuns in all their physical frailty and aged dishabille in the dormitory up under the roof of the convent:

*Scuttling about our dorm, wheezing, shrieking, croaking,
In our yellowy corsets, wonky suspenders, strung-out
garters*

With the now-expected humour she thinks of them as an aviary, a cage of old birds: ‘we were as eerie an aviary as you’d find’. Their oddness is emphasised in the schooner metaphor. It is humorous

in a somewhat surreal way – that vision of the old nuns living at the top of the mast, crawling out on the yardarms:

*Sleeping up there was like sleeping at the top of the mast
Of a nineteenth-century schooner, and in the daytime
We old nuns were the ones who crawled out on the yardarms
To stitch and sew the rigging and the canvas.*

Durcan uses this extreme metaphor, like a metaphysical conceit, to show how out-of-the-ordinary they actually were.

It is interesting to explore how the cinematic montage technique works in this section (the way shots are selected and cut in) and built on stream of consciousness connections. It begins with her admission that she was no fool, that she knew what a ‘weird bird’ she was. We begin with ‘weird birds’ (‘as eerie an aviary’) → old nuns in their worn-out underwear → the dream of a fire in the night (and connection to a happy death) → back to the high-up dormitory → the schooner metaphor, with nuns crawling out on the yardarms → weird birds → oddballs → Christniks → and so back to their philosophy of life as an explanation of their religious vocation. These images not only carry an exciting visual variety, but also a richness of thought about the lives of these old nuns – their frailty, their isolation, their odd way of life and how passionately dedicated they were to their ideals.

For the first time, we are introduced to their philosophy of death. On the possibility of a fire, the speaker had thought:

*We’d not stand a snowball’s chance in hell. Fancy that!
It seemed too good to be true:
Happy death vouchsafed only to the few.*





They welcomed death and didn't fear it because they had absolute belief in the afterlife.

The rest of part I explores these two themes in more depth – the nuns' way of life and religious philosophy and, increasingly as the poem progresses, their acceptance and philosophy of death.

The simplicity of their worldly ambition is evident from the Cardinal Mindszenty episode:

*Any of us would have given our right arm
To have been his nun – darning his socks, cooking his meals,
Making his bed, doing his washing and ironing.*

These were no female liberationists. Child-like in their hero worship, they would be delighted to do menial work. Also in the context of their lifestyle, a brief seaside holiday provided 'one of the gayest days of my life'. Their excitement was palpable, as if they were boarding school pupils of a former era, unexpectedly released for a day at the beach:

*There we were fluttering up and down the beach,
Scampering hither and thither in our starched bathing-
costumes.*

On the very night of the fire, she tells of her school-girl naughtiness in skipping bathroom in order to get more time to read:

*I skipped bathroom so that I could hop straight into bed
And get in a bit of a read before lights out*

We see the entirely human trait of managing to focus on relatively insignificant things: the cost of the book, now to be lost in the

flames and never to be returned to 'the brother-in-law's married niece'. As she observes, in humour tinged with sarcasm:

*Indeed a book today is almost worth buying for its price,
Its price frequently being more remarkable than its
contents.*

Durcan has certainly done enough to communicate the joyous, sometimes juvenile, sometimes scatty but always human qualities of these nuns, so her prayer has the ring of truth: 'God have mercy on our whirring souls'.

This human wildness co-exists with their religious view of life and the world. Thinking over the day out at the seaside, she develops her ecological theology:

*... that Christ is the ocean
Forever rising and falling on the world's shore.*

The nuns were always conscious of their religious mission – how each was, in a sense, a 'Mother of God', bringing Christ alive to people on the streets:

*Each of us in our own tiny, frail, furtive way
Was a Mother of God, mothering forth illegitimate Christs
In the street life of Dublin city.*

And it was this religious faith that governed how they accepted their deaths. She maintains a wonderful equanimity in the face of her sudden, unexpected death:

*Isn't it a marvellous thing how your hour comes
When you least expect it? When you lose a thing,
Not to know about it until it actually happens?*





With Christian conviction, she sees death as a freeing up (of the spirit):

*How, in so many ways, losing things is such a refreshing
experience,
Giving you a sense of freedom you've not often
experienced?*

At other times this calm acceptance becomes more emotional and changes into a joyful welcoming of death, even bordering on the fanatical:

*Burning to death in the arms of Christ –
O Christ, Christ, come quickly, quickly –*

And:

*Only instead of scampering into the waves of the sea,
Now we were scampering into the flames of the fire.*

Also:

*Now tonight in the convent Christ is the fire in whose waves
We are doomed but delighted to drown.*

This fanatical fervour is most troubling and disturbing in the last section of part I. She views her death as sharing in Christ's sacrifice, which is commemorated in the Eucharist:

*The strange Eucharist of my death –
To be eaten alive by fire and smoke.
I clasped the dragon to my breast
And stroked his red-hot ears.*

But this suggests a passionate embrace of the fire, going far beyond mere acceptance of death.

The first half of this section reads like a surreal nightmare sequence. As mothers, they are giving birth to their own deaths – perhaps delivering themselves to Heaven? Doctors and midwives go about 'In gowns of smoke and gloves of fire'. A strangely dressed Christ, 'like an Orthodox patriarch in his dressing gown,/ Flew up and down the dormitory, splashing water on our souls'.

Is this a deliberate undermining of their religious beliefs? Perhaps its purpose is to communicate the confusion, the horror, the disintegration of rational thought in this traumatic situation. For the final lines of part I, the poem makes a transition to a solemn memorial naming of the nuns who lost their lives. It ends with their request to be remembered 'for the frisky girls that [they] were', which brings us back to the 'happy memory' of the subtitle.

Part II

Part II of the poem is after the fire. This part takes the not quite real, dream-like sequences to new heights of unreality, with Jesus preaching on Grafton Street (the most expensive street of consumerism), and the six nuns who died creeping out at night from under the bandstand in St Stephen's Green, where they had been hiding. Perhaps that marvellous creation, the small aged punk who has ditched her punk gear for mourning black, is an incarnation of the narrator? At any rate, this is a space uninhibited by the laws of time or place or state of being – a state of afterlife?

In the first section, an episode from the life of Christ in the Gospels is transposed and applied to modern times. Just as in the





Gospel story where Jesus was deeply touched by the faith of the centurion, he appears to praise the faith displayed in this narrative. Israel, in the Gospel story, has been replaced here by New York City, which has a significant Jewish population and houses the American centre of commerce, Wall Street. Is Durcan making a point about the need for religious values in an age of rampant consumerism? The followers of Jesus have been modernised too, into unlikely groups of teenagers and dicemen. The nuns choose the Fountain of the Three Fates for their prayer meeting. This is ironic, as in mythology it is the Fates who decide a person's destiny and cut the life thread. It is recorded that the nuns recited the *Angus Dei* as if it was an anthem for aid ('Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us'). In fact, what they recite are the words of the centurion in the Gospel story, which display his extraordinary faith in Jesus.

The main focus of part II is on religious faith, so we might read the extraordinary happenings here as quite in keeping with that theme. The narrative technique used is one of the most interesting textual aspects of the poem. The dramatic monologue flits swiftly across different times and many locations, alternating between realistic scenes and the highly imagined and varying in atmosphere from humorous and witty to what at times verges on the macabre. We saw how closely the technique resembles a cinematic montage, tracing the stream of consciousness links in one example. You can trace this through other passages too.

Another significant textual feature, also quite cinematic, is the visual clarity and memorable detail of some of the imagery. There is the description of the punks in the first section (already

discussed); the less exotic but equally memorable 'lifetime of umbrellas drying out in the kitchens'; the 'fluttering' and 'scampering' of the nuns in their 'starved bathing-costumes' at the seaside; or the 'small, aged, emaciated, female punk' who was 'grieving like an alley cat', an image that resonates both visually and aurally.

Durcan uses bird imagery in connection with the nuns on a number of occasions: 'as eerie an aviary' is both apt and clever for their dormitory residence high up under the roof (as an eagle's eyrie). In the midst of the fire, the bird imagery achieves sufficient complexity to suggest their transformation to angels: 'Fluttering about in our tight, gold bodices,/Beating our wings in vain' and Christ 'Flew up and down the dormitory'.

As usual, the sea imagery is nurturing on the nuns' holiday. Christ is the ocean. Fire and water coalesce in that metaphor that communicated the nuns' complex and paradoxical attitude to death:

*Christ is the fire in whose waves
We are doomed but delighted to drown.*

Even in this context the sea aspect of the metaphor manages to suggest happiness.

The poem also includes a number of startling, unlikely images that strain reality but are effective for their purpose. One such image is the schooner image (already discussed) that illustrates just how out-of-the-ordinary the nuns are. Others are disturbing, even macabre, such as the images of the fire dragon that she clasps as a lover to her breast. But it does illustrate that extreme





view of death. Another is the birthing image – the nuns ‘all giving birth to [their] deaths’, with attendant doctors and midwives ‘In gowns of smoke and gloves of fire’. Whether banal or surreal, we cannot dispute the range and imaginative force of the images in the poem.





SPORT

A reading of the poem

At one level this is a poem about a football match, albeit not an everyday one, but at a deeper level it is about the relationship between a father and son.

Sport is a common language for males, with a shared vocabulary about physical prowess, skill, competitiveness and winning. It is a subject that men can safely be emotional and openly passionate about. The speaker can certainly talk the talk, mentioning 'spectacular saves', 'Diving full stretch', 'to turn/A certain goal', 'Leaping high to tip another ... Over the bar'. He describes motivation as:

*That will to die
That is as essential to sportsmen as to artists.*

However, the father doesn't seem to have much small talk, even about sport. His response is the minimal 'Well played, son'. In what nowadays would be considered a very formal encounter, he shook hands with his son. The speaker colours the exchange negatively by the comment 'Sniffing your approval'. However, he does acknowledge that his father recognised his achievement: 'In your eyes I had achieved something at last'. The telling phrase is 'at last', suggesting that everything before had been a failure in the father's eyes.

We need to be aware that the relationship is described only from the son's perspective, so we get only one side of it, but from his perspective the relationship was not a very healthy one. He

doesn't feel that his father had much faith or confidence in his abilities:

*There were not many fields
In which you had hopes for me
But sport was one of them.*

This devastating lack of parental confidence produces increased anxiety in the son:

*I was fearful I would let down
Not only my team but you.*

The desire to win his father's approval outweighs everything else about the game:

*More than anybody it was you
I wanted to mesmerise*

There is an unhealthy degree of the need for affirmation in evidence here, probably caused by the lack of affirmation in the first place, so a vicious cycle develops. It seems that this is the single moment of praise that he remembers getting:

*Seldom if ever again in your eyes
Was I to rise to these heights.*

It would appear that the father's minimalist approach to conversation after the game was a missed opportunity for supportive discussion. But this needs to be considered in the culture of its time, the mid-1960s, when for many in Ireland fatherhood was still primarily about providing a home, funding and guidance. Love was expressed in that way rather than in any emotional articulation.





However, it is true that, for many reasons, Paul Durcan did have a poor relationship with his father, which is chronicled in the volume *Daddy, Daddy*. For example, as a young man he was committed to a mental hospital against his will, which he didn't see the need for and much resented. Indeed, the image of the mentally ill patients here is quite negative – huge, wild-looking men with 'gapped teeth, red faces/Oily, frizzy hair, bushy eyebrows'. Or else they were capable of shocking, gratuitous violence, like the alcoholic solicitor who castrated his best friend but had no memory of it. These pen pictures may be verging on caricature and may be deliberately shocking, but they do provide the context and background for this encounter between father and son and go some way towards explaining the relationship.





FATHER'S DAY, 21 JUNE 1992

A reading of the poem

Father's Day, traditionally held in Ireland on the third Sunday in June, celebrates fatherhood, male parenting and the influence of fathers in society. Against this idealistic backdrop, Durcan explores the more mundane reality of Father's Day and fatherhood for the speaker in this poem. The introductory picture we get is of a very disorganised, harassed man in a frantic last-minute scramble to catch the Dublin–Cork train, 'Dashing up and down the stairs, searching my pockets'. It was in the middle of this chaos that 'She told me that her sister in Cork wanted a loan of the axe'. The conversation that ensues is a model of the exercise of power. First he looks for clarification of what seems an unreasonable request: 'You mean that you want me to bring her down the axe?' She replies, appearing diffident, but holding her ground: 'Yes, if you wouldn't mind, that is –'. He blusters, 'She could borrow a simple saw.' Then she shifts the source of the request to her sister, but it is still there, uncompromised: 'She said she'd like the axe.' Game over! He is embarrassed by the spectacle of the waiting taxi:

*'OK. There is a Blue Cabs Taxi ticking over outside
And the whole world inspecting it,
I'll bring her down the axe.'*

The tone of the last line is left to our own reading – an angry bad loser or resigned submission? But there is absolutely no doubt about who has the most power in this situation, as he says 'I decided not to argue the toss. I kissed her goodbye.'

Overall, the tone of this section is humorous. It is a piece of well-written farce, with a serious point at its core. The comic tension is created by the time element at first: the waiting taxi, the Cork train and the argument he cannot win. And then there is the huge axe, 'all four-and-a-half feet of it', 'leaning up against the wall behind the settee'. This has been planned already! She hands him the bare axe to carry on the train. There is no attempt to disguise it: 'not even a token hanky/Tied in a bow round its head'. This is great visual comedy.

The tone shifts abruptly in the second section as the speaker indulges in serious and painful introspection about their relationship. It is not that there is a particular crisis, just that, as he himself puts it, 'she does not love me/As much as she used to'. He is aware that she will be glad of the space to herself for two weeks; he thinks she may regard his sexual advances as coarse and he is conscious of his unsophisticated eating habits:

*Two weeks of not having to look up from her plate
And behold me eating spaghetti with a knife and fork.*

He also confronts the real issue, which is the strain of being on their own now that their children have left home and they are in a different configuration of family. The sense of emptiness is caught in the long vowels of the plaintive statement: 'Our daughters are all grown up and gone away.'

As if he cannot bear to dwell on this, his thoughts switch swiftly back to the comic memory of the settee snapping shut on his pregnant wife. And so the equilibrium is restored and he can put his public, coping face back on again: 'But not a bother on her. I





nearly died.' The aspect of fatherhood shown here is that of an introspective man feeling guilty that the romantic sparkle has gone out of their lives and feeling the emptiness left by their grown-up daughters.

The comic vein is continued in the final section with a scene of squirming embarrassment. Imagine yourself as the passenger sitting opposite this stranger carrying a huge axe who insists on telling you about the intimacies of his relationship and his guilt at the realisation that his wife doesn't love him as she used to. Then he utters the unintelligible 'Cúl an tSúdaire' at you, which you don't realise is the Irish for Portarlinton, the station you are at. Time to leave the carriage! Here we have father as eccentric, perhaps madman, but in reality he is a sad man who feels abandoned:

*All the green fields running away from us,
All our daughters grown up and gone away.*

All in all, despite the comedy, this is a fairly sombre vision of Father's Day and middle-aged fatherhood. We see a hassled, put-upon man who feels guilty that the romance has gone out of his relationship, talks intimately to strangers on the train and feels lonely and abandoned. But every now and then he manages to fix the joking, coping mask back on his face.

The swift changes of tone that Durcan manages is one of the most interesting technical features of this poem. It is rather like a change of key in a musical score. We saw how this works in the dialogue of the first section and it is most noticeable in the shift between seriousness and humour at the ends of the other sections. The

effect is to create a more complex and rounded picture of the father in the poem.





THE ARNOLFINI MARRIAGE

A reading of the poem

Paul Durcan has always been interested in the arts and many of these media have had an influence on the style of his poetry. Two separate volumes of his poetry consist of his poetic responses to paintings: *Crazy About Women* (1991), poems about paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland, and *Give Me Your Hand* (1994), about paintings in the National Gallery, London. 'The Arnolfini Marriage' is from this latter volume.

Durcan's view of the connection between poetry and the arts is clearly set out in a letter to critic Kathleen McCracken published in the *Irish Review* (no. 7, autumn 1989):

I think I regard it as axiomatic that poetry has to be fundamentally cinematic and photographic and painterly as well as musical. I see no ultimate distinction between the different 'arts' and I feel most at home in those moments, times, experiences when several or all of them come together or work together.

This is a painting about which there has been much critical debate and little agreement on – for example, the identity of the sitters; whether this is a portrait of a marriage or a betrothal or even a memorial portrait of a deceased wife; whether the woman is pregnant or merely holding up her gown; about the significance of the bed in the living quarters; and whether the man's hand signal is a gesture of welcome to those coming in, as seen in the mirror, or a gesture of dismissal. Durcan's poem is a personal response,

incorporating what the painting says to him. It is a dialogue with the picture. The poem and the painting are connected. It would make little sense to read the poem on its own and yet, when read in the context of the painting, it must stand as a coherent work.

We are the Arnolfinis.

Do not think you may invade

Our privacy because you may not.

This is the tone-setting statement for the entire poem. It exudes superiority, hauteur, even arrogance. They say 'We are the Arnolfinis', presuming this is the only information needed; everyone should know them. There is a singular decisiveness about the flow of the statement, culminating in that definite refusal, 'you may not'. Durcan definitely interprets the man's gesture as 'talk to the hand!' This sense of superiority and power is evident right through the poem, even in the stance: 'We are standing to our portrait'. They have commissioned and are in control of the portrait and have given specific directions to meet their requirements: 'we have faith in the artist/To do justice to'. One of these requirements is 'To do justice to our life as a reflection'. A reflection of what? Do they mean a reflection of the importance, wealth, power, success of the Arnolfini family or clan? The painting itself is a reflection. Perhaps there is even a pun on the mirror reflection here. Whatever the nuances, they are inherently self-regarding and have a very high opinion of themselves. Even the little terrier sniffs 'The minutiae of our magnitude' – their greatness or importance. They feel superior to most people in their perfect union, the 'we' – 'Most people are in no position to say "we"'. They presume other people do not have





this completeness. They feel unique in their perfection. They even challenge the poet about the quality of his life:

*Are you? Who eat alone? Sleep alone?
And at dawn cycle to work
With an Alsatian shepherd dog tied to your handlebars?*

In another of Durcan's highly imaginative, reality-stretching moments, this arrogant challenge is flung through time and space and across different media, attempting a dialogue between painting and poet.

Durcan definitely reads this as a marriage portrait, hence the choice of title for the poem out of the number of possible titles of the painting. Their new 'plurality' is very important to them. They are 'a man and a woman saying "we"'. The other aspects they require to be shown include 'domesticity' and 'barefootedness'. Despite the stated need for privacy, this degree of intimacy is permitted to be seen in a domestic setting, without their shoes. This goes some little way towards balancing out the hauteur they show. But they are most insistent that their fertility is recorded. They consider this 'The most erotic portrait ever made', presumably a reference to the pregnancy and also to 'our bed/ As being our most necessary furniture'. This overriding need to be portrayed as fertile, adding another layer to the 'plurality', makes nonsense of the privacy demand. The fertility adds to their sense of superiority.

The poet's response is just to cut the attempted dialogue right there. He employs one of the best-known lines in daily usage from RTÉ radio and television of the 1960s, 70s and 80s – 'We

will pause now for the Angelus'. This introduced a pause in programmes while the Angelus bell was rung, creating a time for private prayer. It signalled a break in transmission of programmes, creating a space for thought.

He ends cryptically with:

*Here you have it:
The two halves of the coconut.*

He is saying 'over to us', the readers. The coconut, being spherical, two symmetrical halves, could suggest perfection. Does it refer to the perfection in the picture or the relationship between picture and poet (the two different arts) or the encounter between a viewer and a picture? Perhaps it is appropriate that there are some unanswered questions about the poem, as there are about the painting.

It is true that Durcan produces a unique, personal and thought-provoking response to this painting. You could explore the details and features of the painting for yourself in order to understand the selections he made. You could also research and discuss the details you find interesting and write your own response to the painting.





IRELAND 2002

A reading of the poem

Throughout his poetry, Durcan looks with a keen eye and sharp critical intellect on the values, myths and inequalities of Irish society. The critic Erik Martiny said of him, 'the poet conceives of himself as an attentive chronicler of the fluctuating mentalities of his nation'.

In this humorous but perceptive epigram, he is highlighting recent changes in attitude and practice in Irish society. The poem highlights the growing affluence of Celtic Tiger Ireland, when regular holidays abroad were common. But it also points to the cultural and economic link with America, where generations of Irish people have made their homes. No longer considered a foreign land of exile, it is now seen as the fifth province. Affluence and affordable travel have enabled this mind shift.

Durcan is pushing the poetic boundaries here. Social commentary, in casual conversational style, is considered a proper subject for poetry and can provide valuable insights into how we 'live and move and have our being'.





ROSIE JOYCE

A reading of the poem

This lyrical poem is an ode of joy to the birth of the poet's granddaughter, Rosie Joyce. It is narrative in structure, with the writer vividly recalling all the details, both the aesthetically beautiful and the banal, of the long journey he makes from west to east, from Achill to the maternity hospital in Holles Street, Dublin. The style is casual, like that of a detailed diary record.

The writer's excitement at the imminent event is palpable in section I. If nothing else, the exclamation marks give it away. Nature seems to reflect the event; even the sun seems to be born through the clouds: 'a hot sun pushed through the clouds/ And you were born!' Her name is repeated with joy. The energy of the journey and his own excitement is caught in the repetition of phrases: 'To drive such side-roads, such main roads, such ramps, such roundabouts'. The great event has coloured and rendered even the banalities of country roads worth recording. There is also a spiritual or religious element to the journey. He refers to the birth as her 'Incarnation Day'. There is specific mention of Croagh Patrick, so he is placing this child into a specific spiritual cultural history.

The climax of the section comes in a text message, as befits a poem of modern Ireland:

*'A baby girl was born at 3.33 p.m.
Weighing 7 and a ½ lbs in Holles Street.
Tough work, all well.'*

The account is succinct, factual and in language that has a no nonsense, almost unemotional tone, in contrast with the writer's own excitement. The section concludes with the reality of the birth.

Section II begins with the rebirth of the land, the birth of summer, as the writer records by name all the flora of the landscape he passes through, a catalogue of natural colour and beauty that reflects his mood. He is delighted to make the epic journey:

*I rode the waters and the roads of Ireland,
Rosie, to be with you, seashell at my ear!*

Here is that water and sea image again at a time of great joy and new life.

In this section also, the birth is placed in the context of family history, the genetic and psychological genealogy. The current journey recalls for the writer the many journeys he made in the company of his father:

He slowed down also, as across the River Shannon

*We crashed, rattled, bounced on a Bailey bridge;
Daddy relishing his role as Moses,
Enunciating the name of the Great Divide*

Between the East and the West!

His father had a view of Ireland as divided east from west. They were crossing the Shannon, as the Israelites led by Moses crossed the Red Sea, escaping from slavery in Egypt. The writer, however,





delights in the great variety and differences in the country; for him, there is no such thing as a uniform Ireland. The power of nature always ensures such diversity:

*There are higher powers than politics
And these we call wildflowers or, geologically, people.*

The other birth celebrated in this section is the birth of new energy and hope for the writer, the lifting of his depression. The birth of Rosie has made his day, just as another such text of hope gave birth to the term 'daymaker' (see the note in the 'Explorations' section in the book):

*But you saved my life. For three years
I had been subsisting in the slums of despair,
Unable to distinguish one day from the next.*

The return journey, in section III, is less frantic, more sober. In Charlestown, he has time to stop and speak to a farmer he knows who comes from Curry. Here, as elsewhere in Durcan's poetry, we see the validation and celebration of place as he details the names of townlands and villages and even houses. The meeting begins with a certain shy awkwardness, more unusual for the writer than the exuberance of this poem up to now: 'He crouches in his car, I waver in the street'. But it is still a joyful meeting: 'we exchange lullabies of expectancy'.

They discuss philosopher John Moriarty's autobiography, a rather unusual way of celebrating the birth. There is an oblique reference to wetting the baby's head, i.e. having a drink to celebrate the birth: 'We wet our foreheads in John Moriarty's autobiography'.

The poem concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for Rosie's descent to earth. This is a poem celebrating all new life – human, natural, psychological. It welcomes Rosie into her family, into her place (the roads, rivers, flowers and townlands of Ireland) and into her spiritual environment. It is a most comprehensive welcome and a poem of unclouded joy.





THE MACBRIDE DYNASTY

A reading of the poem

The word 'dynasty' refers to a line of hereditary rulers. It has connotations of power and domination. The suggestion here is that the MacBrides, who were Durcan's maternal family, thought of themselves as people of consequence and importance. Such families have a tendency to close ranks and defend their reputations and honour against outsiders. And so it is here.

The popular image of Maud Gonne is that of youthful beauty, feminist, actress, Irish nationalist revolutionary and inspiration for some of W. B. Yeats's poems. However, this is a very different portrait of her, an intimate personal view from some members of the MacBride family, in particular Paul Durcan's mother. The relationship was complex, as Maud Gonne, though separated, had not been divorced from Major John MacBride. She was Seán MacBride's mother and so was still part of the dynasty:

*For dynastic reasons we would tolerate Maud,
But we would always see through her.*

This is what the poem is about: seeing through Maud Gonne.

It is obvious from the opening lines that this visit has all the ingredients for high drama. His mother is cast as a vengeful goddess 'Spitting dynastic as well as motherly pride'. The young boy is brought out to Roebuck House to be shown off to 'great-aunt Maud', who is introduced snidely as 'the servant of the Queen', a reference to the title of her autobiography. She is introduced also as Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the figure she played

in the Yeats/Gregory drama, who is the embodiment of Ireland. Certainly, she is portrayed as an Irish grande dame, if not quite queen. She acts like royalty, 'keen as ever to receive admirers', as it is cynically put, with the suggestion that she is open only to admirers: 'MacLiammóir/Had been kneeling at her bedside reciting Yeats to her'. There is also that formal approach and grand entrance to the bedroom:

*Cousin Séan and his wife Kid led the way up the stairs,
Séan opening the door and announcing my mother.*

Of course the young boy lets the show down; frightened by the look of the old woman, he flees. The portrait of her in old age may be realistic but it is cruel; she is compared to a reptile with claws and lizard eyes:

*And Maud leaned forward, sticking out her claws
To embrace me, her lizards of eyes darting about
In the rubble of the ruins of her beautiful face.*

This is a tense moment of embarrassment somewhat lessened for the mother because of her lack of respect for Maud, as the writer puts it humorously:

*Mummy was a little but not totally mortified:
She had never liked Maud Gonne because of Maud's
Betrayal of her husband, Mummy's Uncle John*

There follows a most benign and flattering portrait of Major John –

*Major John, most ordinary of men, most
Humorous, courageous of soldiers,
The pride of our family*





This is in sharp contrast to the portrait of Gonne, so different that it is obvious to the reader that dynastic loyalties are in play here. Each portrait in its different way shows the effects of family bias. Perhaps it is this aspect of family Durcan wishes to draw our critical attention to – the ‘closed ranks’ partiality, the taking of sides, the internal ‘Spitting’. It is interesting that Maud is not the only one displaying an air of superiority. Mummy extends her love only to those she considers worthy:

*Maud Gonne was a disloyal wife
And, therefore, not worthy of Mummy’s love.*

The power play within family is held up to critical view in this poem.

As a portrait of Maud Gonne, it is an antidote to the popular icon view of her. Perhaps Durcan considers her another official state myth that needed to be unmasked





OVERVIEW OF PAUL DURCAN'S POETRY

Themes and Issues

Love and its manifestations throughout the stages and vagaries

- Durcan explores the giddy experience of falling in love in 'Nessa'. This love can't be controlled and there are hints of danger in the whirlpool image. It was an experience in risk-taking as conveyed in the challenge to swim naked, a metaphor for the risk of allowing another person to know him as he really was. Notice the 'earthy' naturalness of the relationship and the wistful note conveyed by the conditional past structure in:
*I'd have lain in the grass with her all my life.
This is love as viewed from a later perspective.*
- Teenage infatuation, from a distance, with the image of Cáit Killann of the 'El Greco eyes' in 'The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage'.
- The speaker wishes that love would survive in 'The Difficulty That Is Marriage':
*But I should rather live with you forever
Than exchange my troubles for a changeless kingdom.*
- Love in the context of the family home, in that image in "'Windfall", 8 Parnell Hill, Cork' where the children, watching through the bannisters, silently cheer on their kissing parents.

- The fading of love in 'Father's Day, 21 June 1992' when the poet suddenly confesses to a complete stranger on the train
*I'm feeling guilty because she does not love me
As much as she used to, can you explain that?*
- The exuberant love the poet feels for his newly born granddaughter, Rosie Joyce
*I rode the waters and roads of Ireland
Rosie, to be with you, sea shell at my ear!*
- The spiritual love that gives meaning to the lives of the nuns in 'Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno'.

Marriage

- Rather than painting an idyllic picture, in 'The Difficulty That Is Marriage' Durcan deals honestly with the fragile nature of relationships – with disagreements and living with differences and questions. He acknowledges his personal difficulties – 'I have my troubles and I shall always have them'. Yet, despite all, love is affirmed:
If it were with you, I should live forever.
- In this poem also we come to understand the essential separateness of people:
*And you are faraway curled up in sleep
I array the moonlit ceiling with a mosaic of question marks*
- In contrast, Durcan also shows us the public face of marriage, the staging and depiction of the image the Arnolfinis want to project to the world in 'The Arnolfini Marriage'.





Durcan's concept of 'home', and the loss of home

- In "Windfall" the poet conceives of home as a place of love, safety and refuge; a place of private family life with images of children growing up and with these moments captured in family photographs. He uses the image of a 'private sea', of 'symbiotic fluid' – their own special type of amniotic fluid, that womb fluid that protected them as babies. He sees home as another kind of womb for them.
- He also understands home as a place that accommodates the various moods and passions of the people who live in it:

*A home of your own – or a sea of your own –
In which climbing the walls is as natural
As making love on the stairs;*

- The loss of home is keenly felt by the poet:
*To be homesick knowing that there is no home to go
home to*
as well as in the lines following, from l 22 onwards.

The nature of family

- The freedom enjoyed by both adults and children in "Windfall" prompted Durcan to think of the family as 'The most subversive unit in society'.
- In 'The MacBride Dynasty', the weight of history and the demands of family loyalty have put a straitjacket on this 'subversive' unit and forced it to put on a public face, rather like the Arnolfinis:
*For dynastic reasons we would tolerate Maud,
But we would always see through her.*

- Durcan explores some aspects of modern family life in 'Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail', in particular the collective escapism to a make-believe world by way of overdependence on American soaps. Serious social questions about family values and communication are raised in comic mode and with tongue-in-cheek irony.
- The poet's own experience of family in 'En Famille, 1979' appears to have been a bleak one. 'The dark school of childhood' suggests a joyless experience where the emphasis was on lessons learned and where the child felt insignificant and powerless – 'where tiny is tiny and massive is massive'.

Parents

- The poem of this title conveys the parents' amazement at having created a new life which is totally 'other' and separate from them. This sense of 'otherness' is achieved through the dual perspectives from above and under the sea and also the diffraction of light where images are distorted when seen through water. The baby sees
*Their mouths open
Their foreheads furrowed –
Pursed-up lips of fearful fish –
... she is calling out to them
Father, Father
Mother, Mother
But they cannot hear her:
She is inside the sea
But they are outside the sea.*





- The poet's relationship with his own father appears to have been difficult. We catch a humorous glimpse of this in 'Madman'.

- 'Sport' shows his fear of letting his father down and conveys the young man's need to impress:

*More than anybody it was you
I wanted to mesmerise*

- Also in 'Sport' we notice the formal relationship between father and son and the father's fairly minimal, emotionless response:

*Sniffing your approval, you shook hands with me.
'Well played, son'.*

Social commentary in Durcan's poetry

- His critique of the failure of national, political ideals. There is a bitter irony in the fact that it is the girl with the keys to Pearse's cottage who must emigrate in order to earn a living.
- His cultural critique of the viewing habits of modern Irish families in 'Wife ...'
- His satirical comments on the pretentious, patriarchal judiciary in 'Wife ...'
- His use of irony generally to drive home that criticism, not only in 'The Girl ...' but also in 'Sport' and 'Wife ...'

Style, language and imagery

Confessional poetry and first person narrative

- Many of the poems are intimate personal recollections and some of these are very painful and troubled, such as "'Windfall" ...' and 'Sport'. Durcan writes with transparent honesty.
- Most of the poems are written in the first person, allowing us direct access to the poet's thoughts.
- In 'The Arnolfini Marriage', the first person voice is in the formal royal 'we' but even Arnolfini invites dialogue with the poet and draws Durcan's personal voice into the poem.
- The first person narrative voice also brings an intimacy to poems that are not autobiographical, such as in 'Six Nuns ...' where it helps convey convincing insights into the philosophy of the sisters.

Range of moods

- These can range from the heights of falling in love in 'Nessa' and the ebullient joy in *Rosie Joyce – that Sunday in May*
Not alone did you make my day, my week, my year to the prescription of Jonathan Philbin Bowman – *Daymaker!*
Daymaker!
Daymaker! to the aloneness of *Windfall to Windfall – can you hear me?*
Windfall to Windfall ...'





Humour

Again, we find a range of techniques.

- Sometimes he just uses a quiet pun:
*There were not many fields
In which he had hopes for me ('Sport')*
- The speaker's apparent inability to 'read' a situation can be quite hilarious, as when the 'axeman' on the train begins too intimate a conversation with a complete stranger who flees! ['Father's Day']
- The quick wit of 'Madman'
- The zany humour in 'Wife ...'
- There are many flashes of zany humour in 'Six Nuns ...', as, for example, when the narrator nun awoke to the convent in flames:

*The first thing I thought of was that the brother-in-law's
married niece
Would never again get her Conor Cruise O'Brien back
And I had seen on the price tag that it cost £23.00*

Conversational language

- A reading aloud of even the first lines of poems will demonstrate that most of the poems are written to be spoken aloud in everyday conversational speech:

*I met her on the first of August
When I was sixteen I met a dark girl*

*Just as I was dashing to catch the Dublin-Cork train,
That was the Sunday afternoon in May*

Imagery

- Imagery from nature forms part of the vital structure of many of the poems, in particular 'Nessa', 'The Girl ...', 'Parents' and 'Rosie Joyce' and to a lesser degree "'Windfall" ...' and 'Six Nuns'. We encounter images of the sea, rocks, fields, fire, water, wind, birds, flowers and shrub. 'Rosie Joyce' is practically a guide to the flora of Ireland.
- Of all the nature imagery, that of the sea is the most frequently and creatively utilised.

In 'Nessa' it provides the playground for love.

In "'Windfall" ...' the sea image translates into some kind of amniotic fluid that sustains the children and parents:

*Our children swam about our home
As if it was their private sea,
Their own unique symbiotic fluid
Of which their parents also partook.*

As we saw, the sea imagery is also central to communicating the 'otherness' of a new baby in 'Parents'.

- Urban imagery is part of the scaffolding of 'Six Nuns', 'The MacBride Dynasty', 'Father's Day' and "'Windfall" ...'.
- Many poems are set in or feature the interiors of houses – 'The Difficulty', 'Parents', "'Windfall" ...', 'Wife ...', 'Six Nuns ...' and 'The Arnolfini Marriage'.

Durcan moves effortlessly across natural and urban landscapes.





Frequently, the imagery has a cinematic quality to it.

- Ideas and concepts are communicated through the imagery, as in 'Parents' and 'Nessa'.
- There is a photographic clarity and detail to the images in 'Girl' and 'The MacBride Dynasty'. Explore them.
- Explore also the surreal imagery and the swift cutting from image to image in 'Six Nuns'.





QUESTIONS

1. Which of Paul Durcan's poems made the greatest impact on you? Outline your thoughts and reactions on reading it.
2. Suppose you had the opportunity to interview Paul Durcan. Draft four questions about his poetry which you would like to put to him and explain the reason for your choice in each case.
3. 'Paul Durcan explores serious life issues but with a sense of humour'. Do you think this is a fair comment? Outline your views with reference to a poem or poems you have read.
4. What do you find different about Durcan's poetry from other poems and poets you have studied?
5. How do you rate Durcan as a love poet? What particular insights do you think he brings to the topic?
6. What do you find interesting about Durcan's ideas on home and on family?
7. 'There is a sadness at the heart of some of Durcan's poetry that makes compelling but depressing reading.' Would you agree? Outline your views on this statement, with reference to some of the poems you have studied.
8. 'One of the most appealing qualities of Durcan's poetry is the transparent, personal honesty to be found there'. Outline your views on this statement, with reference to some of the poems you have studied.





ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2019

2019

W. H. Auden

Funeral Blues

Patricia Beer

The Voice

Elizabeth Bishop

The Fish

The Prodigal

Filling Station

Elizabeth Barrett Browning How Do I Love Thee

Moya Cannon

Shrines

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Kubla Khan

Martin Dyar

Death and the Post Office

Tess Gallagher

The Hug

Kerry Hardie

Daniel's Duck

Randolph Healy

Frogs

Seamus Heaney

A Constable Calls

The Underground

A Call

Robert Herrick

To Daffodils

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Spring

Inversnaid

Ted Hughes

Hawk Roosting

Brendan Kennelly

Begin

Bread

Saint Brigid's Prayer

D. H. Lawrence

Humming-Bird

Baby-Movements II, "Trailing
Clouds"

Rachel Loden

Memo from the Benefits
Department

Gabriela Mistral

Let Him Not Grow Up (trans.
Ursula Le Guin)

O LEVEL 2019 CONTINUED ON
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ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2019

2019

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Street

To Niall Woods and Xenya
Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin
on 9 September 2009

Mary O'Malley

Caoineadh Mháire

Sylvia Plath

Poppies in July

Child

The Arrival of the Bee Box

Elizabeth Smither

On the euthanasia of a pet dog

William Butler Yeats

The Wild Swans at Coole

An Irish Airman Foresees his
Death

Benjamin Zephaniah

The SUN





ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2020

2020

W. H. Auden

Funeral Blues

Eavan Boland

Child of Our Time

This Moment

Love

Elizabeth Barrett Browning How Do I Love Thee

Carol Ann Duffy

Valentine

Emily Dickinson

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died

Paul Durcan

Wife Who Smashed Television
Gets Jail

Parents

Sport

Martin Dyar

Death and the Post Office

Linda France

If Love Was Jazz

Robert Frost

The Tuft of Flowers

Mending Wall

‘Out, Out–’

Robert Herrick

To Daffodils

Andrew Hudgins

The Cadillac in the Attic

D. H. Lawrence

Humming-Bird

Baby-Movements II, “Trailing
Clouds”

Francis Ledwidge

Lament for Thomas MacDonagh

Liz Lochhead

Revelation

Sinéad Morrissey

Genetics

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Street

To Niall Woods and Xenya

Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin
on 9 September 2009

O LEVEL 2020 CONTINUED ON
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ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2020

2020

Alden Nowlan

In Praise of the Great Bull
Walrus

Mary O'Malley

Cealtrach

Marge Piercy

Will we work together?

Adrienne Rich

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
The Uncle Speaks in the
Drawing Room

Eileen Sheehan

My Father, Long Dead

Elizabeth Smither

On the euthanasia of a pet dog

William Wordsworth

She dwelt among the
untrodden ways
It is a beauteous evening, calm
and free
from The Prelude: Skating
[ll 425–463]

Benjamin Zephaniah

The SUN





ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2021

2021

Elizabeth Bishop

The Fish
The Prodigal
Filling Station

Eavan Boland

Child of Our Time
This Moment
Love

Robert Browning

Meeting at Night

Kate Clanchy

Driving to the Hospital

Paul Durcan

Wife Who Smashed Television
Gets Jail
Parents
Sport

Robert Frost

The Tuft of Flowers
'Out, Out—'

Thom Gunn

Considering the Snail

Randolph Healy

Frogs
Primula veris

Seamus Heaney

A Constable Calls
The Underground
A Call

George Herbert

Easter Wings

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Spring
Inversnaid

Andrew Hudgins

The Glass Hammer

John Keats

On First Looking into
Chapman's Homer
La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Francis Ledwidge

Lament for Thomas MacDonagh

Richard Murphy

Moonshine

Julie O'Callaghan

The Net
Problems

O LEVEL 2021 CONTINUED ON
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ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2021

2021

Mary O'Malley

Sylvia Plath

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Penelope Shuttle

Gary Soto

David Wheatley

Caoineadh Mháire

**Poppies in July
Child**

Ozymandias

Jungian Cows

Oranges

Chronicle





ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2022

2022

Elizabeth Bishop

The Fish
The Prodigal
Filling Station

Colette Bryce

Self-Portrait in the Dark
(with Cigarette)

Moya Cannon

Shrines

Kate Clanchy

Driving to the Hospital

Emily Dickinson

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
I heard a Fly buzz – when I died

Carol Ann Duffy

Valentine

Linda France

If Love Was Jazz

Randolph Healy

Frogs

Andrew Hudgins

The Cadillac in the Attic

Ted Hughes

Hawk Roosting

John Keats

On First Looking into
Chapman’s Homer
La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Brendan Kennelly

Begin
Bread
Saint Brigid’s Prayer

D. H. Lawrence

Humming-Bird
Baby-Movements II, “Trailing
Clouds”

Denise Levertov

An Arrival (North Wales, 1897)

Paula Meehan

The Russian Doll

Caitríona O’Reilly

Interlude 12

Adrienne Rich

Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers
The Uncle Speaks in the
Drawing Room

Eileen Sheehan

My Father, Long Dead

O LEVEL 2022 CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE





ORDINARY LEVEL

Poets prescribed for examination in 2022

2022

Penelope Shuttle

Zoo Morning

Gary Soto

Oranges

William Stafford

Traveling Through the Dark

William Carlos Williams

This is just to say

William Wordsworth

She dwelt among the
untrodden ways

It is a beauteous evening, calm
and free

from *The Prelude: Skating*
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William Butler Yeats

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The Wild Swans at Coole

An Irish Airman Foresees his
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ROBERT HERRICK

TO DAFFODILS

Introduction

Herrick is a renowned lyric poet whose pastoral poems praise nature and focus on the brevity of life. For Herrick, his purpose as a poet was to remind his audience that the world is beautiful and that life is short and so he encourages a *carpe diem* (seize the day) attitude to life.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with a lament, 'Fair Daffodils, we weep to see/You haste away so soon'. The poem mourns the fact that the daffodils have such a short lifespan. Their time on earth is brief and the poet exaggerates his response to their departure. The collective 'we weep' suggests that all mankind join in his mourning for the hasty departure of the flowers. He compares their brief stay to a span of a day and in this timeframe the sun has yet to reach noon. He asks them to 'Stay, stay' until the day has run its course to the evening time. The 'even-song' refers to the evening prayers he would have overseen at his church. The 'we' refers to his congregation who, like the flowers, will bow their heads and leave this life, 'we/Will go with you along.'

The main point of this poem is revealed in the second stanza. It is not only the brevity of life for the daffodils that the poet is lamenting, but the brevity

of life for all mankind, 'We have short time to stay, as you'. Like the daffodils our time on earth is 'as short a spring'. For all mortals to grow means to decay and move nearer to death, 'as quick a growth to meet decay'. The short statement in the middle of the second stanza, 'We die', is stark in its philosophical acceptance of mortality. There is no excess of sentiment displayed here. But the images he uses to represent this dissolution contrast with the negative connotations of 'decay' and 'dry away'. The images he uses are beautiful: 'Like to the summer's rain; Or as the pearls of morning's dew'. His message is simple, while life is short it is also beautiful and should be celebrated.

Structure

In this poem Herrick varies his line length to mimic the subject matter he discusses. The poem opens with what appears to be a regular rhythm for the first four lines. But when he begs the daffodils to 'Stay, stay', the structure changes. The short pause on this line lingers, as the poet does, on the wish to prolong the lives of the flowers. However, the following lines use enjambment as they run into each other. Just as time cannot be stopped, so too the lines echo the inevitability of the ageing process by running on. The rhyming couplet in the middle of each stanza causes this tiny moment of respite but in each case it runs on to the next line. In this way Herrick uses the rhyming scheme and rhythm as reminders of the impermanence of life. In





the second stanza the same pause is experienced on the line 'We die'. The following line 'As your hours do, and dry/Away,' also uses enjambment to run on to the inevitable end of the poem, 'Ne'er to be found again.'

Imagery

Herrick uses typical pastoral images to describe the cycle of life. The daffodil is often used as a symbol of new life and new beginnings as it is one of the first flowers to bloom after winter has passed. Here Herrick uses it for an altogether different purpose; the daffodil is the first flower to die and Herrick focuses on this aspect. He uses the flower as a symbol of the brevity of life and inevitability of death.

The passage of time is emphasised by the reference to the 'early-rising sun', 'noon' and 'even-song'. The temporal movement from dawn to night echoes the lifecycle of the daffodils as well as the progress of man towards death. In the second stanza reference is made to spring and summer but the implication is that we too move towards the autumn of our lives and on to death.





GEORGE HERBERT

EASTER WINGS

Introduction

George Herbert is classified as a metaphysical poet. The term was coined by Samuel Johnson when describing a number of poets from the seventeenth century who shared similar characteristics. These characteristics included using elaborate forms of wit, pondering the nature of reality and using religious sentiment. Herbert's poem 'Easter Wings' shows evidence of some of these characteristics.

Herbert took Holy Orders in 1629 and became an Anglican priest. His religious concerns are the central theme of this poem. The most striking aspect of this poem is its typographical layout: the poem is arranged in such a way as to depict a pair of wings on the page. Originally the poem was printed sideways and the reader had to turn the page in order to read the poem. Here, Herbert literally asks the reader to change their point of view, or alter their perspective before they read the poem. This style of poetry was common among early Greek poets and enjoyed a brief revival in the early seventeenth century, however, writers such as John Dryden quickly condemned this style of poetry as an obsolete type of wit and Herbert's poetry lost popularity.

A reading of the poem

This poem was not published until after Herbert's death. He addresses his god in the first line, 'Lord', and so the poem is framed as a private prayer. The first line outlines the initial state of man, 'in wealth and store'. When man was first created in god's image, man was complete and had wealth in abundance. In the second line Herbert alludes to the story of the Garden of Eden when man's foolishness in succumbing to temptation led to his removal from paradise. As man descends into sin and despair the line lengths decrease. Herbert echoes the subject matter of his poem in the physical shape of the lines. The narrowest point in the first stanza is when man is 'Most poor'.

The hint of the redemptive power of the poem is found in the title, 'Easter Wings'. The resurrection provides the power to renew the soul and so in the second half of the first stanza the poet begins his journey to redemption, 'With thee/O let me rise'. The lines get slowly longer as the poet rises with the risen Lord. The poet can sing 'harmoniously' of the redemption he has received. The use of the word 'harmoniously' implies that more than one voice is singing, the poet joins with the voices of others, or perhaps with his god, and sings of 'victories'. The alliterative 'the fall further the flight' at the end of the stanza conveys the flapping of wings as the emotions of the poet swell.





The second stanza begins on a much more intimate tone, 'My tender age in sorrow did begin'. Rather than dealing with the general fall from grace of all mankind, here, he talks of his own personal fall from grace into sin and despair. The harsh sibilance of the line 'still with sicknesses and shame' seems to reveal the poet's self-loathing as his sin is punished by his lord. The central point of the stanza is 'Most thin', again the subject matter reflects the physical form of the line. After this point the poet rises again as he is joined with his lord, 'with thee/Let me combine'. Only through unity with his god can he find redemption and again 'feel this day thy victory'. The emphasis in the final line is on his dependence on his god, 'if I imp my wing on thine,/Affliction shall advance the flight in me.' To 'imp' means to repair a damaged feather. By joining with his god he can repair his soul, take flight and soar again.

Structure

The layout of the poem is of central significance. The poet composed two stanzas with varying line lengths, shaped to resemble a pair of wings when printed on the page. The poem deals with the need for man to join with God in order to find redemption. The shape of the poem echoes this thought. As the poet describes the disintegration of man the lines diminish and narrow; only as the poet joins with God and finds redemption do the lines lengthen and swell to mimic flight. The title of the poem 'Easter Wings', reveals the importance of the resurrection to the poet. Through his belief in the resurrection he finds his unity with God and can overcome his human failings.

The poet uses repetition and mirroring in the poem. The two stanzas physically mirror each other as wings across the page. Each stanza ends with the same words, 'flight in me' and uses the same rhyming scheme.

Imagery

Images of wings, flight and birds echo throughout the poem. The shape and title of the poem reference the wings needed to rise again. The poet wants to rise 'as larks' and ends each stanza with the words 'the flight in me'. The image of the Holy Spirit was often depicted as a bird, particularly a dove.





SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

KUBLA KHAN

Introduction

When he eventually published this poem, Coleridge prefaced it with the following note:

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill-health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne (pain killing drug) had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall." The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of

the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

This tale of how the poem was written provides a framework within which to examine the poem. Was the poem a creative vision experienced by Coleridge in his drug-induced state? Or is he merely apologising for its fragmentary nature and its lack of cohesion? Both readings of the poem are entirely possible.

A reading of the poem

The poem is prefaced by the line 'Or, a vision in a dream. A fragment.' Coleridge apologises for the fragmentary nature of the poem before he even begins. The dreamlike quality of the poem is set up from the outset and the reader is encouraged not to read too much into the poem. Everything is not as it seems and trying to construe meaning will only lead to disappointment.





The opening lines 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree' creates an exotic and grandiose image of the vast palace of the Mongol Emperor. The long vowel sounds of the 'u' and 'a' echo across the first line. This assonance conveys the sense of majesty inherent in the image. The description moves on to the natural environment that surrounds the palace. The 'sacred river' runs through caverns and to the sea. The vastness of nature is captured in the description of the caverns as 'measureless to man'. Nature is depicted as abundant and virile. The gardens are 'bright', the incense-bearing tree has 'blossom'd' and the forests enfold 'sunny spots of greenery'. But this abundance of nature is limited and constrained by 'walls and towers'.

The second stanza focuses on the wild and untamed natural world. The deep divide between nature and the illusion of control is depicted as a 'chasm'. It is described as both 'savage' and 'holy'. These contrasts continue throughout the second stanza. The chasm, or deep gully, is the source of the river. It is described as 'with ceaseless turmoil seething'. From this volatile place the sacred river flings up 'huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail'. The earth itself is personified and is breathing in 'fast thick pants' as if the exertion has exhausted it. The barely contained violence and energy of the place could represent the creative force; the well-spring of inspiration that the poet must tame to create a work of art. It could also represent a graphic depiction of birth. The meandering river continues on its way before descending into the 'lifeless ocean', or death.

Interwoven into this natural landscape are elements of supernatural foreboding. The 'waning moon was haunted', the

woman is 'wailing for her demon-lover' and Kubla Khan himself hears 'Ancestral voices prophesying war'. The promise of war casts doubt over the longevity of the palace. The second stanza ends with the paradoxical image of the 'sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!' This juxtaposition of warmth and cold echoes the contrasting images of wild untamed nature and the civilised pleasure palace.

In the third stanza the poet switches to the first person, 'I saw'. He places his own vision before the reader. Here he envisages an Abyssinian woman playing on a dulcimer, a stringed instrument, singing of Mount Abora. He laments that if he could revive within himself 'her symphony and song' then he too could build a fictional pleasure-dome. Here the pleasure-dome represents a fantastic creation of the imagination. If he could produce such a work then he would be respected and feared. He would have fed on the milk and honey of paradise. This phrase is taken from the Bible and a land of milk and honey was one of abundance and wealth.

Theme: Creativity

Many theorists believe that this poem is Coleridge's exploration of the creative process. The first stanza outlines the efforts to create something beautiful and ordered out of the chaos of nature. Kubla Khan creates a pleasure-dome by 'decree', he has said it will be so and then it is done. But outside the walls the savagery of nature is described. Within that chaos, as described in stanza two, there is great creative power and inspiration. The fountain could represent the creative force bursting forth, untamable. The second stanza





is filled with the contrasting images of chaos and creation. In the third stanza the poet intervenes. He is aware of his own position as a creator of poetry. He must try to capture the beauty of what he sees and hears and from that create his own 'dome in the air', his own art. But by being aware of his own presence the act of creation is altered. The entire poem then is an act of creation. Coleridge's preface to the poem adds another frame to the poem as he describes how inspiration came to him in a dream and the words drifted away from him as he was interrupted by a visitor while he was writing the poem. The realities of the world intruded on the creative act and so he must continue to seek inspiration.

Imagery

Typical of a Romantic poet, Coleridge uses nature as the central focus of this poem. Nature is approached in almost reverential terms as the source of inspiration. The natural imagery used by Coleridge tries to capture both his wonder and veneration for nature. Nature is sensual and holy according in this poem: 'the sacred river', 'fertile ground', 'sinuous rills', 'incense-bearing tree'. Even the hills are described in almost human terms as they are 'enfolding sunny spots of greenery'. It is as if the hills are encircling the greenery in their arms and holding them securely.

In addition, Coleridge uses exotic and oriental images throughout the poem. The names 'Xanadu' and 'Kubla Khan' embody a mysterious, alien and unfamiliar place. The sacred river, 'Alph' may be based on the Greek river god Alpheus and the Mount Abora the damsel sings about in the final stanza was originally Mount Amara in an earlier version of the text. Mount Amara was

reportedly the location of the Garden of Eden. These references, and the final line 'For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drunk the milk of Paradise', give the impression that the landscape described by Coleridge has links to the biblical paradise as well as other mythologies. The sense that the poem exists in an ephemeral world, between imagination and reality is reinforced by the dreamlike images and fragmentary style of the poem.

In typical Romantic fashion Coleridge weaves in elements of the supernatural. Even from the preface that states that the poem is a 'vision in a dream', there is a sense of otherworldliness about the poem. In the second stanza he develops these images. The 'waning moon was haunted/By woman wailing for her demon-lover'. Kubla Khan hears 'Ancestral voices prophesying war', and in the final stanza the image the poet gives of himself with 'His flashing eyes, his floating hair!', all reinforce the sense of supernatural intervention in the poem.

Structure

Coleridge tells us that the poem is a fragment of a dream, and the fragmentary and uneven structure of the poem reflects this. It begins with a regular metrical structure 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree'. This iambic tetrameter (with four iambic feet to a line) feels regular to begin with. The rhyming scheme also seems to begin in a regular manner, *abaab*, but the next section is a little incoherent, *ccdbdb*. A rhyming scheme and rhythmic pattern can be felt while reading the poem but it hits notes of irregularity. Line lengths are sometimes jarring and don't quite fit the tight structure familiar to poets of the time.





Just like in a dream, the structure is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Certain lines lengthen into iambic pentameter with five feet in a line, 'And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills', while others have only three feet in the line, 'Down to a sunless sea'. In this way, Coleridge plays with poetic form to create a dreamlike structure that is similar in some ways to other eighteenth century odes but at the same time slightly strange.

In the second stanza a scattering of exclamation marks is used to convey the poet's reaction to the vitality of natural world, 'But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted/Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!'. The poet captures the energy and vitality of the scene through his use of powerful verbs, 'woman wailing', 'ceaseless turmoil seething', and 'a mighty fountain momentarily was forced'. These verbs and the exaggerated adjectives such as 'measureless' and 'lifeless' give the reader a sense of the vast magnitude of the landscape described.

Assonance, alliteration and repetition

While the poet varies the rhyming scheme considerably, the use of alliteration, assonance and repetition throughout the poem give it a sense of cohesion. The poet reuses images such as 'caverns measureless to man' and the 'sacred river' in the first and second stanzas. This repetition gives a sense of continuation and coherence to the poem. Alliterative phrases such as 'woman wailing', 'mingled measure' and 'meandering with a mazy motion' lend these lines a sense of rhythm and rhyme. The sheer number of alliterative phrases throughout the poem draws attention to this feature as a primary source of rhyme in the poem. Assonance

is also repeatedly used by Coleridge to create rhyme within most lines of the poem. The repetition of the broad vowels can be seen in lines such as 'chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail' and 'Through wood and dale the sacred river ran'.





PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

OZYMANDIAS

A reading of the poem

'Ozymandias' explores a common theme of Romantic poetry: the passing of all human creations, the vanity of the works of humankind and thus the pointlessness of life. Perhaps it is also sneering at the arrogance of rulers – a favourite theme of Shelley's. There is a hint here too of the relative superiority of art over life (in that it lasts slightly longer).

Unusually for a sonnet, this poem is structured as a narrative. It tells the story of a traveller who returned from visiting the remains of an ancient civilisation and described what he saw. The place has been reconquered by the desert and all that remains as an indication of a once-great power are the ruins of an enormous statue – 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone' and some pieces of its shattered face. Yet the shattered head still preserves the king's features, particularly the expression of arrogance and of unchallengeable authority ('frown,/And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command'). This shows the perceptiveness of the sculptor, who managed to capture the king's emotions or passions in the stone ('its sculptor well those passions read/Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things').

The syntax is quite involved here and makes understanding less immediate. In line 8, 'hand' refers to the sculptor's hand and 'the heart that fed' refers to the king's heart, which gave life and energy to all this in the first place. Shelley uses this technique of synecdoche (where a part stands for the whole) to reinforce the sculptor's excellence at recording the king's inner emotions. Hand captures heart. The pedestal also survives, ironically still proclaiming its message of arrogant superiority ('Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!').

In fact, it is mainly by the use of irony right through the poem that Shelley reinforces his theme of the vanity of human endeavour. For example, the once great civilisation is now a desert and even its precise name is no longer used ('an antique land'). The haughty superiority of the king, while still visible in the sculpture, is nevertheless shattered ('Half sunk, a shattered visage'). The fact that all that remains of a civilisation renowned for its architecture and art is this grotesque piece of statuary ('Two vast and trunkless legs') adds a further twist to the irony. It is now disparagingly referred to as 'that colossal wreck'. The inscription on the pedestal is also deeply ironic, as time has made the king's boast a hollow one.

The final statement, through sound and image, reinforces the theme: we see that the works of humans are merely a disfiguring, decaying wreck spoiling





the serene emptiness of the natural landscape. The insignificance of human civilisation when compared with the vastness of time is caught in that beautiful image of rolling desert sands stretching as far as the eye can see and back through history. The long vowel sounds reinforce this sense of the emptiness of time: decay, boundless, bare, lone, far away.

As a sonnet

This poem has been highly praised by critics, who suggest that it displays the best features of sonnet form. Its simplicity is often remarked on. It has a single idea and one simple point to make. The language is simple yet effective (Think of the 'sneer of cold command'). The only change from octave to sestet is a deepening of the tone of irony with the reference to the king's foolish boast. The epigrammatical summary in the final lines reinforces the theme visually and definitively, as we expect from a good final couplet.

The sonnet is structured as a narrative, so the run-on lines are entirely appropriate, with the first long sentence holding the atmosphere of the story. Subsequently, the dramatic effect of the single short sentence is all the greater: 'Nothing beside remains.' We hardly notice that the rhyming scheme is slightly irregular, with some off-rhymes (stone – frown, appear – despair) and an unusual rhyming scheme.





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ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

HOW DO I LOVE THEE

Background

This poem comes from a collection of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning called *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). The title seems to imply that these poems were translated from Portuguese but in fact the forty-four sonnets in this collection detail the illicit courtship she had with Robert Browning before their marriage in 1846. His pet name for her was his 'little Portuguese', which may have inspired the title. Elizabeth's father had forbidden his children from marrying and so her courtship with Robert, which began when he wrote to her admiring her poetry, was carried out in secret. The couple were married in 1846. Elizabeth's father disinherited her and the couple spent most of their married life in Italy.

This poem is sonnet forty-three of forty-four sonnets. The initial feelings of doubt and uncertainty outlined in the earlier sonnets have disappeared and this poem captures the reflection of the poet on the strength and durability of her love.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning suffered from repeated ill-health and died in 1861.

A reading of the poem

The poem begins with a simple question: 'How do I love thee?' But the poet finds it difficult to answer. How can one quantify an emotion? She begins with a scientific approach, 'Let me count the ways'. But soon the scientific method fails her. She loves him to the 'depth and breadth and height' her soul can reach, but how much is that? What is the reach of one's soul? The first quatrain (four lines) ends with the belief that she loves him to the end of her being.

The next quatrain repeats the phrase 'I love thee' as she tries to find the most suitable description of the depth of her love. She feels her love for him every day like a quiet need that doesn't go away either by day or night, 'by sun and candle-light'. Her love is willingly given and pure. Her love for him is compared to those who fight for freedom and their rights for unselfish reasons.

Her love for him is like the intense passions she felt for old griefs in her life. Her love is divine and spiritual like the childlike blind faith she had in her youth. She ends the poem with statement that she loves him with all the elements of her life, 'the breath, smiles and tears', and that if God would allow it, her love will continue even into death.





Structure: Sonnet form and rhyme

The sonnet is a fourteen-line poem that deals with a single issue or theme. The most famous sonnet writers are Shakespeare and Petrarch, and each developed the form in a slightly different way. This sonnet is Petrarchan in structure with a regular iambic pentameter and an *abba, abba, cdcdcd* rhyming scheme. The first two quatrains (four lines) deal with the poet's attempts to quantify her love and the final six lines (sestet) builds to the climax of her attempts to describe her love and her assertion that it will continue after death.

Throughout the poem the poet repeats the phrase 'I love thee'. This repetition, called anaphora, is used to try to capture the depth of the love she feels. The phrase 'love thee' is repeated nine times in the poem as the poet struggles to find just the right words to capture the love she feels for Robert.

The poet uses internal rhyme in the second line with 'depth' and 'breadth'. The word 'breath' in the twelfth line echoes the breadth in the second line. The poet moves from trying to scientifically measure the 'breadth' to asserting that she loves him with every 'breath'. Her love for him cannot be measured but is just as essential to her life as breath.





ROBERT BROWNING

MEETING AT NIGHT

Introduction

This poem captures the excitement and apprehension of the poet as he meets his love secretly at night. Robert Browning married Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1846 but their courtship was kept secret due to her father's disapproval. Robert initially wrote to Elizabeth expressing his admiration for her poetry and the affection developed into something more. After they married, Elizabeth's father disinherited her and the couple moved to Italy where they remained for most of their married life.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with a description of the sea as the poet is en route to meet his love. The scene is dark. The sea is 'grey' and the land is 'long' and 'black'. In contrast, the moon that overlooks the scene is a 'yellow half-moon large and low'. The moon is a typical image used in romantic poetry, often to represent loneliness or isolation. It is at a distance from the scene and sees everything. Throughout the poem the poet gives the impression that his journey is furtive and secretive. The meeting is hidden from prying eyes – the poet approaches the farmhouse from the sea rather than by road, but the moon sees all.

Even the waves seem surprised by the presence of the speaker in the poem. The waves are 'startled' and they leap 'from their sleep'. The poet seems to

have awoken them suddenly. The waves leap 'in fiery ringlets'. Fire is a very unusual image used to describe the sea. The image may represent the passion felt by the poet as he approaches his destination. The curve of the waves may remind him of his lover's hair in ringlets.

The poet arrives at the deserted cove and pushes the prow of the boat into the 'slushy sand' to stop it. The alliterative 'pushing prow' describes the physical effort expended by the poet on his journey. The sibilance of the line 'quench its speed i' the slushy sand' emphasises the sensual imagery used.

The second stanza captures the movement of the poet as he travels over the beach and across three fields before he reaches the farmhouse. The images are given in quick succession. Each image is fleeting as he barely registers where he is, all attention is on his destination, 'a mile of warm sea-scented beach;/Three fields to cross'.

When he arrives all his senses are heightened. Each sound seems amplified, 'A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch/And blue spurt of a lighted match'. The illicit nature of their meeting is highlighted when he taps on the window to catch her attention. His lover is ready and waiting and the only response he receives is the lighting of a match and a low voice. The voice of his lover seems 'less loud' than the beating of their hearts, 'the two hearts beating each to each!' The poem ends when the lovers unite and no further details are revealed.





Tone

The tone throughout the poem is of apprehension and excitement. The poet focuses on the small details of his experience and the tension slowly builds as he approaches his love. Each stanza comprises of a long sentence, broken down into short phrases that capture the scene briefly. There is no time for lengthy descriptions, but every sense is heightened. The visual image of the 'long black land' seems ominous and foreboding. The waves jump in surprise and the fiery ringlets hint at the hidden passions just beneath the surface.

The mile of beach is described as 'warm' and 'sea-scented'. The welcoming image draws him on across the three fields he must cross to meet her. The sounds of the 'tap' on the window-pane and the 'quick sharp scratch' of the match seem to be louder in the darkness. The poet captures the tension felt by the lovers in the harsh consonants of the 'quick sharp scratch'. The feelings of the lovers when united don't need to be described in detail. Instead the beating of their hearts 'each to each' is the only sound that can be heard.

Sensual images dominate the poem. The 'startled little waves that leap', the 'pushing prow and the 'slushy sand' all ground the poem very much in the physical world. In the second stanza aural images predominate with the 'tap', 'scratch' and 'beating' making the poet very aware of his surroundings.





WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

A reading of the poem

This poem has an accessibility about it that encourages us to engage with it. Before we even read it, the way that it looks on the page persuades us to come closer. It presents a non-threatening appearance constructed from short words, lines and stanzas. In many ways, this poem is as much about space as words. It is as if William Carlos Williams has deliberately chosen to include a lot of space in this poem so that we, as readers, can use it to think about the things that we might easily miss, the 'real things' of everyday life.

As we draw closer we read the title of the poem, 'This is just to say'. This is a title that is bound to stimulate our curiosity so that we want to read on into the poem to find out what is being said. The first stanza comes to the point quickly, as it provides a clear explanation of the situation in a very businesslike tone: 'I have eaten/the plums/that were in/the icebox'.

In the second stanza, the businesslike tone is tinged with guilt as there is an admission that this was the wrong thing to do because the plums had been bought for a purpose: 'and which/you were probably/saving/for breakfast'.

Finally, the third stanza begins with a request for forgiveness, 'Forgive me', but then rather surprisingly veers into a vivid description of how 'delicious' the plums were, expressed in a more emotional tone of voice. Perhaps Williams is supporting his plea for forgiveness by making it clear that the plums were so wonderfully 'delicious', 'sweet' and 'cold' that it is quite understandable that he simply could not resist them. On the other hand, he could feel that the fact that he enjoyed the plums so much would please the person who had plans for the plums because that person wants to see him happy. Or perhaps Williams is just teasing this person in the hope that a bit of humour might speed up the process of forgiveness.

The structure of the poem

As a young poet, Williams was absolutely determined to develop a way of writing poetry that would reflect the fact that he 'was an American kid'. This meant that he rejected many of the traditional features of poetry that had been developed by poets working in England. Above all, he wanted to 'try to say it straight, whatever is to be said'. He did not write in rhyme because 'I found I couldn't say what I had to say in Rhyme. It got in my way.' He stopped putting a capital letter at the beginning of every line because he 'thought it pretentious to begin every line with a capital letter'. He explained his





rejection of the long line of poetry in favour of a much shorter one by commenting, 'I didn't go in for long lines of poetry because of my nervous nature.' This 'nervous nature' is also evident in his lack of punctuation in this poem. This produces a kind of breathlessness in the pace of reading that, in the case of this poem, suggests a feeling of panic about the reaction that his eating of the plums will provoke.





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FRANCIS LEDWIDGE

LAMENT FOR THOMAS MACDONAGH

A reading of the poem

In spite of the short length of this poem, it successfully creates an overwhelming mood of sadness in stanzas 1 and 2 (and, unexpectedly, hope in stanza 3). The cause of the sadness is the death of Thomas MacDonagh, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. Although Francis Ledwidge uses simple language and short lines, the images that he creates are vivid (intense and graphic) and easy to picture because they appeal to the senses of hearing, touch and sight.

The fact that this poem is about the death of Thomas MacDonagh creates a mood of sadness in stanzas 1 and 2. Hearing is said to be the last sense to fail just before death, so it is interesting that in the first stanza, Ledwidge describes the sounds that MacDonagh can no longer hear because he is dead: the 'bittern' and the 'rain'. Through these images, Ledwidge adds to the mood of sadness because the cry of the bittern is a booming one, rather like the slow drum beat that was once played at funerals, and the rain is 'wailing' like the keeners who, long ago, wailed at Irish funerals. It is also sad when Ledwidge refers to 'the wild sky' in line 2, as MacDonagh was buried in a British army cemetery and so, in a way, in British soil and not in the freedom and space of the Irish landscape suggested by the phrase 'the wild sky'.

The second stanza presents us with images that are heard, felt and seen intensely, again to emphasise what MacDonagh can no longer experience because of his death. MacDonagh will not hear or feel what it is like when 'loud March blows/Thro' slanting snows'. He will not see 'the golden cup' of the daffodil dance like a 'flame' in the wind. Ledwidge adds to the mood of sadness by using the word 'upset' in line 8. On the one hand, 'upset' could refer to the daffodils being blown about by the wind; on the other, it could suggest the emotional reaction of being upset by a death.

The mood changes in the final stanza as Ledwidge describes the image of a 'Dark Cow' moving from poor grazing land to 'pleasant meads'. Once more, sound makes this image come alive as the cow's pleasure, because of her better conditions, is expressed in her 'low at morn'. But the full meaning of these lines only becomes clear when we know a little more about the historical facts behind them. In the eighteenth-century, the 'Dark Cow' was a secret name used for Ireland so that people could talk about their country without the fear of being arrested. Consequently, the 'Dark Cow' in the 'pastures poor' becomes an image that represents Ireland suffering under British rule. The movement of the cow to 'pleasant meads' and her lowing represents the hope that Ireland will one day be free and independent. Thus, the first hope that creates a mood of hope in the final stanza is the hope that Ireland will be free. The second hope that also helps to create this mood





is Ledwidge's hope that MacDonagh will somehow know when Ireland does achieve freedom, represented in the line 'Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn'. This suggests that Ledwidge believes that once MacDonagh knows that Ireland is finally free, he will also know that his death in 1916 was not in vain, and so he can rest easily.

The elegy

'Lament for Thomas MacDonagh' is an elegy, that is, a poem that is written to lament, or express sorrow about, the death of someone. In this case, the poem laments the death of Thomas MacDonagh, executed for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising.

The mood (feelings and atmosphere) created in an elegy is usually one of nostalgia (regretfully remembering earlier times), sorrow and thoughtfulness. Ledwidge's poem has all three of these. The nostalgia is evident in line 1: 'He shall not hear the bittern cry'. One interpretation of this line is that it is a reference to the fact that MacDonagh can no longer hear the bird because he is dead. However, this line could also be seen as a reference to MacDonagh's translation of an Irish poem about a bittern. Perhaps Ledwidge is thinking back to the times when he and Thomas MacDonagh met as fellow poets in the Dublin literary scene. There is a genuine feeling of sorrow expressed by Ledwidge in lines 1–8 that MacDonagh will no longer be able to experience the natural beauty of the Irish countryside. Finally, there is a gentle atmosphere of thoughtfulness in the poem as Ledwidge thinks about what death means and the possibility that although he is dead, Thomas MacDonagh might somehow know when Ireland gains her freedom.

Rhyme, assonance and alliteration

Ledwidge shows considerable awareness of the sounds of the words that he uses, and as a result he creates a poem where the sounds of his words are almost as important as their meanings.

His use of rhyme is perfectly suited to a poem that is an elegy. In each of his four-line stanzas, it is only the last words in the second and fourth lines that rhyme. This has the effect of slowing down the pace (speed) of the reading so that it reflects the poem's mood of nostalgia, sorrow and thoughtfulness. Try reading the poem aloud and you will hear this.

Stanza 2 is an excellent example of the ways in which Ledwidge harnesses the sounds of his words to increase the impact of their meanings through his use of assonance and alliteration:

*Nor shall he know when loud March blows
Thro' **slanting snows** her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
Of many an upset daffodil.*

Assonance is where a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) sound is repeated in a line, or lines, of poetry. If we look at lines 7–8 in the stanza quoted above, it is clear from the highlighting that the vowels o, a and u are repeated in these lines. However, they are all mixed up, with an o sound being followed by an a and a followed by a u sound. Because of this, these sounds reflect the meaning of these lines. The poet describes daffodils being unsettled and disrupted by the wind, and the sounds of the words are similarly unsettled and disrupted.





Alliteration is where the same letter or sound at the beginning of words is repeated. Looking at line 6 above, there is alliteration with the letter **s** in 'slanting' and **s** in 'snows' (highlighted with bold text). Again, this sound reflects the meaning of these words: the poet is describing cold snow falling at an oblique angle, and the **s** sounds convey the whispering sound of drifting snow and the stinging sensation as it hits the faces of those who are out in it.





GABRIELA MISTRAL

LET HIM NOT GROW UP

Introduction

This poem was first published in 1924 in a collection of Mistral's poetry called *Ternura* (Tenderness). This collection deals primarily with childhood. It begins with a selection of cradle songs and round dances, some of which have been set to music in Chile. This poem, however, comes from the third section entitled *Raving Woman* in which Mistral explores the sometimes contradictory emotions experienced in motherhood. Although she never had a child herself, two years after this collection was published Mistral adopted her half brother's son and was his only parent until the boy committed suicide at age 17. Ursula Le Guin, the translator of this poem has written about Mistral's exploration of motherhood and states that 'The *Raving Woman* poems are filled with fear, irrationality, the two-mindedness which every woman who's brought up a child will recognise. She thinks deeply about what motherhood is, and her thoughts are complex, inconclusive and disturbing'. Many of these traits can be found in this poem.

A reading of the poem

The poem begins with a wish or prayer 'May my little boy/stay just as he is'. The mother persona in the poem wishes for her son to remain a child and not to grow up. This seems a strange wish for a mother to make. She continues

with the statement 'He didn't suck my milk/in order to grow up'. This is very contradictory as a mother nourishes her child to help him grow. Mistral uses the intimate image of breastfeeding the child to point to the inevitability of growing up. As the child grows, the first distance experienced by the mother is when he is weaned and no longer needs her nourishment. She asserts that 'a child's not an oak/or a ceiba tree'. These elements of nature grow tall as do 'poplars' and 'meadow grasses', but for her son she wishes he will stay like the 'mallow-flower'. This short, domesticated plant is easily managed and like the plant, she wishes to keep her son close to her and protect him.

The plaintive yearning continues in the next stanza. Mistral tries to use reason to explain her wish. He has everything he needs already and doesn't need to grow to achieve more. The list of his acquisitions 'laughter, frowns, skills, airs and graces', captures the essential elements of childhood, before the worries of adult life have an influence.

In the third stanza, the true nature of the mother's misgivings is revealed. She is afraid for her son, 'If he grows they'll all come/winking at him,/worthless women/making him shameless'. The mother's fear for her son at the hands of the 'worthless women' is a familiar fear. The mother feels that no woman could possibly be worthy of her son but it is inevitable that he will follow his instincts and leave his mother behind. The mother knows in her heart that this is inevitable but she fears that he will be easily seduced by their 'winking'.





She is also afraid of ‘the big boys that come by the house’. Her son will also be a big boy but to her he will always be her ‘little boy’ and she wants to protect him. She wishes that he will ‘see no monsters coming’. The monsters of childhood will become different fears in adult life, but she wishes that she can always protect him from the monsters.

The fourth stanza begins with a very specific wish ‘May his five summers/be all he knows’. This seems a very strange wish. We cannot remain frozen in time so does she wish that his life stops at five? Does she wish that his life and potential be cut short? She continues with her assertion that he can be happy with a life that is brief but filled with birthdays, Easters and Christmas Eves. The key moments of childhood are condensed down to the length of a yardstick. That is enough. This contradictory view of motherhood seems strange. Rather than wishing for a long and happy life for her son she wishes that it is brief but intensely happy.

The full explanation of the wish she has for her son is outlined in the next stanza. She addresses the ‘Silly women’ and tells them not to cry. She explains that the sun and stones are born but don’t grow; they remain unchanging and ‘never get older,/they last forever’. So this is what she wishes for her son – to be immortal like the sun and stones, to live forever in a state of unchanging stasis, frozen in time at this magical age of innocence and happiness. In contrast, ‘the kids and lambs/grow up and die’. This harsh reality of life and death is what she really wants to avoid for her son. The sheep and kids were traditionally used as sacrifices in the Bible, this is the fate she wishes to avoid.

The final stanza loses the objective tone found elsewhere in the poem. The poet pleads ‘O my Lord, stop him,/make him stop growing!’ The greatest fear that the mother has is that her son will die. The fact that this is inevitable has resulted in this outpouring from the poet. The only alternative is to remain frozen in time but that is not really what she wants either. The poem ends with the mother wishing for what she knows is not possible and so no real resolution can be reached.

Theme: motherhood

Mistral explores the contradictory nature of motherhood in this poem. The mother, of course, wishes for her son to grow and achieve his potential. But with each passing year the mother is aware of the fact that as her son grows he leaves moments of his childhood behind. The mother wishes to protect her son from all the dangers of adult life but knows that this is not possible. The answer is to wish that he does not grow up. Her wish is for him to remain a child suspended at age five, with all his birthdays, Easters and Christmas Eves giving him happiness. Her fears for the future include the ‘worthless women’ who will try to tempt him and the ‘big boys’ who represent a threatening danger. But even though she wishes for this immortality she knows it is not possible and ends with the pleading ‘don’t let my son die!’





W. H. AUDEN

OL 2019

OL 2020

FUNERAL BLUES

Background

It is sometimes difficult to trace the origins of certain Auden poems because he had the habit of revising his material frequently, incorporating some poems in longer works and generally rewriting. A version of 'Stop All the Clocks' (the first two verses as here, with two others) first appeared in the drama Auden wrote and produced jointly with Christopher Isherwood in 1936, *The Ascent of F6*. In this satirical fable about politics and leadership, the song is a spoof of a dirge for a dead political leader. It is a tongue-in-cheek lament, making fun of the gullibility of the public, who insist on making heroes of flawed human beings.

The present version appeared in the collection *Another Time* (1940) and was entitled 'Funeral Blues', one of 'Four Cabaret Songs for Miss Heidi Anderson'. At the time of composition Heidi Anderson was engaged to Auden's friend and collaborator, the Irish poet Louis MacNeice. The music for these was composed by Benjamin Britten.

A reading of the poem

This poem can be read either as an elegy or as a satire. If we read it as an elegy we tend to concentrate on the two final stanzas and focus on the depth of

feeling, that intense sense of loss that finds expression in the outpouring of unbridled grief:

*He was my North, my South, my East and West ...
The stars are not wanted now: put out every one*

If we read it as an elegy, these exaggerated sentiments are an attempt to communicate the depth of pain and the fearful grief felt by the speaker.

If we read it as a satire, we take our cue from the first two stanzas in particular and view the poem as a satirical treatment of public mourning, as a lament with exaggerated sentiments and imagery that succeeds in ridiculing the practice of the public funeral and is critical of the outpouring of popular grief for a public figure.

Style

On first reading this poem, one is struck by the ludicrous imagery and the wildly exaggerated emotions. The reader may not be sure whether this is comic or tragic, but if we consider the poem's origins as a blues song it may help our understanding. The critic John Fuller sees the poem as 'a good pastiche of the stoical lament and flamboyant imagery of the traditional blues lyric'. In other words, the style is a mixture of features from the lament and the blues lyric, and Auden has exaggerated these. We find an overstatement of the usual blues sentiment in lamenting a dead lover. This





exaggerated feeling is carried in the imagery, which varies from the stately and solemn –

*Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

– to the comic ‘Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves’.

We also find the blues style in the use of clichés:

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest*

Banal and much-used metaphors such as these help convey the notion that these feelings are felt by everybody, by ordinary people. They foster the idea that this grief is universal. Blues rhythms are also suggested in the metre. We get these long, rolling sentences, for example in the third stanza, and then the division of some lines into two introduces a counter-rhythm and a regular beat: ‘I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong’.

Satire

The satirical effect is created through exaggeration. The realistic sounds, silences and colours of a funeral are evoked in the first two stanzas: ‘Stop all the clocks’, ‘Silence the pianos’, ‘muffled drum’, ‘aeroplanes ... moaning’, ‘crêpe bows’, ‘black cotton gloves’. The long o and u sounds help create the atmosphere of mourning: ‘phone’, ‘bone’, ‘drum’, ‘come’. But it all goes over the top into melodrama through the use of extremes: ‘Prevent the dog from barking’ and ‘Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead/Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead’. The flamboyant American

advertising culture is quite inappropriate for conveying the announcement of a death; this bad taste heightens the sense of satire. The somewhat hysterical tone of the opening (‘Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone’) adds to the melodrama, as do the extremes of feeling in:

*Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

But do you think there might be a hint of real grief and sorrow behind this melodramatic exaggeration? Consider, for instance, the third stanza. Could line 9 be read as meaning ‘he was the whole world to me’, line 10 as ‘he was always in my thoughts, both at work and leisure’ and line 11 as ‘he was at the centre of all my moods, happy or depressed’ (‘noon’ or ‘midnight’)? It might be useful to list (in your own words) the speaker’s feelings for the dead person, then examine the final stanza in some detail. Why do you think he chooses the references he does? Why the sun, moon and stars? Why does he feel he will no longer need the ocean or the wood? Could these have been their favourite places? Do you find that the two final stanzas prompt you to consider that this poem communicates genuine feeling and depth of emotion?





WILLIAM STAFFORD

TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK

Background

It is interesting to note that this poem was rejected by some twenty magazines before Stafford finally succeeded in having it published. However, it has since proved to be one of his most popular pieces.

In his biography of his father, William Stafford's son notes that his father had a favourite method for opening a poem: 'as he often did, he started ... with recent news from his own life before coming to deeper thoughts'. Indeed, William Stafford acknowledged that he had once come upon a dead deer. It is the way in which Stafford manages to blend his own life experience and thoughtful poetic expression about life that makes this poem a particularly successful piece of writing.

A reading of the poem

Stafford begins his poem by repeating the title again in the opening line: 'Traveling through the dark'. This repetition is deliberate and highlights the importance of the phrase and alerts the reader to the changes in the meanings that are attached to it as the poem progresses. Clearly, 'Traveling through the dark' can be simply that: a reference to the fact that the poet was driving along the Wilson River road at night. Certainly, the first stanza

reinforces this interpretation by remaining firmly fixed in a very real situation. He finds a recently run-over deer lying at 'the edge' of the road. It would seem that this is a fairly common discovery, as there is no tone of shock or horror in his voice in lines 1–2. Instead, in a very cool and balanced manner in lines 3–4, he decides to take the usual option and 'roll' the animal 'into the canyon' in order to prevent a further accident being caused by another driver attempting 'to swerve' to miss the dead deer.

In the second stanza, he relates how he went to the back of the car and looked at the deer. There is an added feeling of intensity created by the image of the surrounding blackness of the night punctured by the red-brown body lit up in the 'glow of the tail-light'. There is something a little disturbing in the speaker's initial description of the body as 'the heap'. Although quickly followed by 'a doe', his recognition of the body as having once been a living, breathing creature is brief, as he again returns to a rather impersonal tone with the phrase 'a recent killing'. His noting of how the doe was 'stiffened' and 'almost cold' is again suggestive of a person who has previously met with the bodies of dead animals. However, as we read on, this familiarity begins to border on callousness. The impersonal tone in line 6 changes into rough action in line 8 as he comments 'I dragged her off'. His observation that 'she was large in the belly' indicates that he is rather irritated by the size of the creature that he has to deal with.





Suddenly, the third stanza presents us with a shift in his reaction to the situation. Up until now, the scene has largely been described using the sense of sight. The sense of touch had been introduced in line 8, but that was an impersonal, almost ‘unfeeling’ kind of touch. Here, he suddenly notes details about ‘the heap’: it is female once again as he finds his ‘fingers touching **her** side’, a side that is ‘warm’. There is a sense that this touch is a lingering contact. In a surprising moment of empathy, given his previously practical approach, he pictures the source of this warmth: ‘her fawn’ lying within her. He momentarily seems to identify with the fawn as it becomes ‘alive’ to him. But then it is as if his moment of empathy begins to dissolve into a confusion of meanings attached to the word ‘still’. Does he mean ‘still’ as in ‘not moving’ or ‘quiet’ or ‘even now’? Whatever the interpretation, he acknowledges that the fawn will ‘never ... be born’. And yet, he cannot recover his earlier brisk practicality. He admits that his actions stopped as he ‘hesitated’.

Once again, in the fourth stanza the lights of the car serve to heighten the intensity of the moment in the overwhelming darkness. As he hovers in this moment of hesitation, his eyes follow the ‘parking lights’ of his car ‘aimed ahead’. Up until this point there has been no mention of sound in the poem, but in this moment he is struck by the sound of his car’s engine. The image is suggestive of a giant lazy cat with half-closed eyes, ‘lowered parking lights’, its body gently vibrated by purrs of contentment and satisfaction. Indeed, this car seems to possess a certainty that the poet lacks because its ‘parking lights’ are ‘aimed ahead’: it knows what direction to take. Once again, in line 15, the colour red appears in the darkness as the ‘exhaust’ turns a glowing, warm, vibrant red. Whereas in the second stanza the doe alone was

highlighted, here it is the poet who is lit up. But he is no longer alone. Now he stands alongside the car and the doe in ‘our group’. This shared community of three is surrounded by a sea of silence. He suddenly loses his objectivity as he allows himself to indulge in a moment of pathetic fallacy where he imagines the non-human ‘wilderness’ as having the human urge to ‘listen’.

The final two lines of the poem are significant, not least because they are only two lines. Previously, Stafford has used quatrains (groups of four lines). There is something jagged about lines 17–18, as if he is trying to shake himself out of this moment of hesitation. Line 17 is broken by dashes as he sees himself take on an almost prophet-like role as he acts for all human beings: ‘I thought hard for us all’. He seems to be excusing his hesitation with his declaration that it is his ‘only swerving’. The suddenness of line 18 is deliberate on Stafford’s part. His hesitation vanishes into practical activity; his lingering contact with the doe reverts to the ‘unfeeling’ touch of line 8. The doe may still be ‘her’ but she is nevertheless pushed ‘over the edge into the river’.

It is in the final two lines that we begin to understand another, symbolic level of meaning to the phrase ‘traveling through the dark’. Is Stafford suggesting that human life is much like this situation? Do we, too, spend most of our lives surrounded by a blackness that hinders our attempts to move along the road of life? Is it that, on occasions, there are glimpses of possibilities of other choices or decisions but we are often trapped in hesitation? And finally, is it possible that these moments of hesitation can suddenly give way to a certainty and decisiveness that enable us to make that choice, commit to a decision and move ‘ahead’?





PATRICIA BEER

THE VOICE

A reading of the poem

Patricia Beer's poem opens conversationally: 'When God took my aunt's baby boy, a merciful neighbour/Gave her a parrot.' The reference to the parrot is unexpected and sets the tone for some wry observations from the poet. A dramatic turning point in the unnamed aunt's life is referred to matter of factly: 'And turned her back on the idea of other babies'. Her difficult financial circumstances are suggested by the fact that she 'could not have afforded' the parrot. In her house, the parrot 'looked unlikely' because of his bright coloration; the only other colour there was the old-fashioned, cheap 'local pottery' with quaint dialect inscriptions, 'Du ee help yerself to crame, me handsome'. Beer describes how the parrot 'said nothing' while speculating entertainingly on what sounds might have issued from him: 'From pet-shop gossip or a sailor's oath ... tom-tom, war-cry or wild beast roaring'. The aunt teaches him 'nursery rhymes morning after morning'; he learns to speak in a Devon accent. Beer associates the parrot with the aunt's lost child: 'He sounded like a farmer, as her son might have.' In a telling phrase, 'He fitted in.'

Beer mixes humour and pathos as the parrot becomes ill: 'he got confused, and muddled up/His rhymes. Jack Horner ate his pail of water ... I wept'.

There is some of Beer's characteristic wry humour to be observed in 'He had never seemed puzzled by the bizarre events/He spoke of' and clever phrasing in 'And tumbled after'. Ironically, when the aunt died, 'widowed, childless, pitied/And patronised', the poet is left with no memory of her voice, 'But I can still hear his'.

Language

Beer captures the rhythms and idioms of colloquial speech: 'When God took my aunt's baby boy' and 'And turned her back on the idea of other babies.' Her style is direct: 'But I can still hear his', while displaying a playful sense of humour as she echoes the nursery rhyme: 'Said/"Broke his crown" and "Christmas pie". And tumbled after.' Her use of dialect helps to suggest the character of the aunt's house and decorations: 'With the local pottery which carried messages/Like "Du ee help yerself to crame, me handsome."' Beer sums up the aunt's life most succinctly: 'My aunt died the next winter, widowed, childless, pitied/And patronised.' The alliterating *w* and *p* sounds help make the line memorable, like the *h* sounds in the final line: 'I can still hear his'.

Tone

As the poem opens, the poet seems detached: 'When God took ... a merciful neighbour/Gave her a parrot.' There are flashes of humour as she describes





the aunt's pottery and 'her jokes; she used to say turds and whey'. The parrot's confusion in his final illness is humorously illustrated; she also suggests her feelings: 'I wept.'

The final stanza allows a rather different perspective, as Beer reflects on the unnamed aunt's life, 'widowed, childless, pitied/ And patronised'. She is far more sensitive to the woman's suffering and concludes ironically with the poignant observation, 'She would not have expected it to be remembered/After so long.' In a poem about voices, the aunt has no voice and no name. The colourful parrot's voice is still heard.





DENISE LEVERTOV

AN ARRIVAL (NORTH WALES, 1897)

A reading of the poem

The title of this poem suggests that it will be about an important historical event, but it is actually a description of a young orphaned girl arriving to live in a strange town with unfamiliar relatives. Many of Denise Levertov's poems are concerned with incidents in the everyday lives of ordinary individuals. She believed that such everyday incidents reveal more about the reality of how people live together than important events. She was very interested in how people's lives can be made very difficult by differences in customs and attitudes. Levertov felt that we ought to question the customs and attitudes that we grow up with to discover if they are fair to everyone, and if we realise that they are unfair, then we should change them.

This poem is set in Wales over 100 years ago. Lines 1–9 describe a young orphaned girl arriving in a town that she does not know to live with unfamiliar relatives. The poet mentions the girl's 'moss-agate eyes' looking around the different place and her 'Nostrils flaring' as she smells the different smells, so it is evident that she is anxious about the changes that she is facing: moving from the more industrialised area of Glamorgan to a country town and living with people she does not know. The girl is wearing a mourning outfit, showing that somebody close to her has died. She clearly wants to make a good

impression on her relatives because she has bought an expensive mourning outfit, gives gifts of money to them and tries to talk to them. However, lines 10–14 describe her cousins' 'amazed' reaction to the very different attitudes and customs of the girl.

In lines 15–21 we learn more about the reactions of the 'Auntie' to the girl. She takes 'the gold' gifts away from the cousins, so she obviously does not think it is appropriate for young people to have control of money. She also takes away the girl's mourning clothes to have them 'altered', as she considers them to be 'unsuitable', and she is shocked that the young girl chose them herself. We learn from these actions that the aunt does not approve of young girls wearing expensive and elaborate clothes. It is also evident that she believes that young girls should have their clothes chosen for them by adults, because they will know what is 'suitable'. This shows us that the aunt does not like the different customs and attitudes of the girl. The 'Auntie' also explains to the girl that because her father has died, she is no longer 'her father's daughter' but the 'niece' of her uncle, who is a minister. This reveals that the aunt's attitude is that girls and women only matter because of the men to whom they are connected. The fact that the aunt refers to the girl's uncle as 'the minister' suggests that the aunt feels that her husband has an important role in their society. Because of this, the aunt expects that the young girl, as his niece, will always behave in a way that will not embarrass the uncle, no matter what she herself would like to do.





In lines 22–32, the poet uses a series of vivid images to convey the young girl's unhappiness. She spends a lot of time on her own, walking around her 'new world's' different streets. This behaviour shows that she has not grown close to her new relatives. Also, she is puzzled and bewildered by the different customs and attitudes of her relatives, 'enquiring' about the ways in which they treat her and why her clothes and actions and speech seem to be so shocking to them. In addition, it seems that her relatives do not approve of expressions of emotions because the young girl can only show her 'rage' at the terrible changes to her life by weeping when she is away from the house or when listening to 'the choirs' in her uncle's church. In the final image of the poem, Levertov conveys the depth of the girl's distress in the touching image of her tears filling her eyes so that the hills seem to wobble and jump about, as if they 'skipped like lambs'. Sadly, there is no skipping for the orphaned girl because the differences between her customs and attitudes and those of her relatives have not been discussed and settled so that everyone is treated fairly.

Themes

Differences in customs and attitudes

One of the main themes (ideas) explored in this poem is the ways in which differences in customs and attitudes can make life very difficult for people, particularly if people are unwilling to compromise or change. This is represented in the different ideas of what is 'right' and 'wrong', held by the 'orphan' and the 'Auntie'. Below is a summary of the main differences in their attitudes and customs, although you may find others in your reading of the poem.

- The orphan's clothes: The 'orphan' buys a mourning outfit that is considered to be 'right' and likely to make a good impression, according to the attitudes in her world. The 'Auntie' considers that the mourning outfit is 'wrong', so she takes it to have it altered so that it will fit in with what is considered to be 'right' according to the attitudes in her world.
- Buying the clothes: The orphan's actions of choosing and buying the mourning outfit are considered to be 'right' according to the customs in her world. The 'Auntie' considers these actions to be 'wrong' according to the customs in her world.
- Giving gifts of money: The 'orphan' gives her cousins 'gold funeral sovereigns', the 'right' funeral custom in her world. The 'Auntie' thinks that this is 'wrong' according to the customs in her world.
- Behaviour: The behaviour of the 'orphan' as described in the points above was accepted as being 'right' for her role as 'her father's daughter' according to the attitudes in her world. The 'Auntie' regards this behaviour as 'wrong' and tells the girl that she will have to change it so that it will fit in with what is considered to be 'right' for a minister's niece according to the attitudes in her world.

The difficulties that can be caused by such differences in attitudes and customs and an unwillingness to compromise or change are vividly conveyed in lines 22–32, with the sad image of the 'orphan' who is 'Alone' walking her 'new world's' streets, 'turning things over/in her heart', and feeling 'rage' and 'weeping'.





Power in a society

This poem also explores the theme of power in a society. In the new, unfamiliar world where the 'orphan' now lives, the power is shared out in this order of importance:

1. The uncle, who is an adult male and a minister, has the most power.
2. The 'Auntie', who is an adult female and the minister's wife, is next in line.
3. The 'Cousins', who are the children of the minister and part of his immediate family.
4. The 'orphan', who is a child, female, the niece of the minister and part of the minister's extended family, has the least power.

It is also worth noting that the orphan is only described in terms of her relationship to men: 'her father's daughter' and 'the minister's niece'. This suggests that adult males are considered to be the most important and therefore the most powerful members in this society.

It should be remembered that the theme of power in a society is connected to the theme of differences in customs and attitudes because structures of power in a society, such as the one outlined above, usually develop out of, and are supported by, customs and attitudes. Thus, changing a custom or an attitude involves a change in the way that power in a society is shared out. As a result, those who have the most power in a society are often unwilling to compromise or change customs and attitudes because they are afraid of losing the power that they have.





RICHARD MURPHY

MOONSHINE

A reading of the poem

Unlike most love poems, which are very serious, this one is light, whimsical and full of humorous wordplay. Murphy sets up the dilemma or problem in the first stanza between thinking and loving, being alone or being together. Thinking and loving do not mix, as thinking requires solitude.

The second stanza is dominated by wordplay on the different shades of meaning of 'think'. 'I think of you' is straightforward thinking about you. It is highly ironic that a love poem should be structured as a piece of logical reasoning or argument, as this poem is. This undermines the conventional notion of love as overwhelming, non-rational emotion. Structuring the poem as a logical argument pokes fun at the conventional forms of love poetry. In a further witticism, the bones of the dilemma are echoed in the end-of-line words in each stanza. See the third stanza – think, loving, love, thinking – or the first stanza, repeated again in reverse order in the final stanza: think, alone, love, together and love, together, think, alone. If there is a serious point, it is that thinking and feeling do not combine very well in love.





THOM GUNN

CONSIDERING THE SNAIL

Introduction

In this poem Gunn looks closely at the slow progress of a snail. His careful structure and control of form replicates the snail's slow but deliberate progress.

A reading of the poem

The enormous effort required by the snail is captured by Gunn in the opening lines of the poem. The snail 'pushes' and the 'grass is heavy/with water'. It seems to resist his progress but still he perseveres. The 'bright path he makes' is contrasted with the 'earth's dark'. The snail brings brightness into a world of darkness, darkened by the rain. From the snail's perspective the grass seems like a 'wood of desire'. The word desire seems strange here. What is desire but instinctual wants or needs? The progress of the snail is governed by his instincts; he knows he must continue and so he does.

The antennae of the snail are described as 'pale antlers'. This exaggeration gives the snail a majestic air. We would rarely consider the snail as a hunter and yet here Gunn describes him as stealthy, 'barely stirring/as he hunts'. The single-mindedness of the snail, doggedly pursuing his intent, is described as 'drenched there/with purpose, knowing nothing.' The poet poses a question

'What is a snail's fury?' Like desire in the first stanza, the word 'fury' here seems out of place for a creature such as a snail. We do not think of a snail as capable of such raging emotions as 'Desire' 'fury' or, from the last stanza, 'passion'. The poet makes us re-evaluate our perceptions of the snail. Just because his progress is slower and his world smaller, does not mean that his emotions are any less relevant.

The final stanza returns to the poet's perspective. He looms as a giant above the snail and imagines that if he parted the grass and saw the 'trail of broken white' he would never have imagined the 'slow passion to that deliberate progress'. The shifting perspective allowed the poet to appreciate the subtle power of the snail and he challenges us to see things differently.

Theme: creativity

The progress of the snail can be compared to the creative work of a poet. The slow painstaking progress may not be seen or appreciated by most but yet, the poet, will, like the snail, push through barriers and resistance. He brings brightness and illumination to the darkness. The creative impulse is instinctual and beyond easy explanation. Like the progress of the snail, the poet 'cannot tell/what power is at work', but still he must continue. Like the snail, when one looks at a piece of poetry most 'would never have/imagined the slow passion/to that deliberate progress.'





Structure

While the poem may at first glance appear to be in free verse, in fact the carefully crafted verses conceal a very disciplined metre and rhyming scheme. The three stanzas, like the spiral of a snail, are tightly wound with internal rhyme. The three six line stanzas follow the same *abcabc* rhyming scheme, but each rhyme is slant rhyme and so subtle rather than brash. Each line, rather than following a traditional metrical rhythm, follows a syllabic metre; each has seven syllables except the last, which has eight. The subtle structure evident throughout the poem reveals the slow methodical progress of the poet as he crafts his work.

Imagery

The descriptions in the poem dwell on the physicality of the snail and the world around it. The grass 'is heavy with water', the snail makes a 'bright path' and the 'rain/has darkened the earth's dark'. These images are filled with contrasts between bright and dark as well as illustrating the resistance the snail must overcome. Words such as 'desire', 'fury' and 'passion' belie the insignificance of the snail's existence. These powerful emotions are the motivating factors for most human endeavour. The poet uses the switch in perspective to reveal universal truths.





TED HUGHES

OL 2019

OL 2022

HAWK ROOSTING

A reading of the poem

Hughes opens this poem in a way that is designed to make the reader feel immediately involved: 'I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.' The combination of this dramatic image of the hawk perched on the very top of a tree, confident enough to close its eyes, and the assured tone of the words that are spoken immediately catch the reader's attention. We cannot help but read on. Without feeling any need to question the 'rightness' of the life that it leads, the hawk celebrates the way in which its physical make-up and instincts are so closely and successfully linked: the 'hooked head' and 'hooked feet' are beautifully designed to carry out 'perfect kills and eat'.

In lines 5–11, the hawk reveals the extent of its absolute certainty about its position in life: that to live as a hawk is, literally and metaphorically, to be at the centre of all things. The hawk declares that the 'high trees', the air and the sun are all there purely to offer 'advantage to me' and even the very position of the earth is located 'upward for my inspection'. Without any trace of modesty or, indeed, gratitude, the hawk says 'It took the whole of Creation/To produce my foot, my each feather'.

But lines 12–20 make it clear to us that the hawk sees the place that it has in life as being much more than simply living as a successful product of Creation. With a casual tone that reflects the hawk's unquestioning acceptance that it is truly the creature who has power over all things, the hawk explains how it is stronger than the force of Creation because of its ability to destroy what Creation has made by killing. Significantly, Hughes suggests that there is something to be admired in the brutal honesty with which the hawk goes about its business. It does not try to hide behind arguments that are designed to deceive others as to the reasons for its actions, but rather, it frankly defines its purpose as the 'allotment of death'. The hawk's 'right' to live in this way is based on something that is far stronger than arguments – that is, instinct. To the hawk, it seems as if the sun, that power source that drives the world of nature, is actively supporting the fulfilment of its killing instincts by shining 'behind' the bird, so that any prey will be blinded by its rays.

In the final three lines of the poem, we witness the full extent of the hawk's sense of its own supremacy. It comments confidently that 'Nothing has changed since I began' due to the fact that 'My eye has permitted no change'. The poem ends as it began, with a statement that reveals the complete assurance and certainty of the hawk: 'I am going to keep things like this.'





Ted Hughes and nature

Ted Hughes was born in Yorkshire and from his childhood he loved the world of nature and was particularly fascinated by animals. Over the years, he began to recognise significant differences between the relationship that animals and birds have with the world of nature and the relationship that people have with nature.

For Hughes, animals and birds are directly connected to nature by the ancient energies that they all share, the same energies that caused the world of nature to first appear on the surface of the earth many millions of years ago. These ancient energies still drive the world of nature and, in the form of the natural instincts that they are born with, the animals and birds of today. The natural instinct to fight for survival is one of these energies. Hughes believed that because animals and birds respond to these instincts without questioning them, they are at one with the world of nature. They can live their lives in a focused and single-minded way, using the powers that nature has given them, without experiencing any doubts about their behaviour. This is exactly what the hawk does in 'Hawk Roosting'.

In contrast, Hughes felt that people have become increasingly separated from the world of nature over time. He believed that this separation was caused by religion and, more recently, rationalism, that is, the belief that people should live their lives guided by reason. For Hughes, both religion and rationalism bring about situations where people are encouraged to suppress their natural instincts, the ancient energies that once connected them to the world of nature. However, suppressing such instincts is no easy task, so consequently, Hughes regarded people as being

pulled in two directions, one way by their natural instincts and the other way by religion and rationalism. As a result, he believed that people live lives that are unfocused and full of questions and doubt.

Structure

Interestingly, the way in which Hughes has structured this poem reinforces the impression that the hawk is a bird that lives life in a focused and single-minded way. Firstly, the poem is divided into six stanzas of four lines each, suggesting an ordered and methodical approach, much like that of the hawk to its killing. Secondly, the lines of poetry are short and many of them are one-sentence statements, such as line 1: 'I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.' Lines such as this one reflect the fact that there is no room in the hawk's instinct-driven thinking for long lines expressing and examining doubts.





ALDEN NOWLAN

IN PRAISE OF THE GREAT BULL WALRUS

Introduction

Alden Nowlan was a physically large man with a beard and this poem offers a humorous caricature of himself as a bull walrus. The conversational and direct tone adopted by Nowlan in this poem conceals a tightly controlled poetic form.

A reading of the poem

The poem opens with the poet seemingly in mid-conversation, 'I wouldn't like to be one/of the walrus people/for the rest of my life'. The random thought feels as if it is part of a larger conversation that we have not heard. We are just eavesdropping on this small section of the ponderings and musings of the poet. The anthropomorphising of the walrus as a 'people' gives them characteristics and societal rituals that would be normally considered human attributes. The poet continues to speculate and imagines lying on the rocks with the walrus and engaging in conversation. He paints an image of drinking in a dark tavern that caters for longshoremen. The imagery is full of nautical allusions. The 'tavern' feels like a place where pirates and ship-hands abound and women are not tolerated. This patriarchal society is one where the poet feels at home and it is here he imagines his conversation with the walrus.

The poet sees himself mirrored in the walrus. The mirroring is most evident in the dialogue he engages in with the walrus when the colloquial 'How yuh doin' you big old walrus?' is echoed back in the walrus's response. The same cadence and phrases are used by both speakers. In this way Nowlan conveys the conversation as a meeting of equals. The ecological implications of this meeting are revealed in the next exclamation of the poet, 'How good it is to share/the earth with such creatures/and how unthinkable it would have been/to have missed all this'. The verb 'to share' implies the co-ownership of the earth that mankind has to be mindful of.

The poet poses a philosophical question with the use of the conditional 'how unthinkable it would have been/to have missed all this/by not being born'. In a manipulation of the Descartes statement, 'I think therefore I am', Nowlan states that because he has been born non-existence is unthinkable. The thought of not being born is followed by the strange interjection 'a happy thought, that'. But the final lines of the poem reveal the deep thinking wisdom the speaker, or the walrus, exhibits. Not being born is 'the only tragedy/that we can imagine/but need never fear.' The rolling cadences prevalent throughout the poem slows down in the final line to an authoritative, heavily stressed, alliterative phrase. While anyone can imagine and worry about a number of tragedies, this one at least, cannot come to pass.





Tone

The conversational tone of the speaker is created through a number of techniques. The short rolling phrases draw the reader along. The phrases echo the natural cadences of conversation. By using the first person and an almost confessional tone, the reader feels that they have been included in a private conversation. The poet uses balancing phrases such as ‘for the rest of my life’ and ‘one sunny afternoon’ which helps to create the rolling rhythm in the poem. The deep, gruff voice of the speaker and the walrus is created using the colloquial phrase “How yuh doin’”. This phrase is repeated by both the speaker and the walrus creating a mirroring effect between speaker and walrus. The final lines become more ponderous than conversational. The epigrammatic statement ‘for not being born is/the only tragedy/that we can imagine/but need never fear’, contains layers of meaning and belies the light conversational tone that has been evident up to this point.





MARGE PIERCY

WILL WE WORK TOGETHER?

A reading of the poem

It is significant that this poem opens with the word 'You', for although the poet's lover does not speak in this poem, she makes him very much a part of it by her frequent references to 'you'. She goes on to describe how she knows that her lover will be angry when he wakes up because she is not there. Although he curses her, she is not upset as she knows that this is because, without her, his world is 'grey'. She tries to comfort him by reminding him of how it is when she is there. When she is with him, she is the bringer of light and bright heat. Her bones and heart, her face and body all function in a different way in his company. But she does not see this wonderful condition as an end in itself. For her, it is merely a beginning. The intensity of her feelings for him, and his for her, are fuelled by an energy that can be used by them to construct something that is 'useful': a respectful, lasting, fun, protective relationship where they can celebrate each other and the love that they share.

Imagery

Piercy believes that as a human being in this modern world, 'You need affirmation of the parts of you that the media doesn't affirm – the core of

you.' For her, it is poetry that provides this affirmation. Indeed, in this poem she creates stunning images that help us, her readers, to understand something of the 'core' needs, wishes and hopes that lie deep within each of us.

Her description of the passionate connection that two people can share is both emotionally powerful and deeply affecting in its old-fashioned 'homeliness' because of the imagery that she uses to convey it. When she is with her lover she is 'bright/as a fireplace'. In a world where central heating is becoming the norm, we still feel an emotional response to the idea of sitting in front of a warm fire with a loved one. Similarly, her bones are 'singing/like a tea kettle on the boil'. Again, we now have kettles that switch themselves off once they have boiled and do not merrily whistle away, but we know what she is saying about feelings of being cared for, of the power of a comforting cup of tea. There is something very vulnerable about the image of her heart wagging as if she were 'a big dog/with a bigger tail'. She is making it clear that when she is with her lover she reveals her feelings for him with the same unguarded openness as that of a sloppy, affectionate dog.

When she moves on to tell him of her hopes for the way in which their relationship will develop, she uses two images that at first seem to be very different to each other: the statue of a goddess and the sheep. The statue could be seen as something that is distant and cold, but although she is clearly a figure of respect, she actually has a rather appealing appearance.





She may be 'armed', indicating strength, but she is 'laughing' and 'wearing/flowers and feathers' in a celebratory manner. In this way, the statue of the goddess represents characteristics that we would all like to have in our relationships. There is a touch of humour in the sudden change from the goddess to the sheep, but it too stands for one of our 'core' wishes – to be with someone who, when times are cold and gloomy, will wrap us up warmly and snugly with their presence. Truly, these are indeed 'useful' things that lie at the 'core' within us all.





OL 2019

OL 2020

ELIZABETH SMITHER

ON THE EUTHANASIA OF A PET DOG

A reading of the poem

This is a personal, even intimate, poem revealing both the grief and love felt on the death of a beloved pet. Emotions, we can imagine, are heightened in the case of pet euthanasia, as it is the owners and carers who have to make the decision.

The actual event is described in the first four and a half lines. The emotion, in this section, is kept under control as the poet focuses on the details: the 'shaver and syringe'; 'Lightly she fell'; 'the vets' hands held her'. There is a gentleness to the process, carried out by 'two young blonde girls just out of vet school' as 'she died between them, surrounded by petting'. All of that culminates in the sudden awareness of the time: 'It was three o'clock'. It is as if time stopped then. The moment of death, the moment of passing for each human or animal is significant, mainly for those who loved and are left. It is a watershed moment. And it is so used here – phrased as a short, stark factual statement that closes out the first movement or scene of the poem.

After this moment, time switches back to the earlier part of the day when they sat with the pet dog, 'making our farewells'. This stanza clearly shows the reason for the decision. The dog is suffering, 'heart heaving', even though she is still bravely trying to do what a dog does – sift the information carried

on the breeze. We get clear, definite images of the dog that are deeply moving. Yet, still the emotion is held in check, controlled:

*while she sniffed the bright day, heart heaving
and lifted her muzzle to the faint breeze.*

In the third stanza the floodgates of emotion and grief can no longer be contained. We get fractured images of people; – glimpses of their faces and hands and their ungainly, disorganised movements – 'rushing'; 'stumbled'; 'stooped' – together with suggestions that they are about to be sick. All these images convey the physical effects of grief and the brokenness of loss.

A kind of calmness, a sad serenity, returns in the final stanza. The physical changes after death suggest that for the dog, death has been a relief from suffering:

*She lay on the carpet so soft and plumped-out
all dehydration gone, all clenching of sinews.*

This leads to that wonderful fiction, in the third line, that blurs the boundary between life and death: 'she stayed there for hours'. It is as if the dog, relaxed from her suffering, is content to lie there and be hugged. The final two lines are filled with signs of love: caresses and blessings. They caress her (hug; touch lovingly) and bless her, (ask God's blessing on her). And they talk to her 'finally', i.e. for the last time. So the poem closes with these signs and rituals of love.





General points to think about

- Consider how well-structured the poem is; how the movement of the story flows. Stanza 1 deals with the euthanasia, a dramatic opening; stanza 2 goes back to the earlier part of the day; stanza 3, post death, shows how they 'gave in to grief'; stanza 4 is devoted to the final leave-taking.
- The different moods and changes in emotion also follow this structure, producing a dramatic rollercoaster of emotions.
- In stanza 1 the emotions are kept under control by the focus on the factual details. Stanza 2 is deeply moving, poignant, recalling when they sat with the dog earlier in the day 'while she sniffed the bright day, heart heaving'. Stanza 3 dissolves in unrestrained grief. But there is a return to a calm, intimate leave-taking in the final stanza.
- Notice the detail in the imagery, everywhere. It ranges from the clinical detail in the first stanza; to the dog's dying attempts to do the ordinary as she 'lifted her muzzle to the faint breeze', in the second stanza; to the images of broken people grieving, in the third stanza; to the gentle tactile leave-taking in the fourth stanza.

Use of language

Though the poem does not have the conventional musical sound effects of a rhyming scheme, the poet does, at crucial moments, create the music of repeated sound – 'caress' and 'bless'; 'all dehydration gone, all'. There's also the music of alliteration present, again at crucial moments – 'heart heaving'; 'rushing to basins to bend'; and, of course, the vets with 'shaver and syringe'.





TESS GALLAGHER

THE HUG

A reading of the poem

We are pretty much thrown into the action of this poem in the first line. There is no sense of setting up the background to the story – it is as if we have turned on the television in the middle of a programme. There is a woman ‘reading a poem’ and another is listening. Although standing close to each other, the two women are clearly separate individuals. In contrast, the poet seems to be very much part of a couple as she and her partner listen, their ‘arms around each other’. There is the suggestion that there is something special about the fact that the poem is being read and listened to ‘in the open’ and, to be honest, it is not often that poetry is read ‘on the street’. Yet it is a very quiet ‘open’, as the overall impression is of the four figures standing together in an otherwise deserted street of houses.

Moved by the uniqueness of this moment, the poet feels the urge to hug her partner. She conveys her emotion in a vivid simile, comparing it to ‘a variable star’. However, there is something a little unsettling, perhaps even bordering on amusing, in the idea of the star ‘shooting light/off’ so that it feels ‘comfortable’. It suggests that this hug, although she says that she is ‘giving it’ to her partner, is almost a form of pressure release for her benefit, something

to make her feel more ‘comfortable’. It is significant that she says ‘I finish but keep on holding’. There is no sense that her partner is involved in the hug.

The arrival of the ‘man’ who ‘looks homeless because of how/he needs’ breaks into the moment. The strength of his neediness is such that the poet decides that he can only be a man totally on his own, both in the emotional sense and in the concrete physical sense of not having a ‘home’, a ‘place’ to belong. Surprisingly, this stranger asks her partner, not her, if he can have a hug. Even more surprisingly, her partner nods yes. It is odd that she is not consulted by either the stranger or her partner. It is as if she is seen as a possession. However, it soon becomes clear that she would, to some degree, like to be possessed by her partner as she longs for him to reveal his love for her by declaring that she is his ‘only’. However, there is something rather amusing about the way she puts ‘etc.’ into the list of what she would like him to say: ‘that I’m yours, only/yours, etc.’. It rather sounds as if she is dictating a letter.

Perhaps in a fit of ‘I’ll show you!’, she goes over to the stranger and begins to hug him, trying to appear as if she means it. She clearly feels awkward as she tries to work out how long it should last. But then her feelings begin to change as she surrenders to her ‘needs’. She is hit with the full sense of how big this man is. Rather like a child with her father, she relaxes and puts her





head on his chest, starting to 'snuggle/in'. Magically, the physicality of the hug dissolves and they share something much more meaningful than body contacting body: they share their wishes. The hug is such an overwhelming experience that she is no longer conscious of anything else: her 'lover', the women, even the houses have disappeared.

There is a dry humour in her comment 'Clearly, a little permission is a dangerous thing.' The permission her 'lover' gave her was far from 'little', since it indicated a major weakness in his feelings. The truth of the situation is apparent to the poet. She, like all of us, wants a hug to be 'a masterpiece of connection': a total embrace of body, heart, soul and mind. Her comparison of such a special engagement to 'the button/on his coat' leaving 'the imprint of/a planet' on her cheek may seem ridiculous, but it does capture the consequences of this moment. For hugging this stranger is in itself a small act, taking only a matter of seconds in her life – a 'button', as it were – but the mark it has made on her life is huge, 'a planet'. She knows that she will have to end this hug and 'walk away'. But that is not really the end of it. For she also knows that when she walks away she will have to face up to the fact that the 'place' that she had in life (being in a couple, being in love and being, as she thought, loved) is gone. She finds herself, in a very real sense, 'homeless'.

Imagery

'I'm interested in the type of poetry that will haunt me and stop me in my tracks,' says Tess Gallagher. There are many ways in which Gallagher's poetry can 'haunt' and 'stop' readers in their

'tracks', but perhaps in 'The Hug' it is her use of imagery that has the greatest impact. Unsurprisingly for a woman who studied film, Gallagher employs what could be termed a cinematic approach here. Lines 1–6 read almost like notes about a scene in a film. She attacks the description of an abstract emotion in an equally thorough manner. The simile of the real and concrete 'variable star' is vivid and enables us to appreciate just how overwhelming the poet's desire to hug is. However, this image also carries with it the implication that this desire comes from her need to release some emotion so that she herself can feel 'comfortable' rather than a desire to engage in a mutual sharing with her lover.

Her other particularly haunting image is that of the imprint of the button on her cheek, indicating the consequences of this incident. On first reading, this connection seems to be a little odd, if not slightly amusing, but it is these qualities that make the reader think about the image. The button may be a small item that leaves a temporary but potentially embarrassing mark on her face, but in emotional terms this incident has consequences of planetary proportions for the poet.





LIZ LOCHHEAD

REVELATION

A reading of the poem

Liz Lochhead uses straightforward, conversational language to describe an incident that at first seems to be nothing more than a narrative (a story) based on a childhood experience of collecting eggs and milk from a nearby farm. In lines 1–7 she describes the setting: a farmyard with an outhouse for a bull rather unsuitably named Bob. The tone of these lines suggests that the poet, as a young girl, felt comfortable coping with the errand to the farmhouse for milk and eggs. She felt safe and cared for at the farm, as is indicated by the ‘someone’ who was willing to hold her hand as she looked in at Bob for the first time.

However, going to see Bob led the poet to an experience that took her out of her comfort zone and into a situation where she was forced to confront, in a dramatic way, a new level of understanding about the world in which she lived. In lines 8–14, Lochhead uses images that appeal to the senses of smell, sight and hearing to convey the overwhelming impact that the bull had on her. The powerful physicality of the bull, barely restrained by a chain, and the uncontrolled emotional strength of the roar of ‘rage’ suddenly made her realise that this animal had a capacity for violence, as is indicated by her use of the word ‘wounds’ to describe the bull’s nostrils.

Lines 15–23 suddenly place the poet, as a young girl, back into the setting where she had once felt so safe and cared for: the ‘yard’ of the farm. But now, because of the revelation she has experienced with the bull, she can no longer feel the same way. In her radically changed state, the poet describes how she envied the ‘oblivious’ hens. Unlike them, however, she now fully understood something that she had ‘always half-known’: that the world is not a completely safe place because there is evil in it. This evil, which can be represented as the devil or the ‘Anti-Christ’, brings violence, ‘anarchy’ and destruction into the world and seeks to destroy life and anything that is life-sustaining, such as the eggs and milk.

So it is that in the final section of the poem, the poet tells how as a young girl she ran home, feeling very vulnerable, through a world in which this evil seemed to surround her. To her, the boys carelessly destroying the butterflies and the frogs seemed to be part of the violence and anarchy that she now saw everywhere, even in the world of nature, conveyed by the images of the ‘thorned hedge and harried nest’. Following her revelation about the presence of evil in the world, she felt that all she could do was to try to protect the eggs and milk, and perhaps herself, from such evil with her ‘small and shaking hand’.





A persona

It is unclear whether we should read the 'I' in this poem as the poet speaking as herself and recalling an incident from her own childhood or as a persona, that is, a character that the poet has created and adopted for the purposes of the poem. However, there is a very personal tone (the emotion in the speaker's voice) in this poem, so it does seem to be based on the poet's personal experience.

Themes

Through this incident from her childhood, the poet explores two main themes (ideas): the transition, or change, from childhood to adulthood and what it is to be male or female.

Transition from childhood to adulthood

As a young girl, the poet goes to the farm in a childish way. We can imagine how grown-up she felt as she walked, on her own, 'for eggs and milk'. Her childish state is conveyed by the behaviour of the people there who took care of her, as is suggested by the 'someone' holding her hand and the fact that she was 'let' to look inside the outhouse, but only from the 'threshold'. So she felt secure, protected and safe and was only vaguely aware that there were dangers like the 'monster' Bob in the world.

Following her revelation about the presence of evil in the world, this childish sense of security and safety disappeared. She recognised that she was no longer 'oblivious' like the hens. She had been forced into knowing about a much more adult world where evil, and the violence and anarchy that it caused, was always active in trying to destroy life, both in the world of people and

the world of nature, as represented by the activities of the 'the big boys' and the 'thorned hedge and harried nest'. In the face of this, the poet felt 'fear'. The image of her holding the jug with her 'small and shaking hand' in an attempt to prevent the milk from spilling can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it could be implying that her attempts to protect the milk against the evil of destruction that the spilling represents indicate that she was trying to enter into this adult world by becoming the protector rather than the protected, as she was in her childish state. On the other hand, it could suggest that the poet felt afraid about becoming an adult and wanted to stop this process of transition, as she wanted to stop the milk being spilled. However, what is clear is that the poet, in her exploration of the theme of the transition, or change, from childhood to adulthood, understands that this can be a difficult and challenging time in everyone's life.

What it is to be male or female

The poet, as a young girl, seemed to be unaware of male and female at the beginning of the poem, as is indicated by her reference to the 'someone' who held her hand. Then she looked in at the bull, which she knew was male because of his male name, 'Bob'. Her recognition of the bull's physical size and strength that led to her revelation concerning his capacity for violence were connected to her awareness that the bull was male. As she associated violence with anarchy and evil and the urge to destroy life, she continued to use the male pronouns 'he' and 'his'. Consequently, 'the big boys' as males, violently wounding and destroying life, also became part of this mixture. It is important to note that her use of the words 'antidote and Anti-Christ', both





with the prefix 'anti', suggests that she was also becoming aware that this mixture was the opposite to another type of mixture.

Following her revelation, the poet recognised that she was not part of the mixture that she connected with the male bull and the male 'big boys'. Therefore, she must be part of the opposite mixture, where girls like her went to collect 'eggs and milk' that operate not to destroy life, but to sustain it. But she also realised that the eggs and milk were vulnerable because they could be easily wounded or destroyed: eggshells could be broken and milk could be spilled. She linked this physical vulnerability to herself, as is indicated by her awareness that her smaller and weaker body registered the relatively small weight of her 'pigtails thumping' on her back, something that the bull would not have noticed at all. Also, her recognition of her similarities with the eggs and milk included a growing awareness of her emotional vulnerability. She did not feel the 'rage' of the bull, therefore she must be 'well rounded, self-contained' like the eggs and share the 'placidity' of the milk. To her, these seemed to be frail qualities in the face of 'rage' and 'anarchy'. Consequently, all she could do was to take the actions of avoidance and of protection: she 'ran' from the threats and she tried to protect the eggs and milk. But she was 'scared' and her 'small' hand was 'shaking'.

Clearly, this theme of what it is to be male or female is linked to the previous theme of the transition, or change, from childhood to adulthood, because working out what it is to be male or female is one of the issues involved in making the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is evident from this poem that the poet was in the early stages of trying to sort out what being male or

female involved. No doubt as she moved through her process of transition from childhood to adulthood she came to understand that what it is to be male or female is complex. For surely that is part of what being an adult involves: the realisation that not only life, but also those who live it are complex.





PENELOPE SHUTTLE

JUNGLIAN COWS

A reading of the poem

The title of this poem plays a significant part in the way in which we approach our reading of it. Shuttle uses the two words 'Jungian Cows', and their complex meanings, to signal that there is a lot more to this poem than simply an amusing incident. There is indeed humour in this poem: the naming of the cows after significant female figures; the picture of these names being yodelled 'across the pasture' by burly farmers to chewing cows; the male figures dressed in what is traditionally accepted as female clothing; and the cows knowing full well that the so-called 'female' who is milking them is only 'an echo of the woman'.

But the important thing about humour is that a large part of the reason why we see it as funny is because it deals with incidents that break the rules of what we would normally expect to happen. These rules are based in the traditions, or as Jung describes it, the archetypes, that we have inherited. Thus, it is amusing to see a big strong farmer dressed in a skirt. Shuttle's use of humour is not only intended to make us smile, but to encourage her readers to examine the way that we think about our world, and in particular, what it is to be 'female' and 'male'.

Imagery

It is Shuttle's effective use of imagery that really draws us on into this examination. In the opening section of the poem, she cleverly introduces the setting as Switzerland, the home of Carl Jung, again to signal that this will be a thought-provoking poem. There is the rather amusing hint in this section that perhaps some of Jung's complex theories were triggered by hearing the yodelled names of the cows near his holiday home in Bollingen.

This is then followed by the farmer who, because his wife is busy, must dress in one of her skirts in order to successfully milk 'the most sensitive cows'. Once more, there is a depth to this image in that it implies that the female 'wife' is better able to deal with the sensitivities of the female cows. The only way that the farmer can access this ability is by taking on a traditionally female appearance.

The solution to the cows' refusal to yield milk to the 'electric milking-machine' is described using similarly vivid images. The 'man who works the machine/dons cotton skirt' in order 'to hide his denim overalls and big old muddy boots'. The implication is that the physical strength of males, represented by the 'overalls' and the 'boots', the traditional root of their power in society, is absolutely useless in this situation. The only solution is for him to take on something of the traditional physicality of the female so that





he 'walks smelling feminine and shy among the cows'. It seems that the production of life-giving milk by the female cows and the collection of milk by the farmer's female wife is a relationship that can only be shared by females. Males are powerless to take part unless they are prepared to participate in 'femaleness'. Interestingly, neither man seems to be upset by having to become a 'disguised man', perhaps because, as Jung believed, they carry something of the female in them. The farmer simply sees that his wife is too busy to milk the cows and puts the skirt on. The man working the milking machine fastens the 'cool soft folds' of the frilly skirt 'carefully'. While it does produce some funny pictures of the men, their acceptance that this has to be done in order to obtain the milk represents an overturning on their part of the traditional archetypes of what it is to be male and female. And it is never an easy thing to overturn the traditions and customs of our forebears.

In the final section of the poem, the image of the life-giving milk gushing out 'into the churns' suggests that the male has been successful: he has fooled the female cows into co-operating. Indeed, 'Venus, Salome, Eve, and Fraulein Alberta' appear to be drowsily submitting to the clever trick played by the man. But the final two lines of the poem reveal the truth of the situation. The female cows are not at all fooled, they are simply 'accepting the disguised man as an echo of the woman'. After all, they can afford to be generous because they are female, and as females, whether animal or human, they have the ultimate power: that of producing and sustaining life. Their breath is filled with the 'green' of life that has nourished them and that will, in turn, enable their milk

to feed. By allowing themselves to be milked they are reinforcing their power in the world. It is easy, and amusing, for them to allow the male to think that he has won, that it is he who has the power, because they know the truth.





PENELOPE SHUTTLE

ZOO MORNING

A reading of the poem

This is a brilliantly clever, inventive poem, imagining the real, unobserved night life of animals as the very opposite of what we observe by day. The elephants are party animals; the monkeys are dull academics and researchers with their huge books ('tomes') and research volumes ('theses'); the bears are politicians; and the big cats pursue the feminine pastimes of genteel Victorian ladies. The contrasts are witty and hugely exaggerated for maximum comic effect. The tongue-in-cheek humour and irony pervades the entire poem in examples such as the snakes opening their 'hinged jaws in welcome'.

But at another level the poem is also serious, as the poet invites us to think seriously about the world around us and our participation in it. She turns the world as we see it on its head to make us consider it afresh. Here, the animals are conscious, sentient beings who are performing for us. We are the punters, the ones being exploited, pretended to, given a false impression. This reverse angle view invites us to explore a number of issues about both animal and human life. It brings to the fore the question of the exploitation of animals in zoos and circuses; how we dominate and exploit animals for our doubtful enjoyment; and that we need to rethink the relationship between us humans and the animal world. The poem explores this with clever humour and a

lightness of touch, in contrast to the usual heavy preaching on this theme. This is very effective and memorable.

Central to this poem is the contrast between perception and reality. This theme of the gap between the outward and the hidden life of both humans and imagined animals is explored. A trip to the zoo is always referred to as a fun day, but the reality is often different, as 'The kids howl, baffled'. In the comparison between animals and humans ('we drag our unfurred young'), the humans are inferior:

All the animals are very good at being animals.

As usual, we are not up to being us.

The poet's slightly cynical view of human nature contrasts with the romanticised view of the natural world, where the spider 'waltzes and twirls;/ joy in her hairy joints, her ruby-red eyes'.





RACHEL LODEN

MEMO FROM THE BENEFITS DEPARTMENT

Introduction

This poem was published in Rachel Loden's first full collection of poetry *Hotel Imperion* (1999). In this poem the poet turns a darkly ironic eye on the system of benefits and the dehumanising nature of such a department.

A reading of the poem

The opening line of the poem is a play on the biblical reference 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (Exodus), which outlines that any punishment should be appropriate to the amount of suffering caused. Legal systems also use this principle – the law of retaliation or *lex talionis*, states that the penalty for any crime or compensation must be relative to the severity of the action. This principle has been undermined in popular culture with speakers such as Martin Luther King claiming 'that old law about "an eye for an eye" leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing'. Here, Loden takes the line and uses it to explore the logical application of benefits given for injuries experienced by applicants. The extent of a person's suffering cannot be so crudely measured but Loden takes the authoritative voice of the Benefits Department and laces it with her own irreverence and humour.

'For an eye, not an eye./For a tooth, forget it.' The dismissive tone of 'forget it' suggests that for the serious business of the Benefits Department, the loss of a tooth is inconsequential. The play on the word 'benefit' riddles the poem. A 'benefit' refers to a payment made by a government agency, but for an individual, a 'benefit' would be something that gives them an advantage. Obviously, any advantage of losing a limb would be difficult to imagine. The heartless, cold statement 'No benefit if you cut off/your own hand or your own foot', implies that such an action may have been undertaken by choice. The sing-song rhythm of the lines 'ditto for war/suicide or riot' reveals how these things are dismissed by the speaker. Does the speaker represent society at large? Are these things easily dismissed in our modern society?

In the second stanza, the speaker begins 'For extremities', in this case meaning the ends of limbs, hands and feet. The speaker is very graphic in the definition of 'loss' – 'severance at the wrist or ankle joint'. The word 'extremities' may also imply that these are extreme examples, and yet they are treated in a methodical objective manner. The description of the loss of sight, however, is given a dramatic lingering description, conveying the progression of the blindness, 'For eyes/the slow, or sudden/disappearance of the light'. The slowing pace towards the end of the line feels like the last vestiges of sight disappearing.





The loss of life is reduced to 'black limousines,/a brief orbit'. The black limousines of the funeral procession mark the solemnity of the occasion, but the phrase 'a brief orbit' underlines the temporal nature of life. We have but a brief time on this earth.

The next stanza returns to the brisk, no nonsense tone typical of formal correspondence. 'If you suffer,/see the Schedule of Sorrows.' A schedule is usually a graduated list. Here it implies that sorrows and suffering can be categorised and delineated into a coherent list. Any human, or humane, element is removed.

The final stanza plays on the term 'a lump sum'. This is usually a sizable amount of money, paid in a single payment rather than installments, sometimes as part of a pension. Here this image is conflated with a lump of coal – the traditional gift for bold children at Christmas. The imagery at the end of the poem disintegrates from a lump sum to a lump of coal to grey gruel to a box of soot. The disintegration to ash echoes the human condition – we all return to dust. The overall tone of the poem ends on a despondent note that leaves the reader feeling that in the modern world, people and the suffering they endure, can be reduced down to entries in a schedule. Nothing is valued and the nameless, faceless bureaucracy runs everything.

Structure and rhythm

Loden has said that 'each line break is a crucial musical decision'. Each line in her poem is meticulously planned and the balancing statements provide an internal rhythm. The echo in the first line 'For an eye, not an eye' is replaced in the second line by alliteration, 'For a tooth, forget it.' In the second stanza the long,

phrase detailing 'the disappearance of the light' contrasts with the harsh consonants of 'wrist or ankle joint'. The sibilance of 'If you suffer,/see the Schedule of Sorrows' almost makes the line seem caring, which contrasts with the harsh sentiment expressed. The stressed emphasis on the final line, 'charred box of soot', conveys a desolate final tone. All humour and irreverence evident earlier in the poem fade by the final line.





KERRY HARDIE

DANIEL'S DUCK

A reading of the poem

This is a narrative poem describing an ordinary neighbourly act in the country, the bringing of a gift of food, this time a wild duck the writer has shot. The incident is described step by step, in minute detail and vivid pictures.

One of the issues the poem encourages us to think about is that much of our food comes from animals or birds that were once alive. In cities and towns we are more isolated from this reality, but butchering or shooting for food is more common in country living. There is a more practical, less sentimental attitude to animals in the country. (Read, for example, Heaney's 'The Early Purges'.) The unspectacular ordinariness of the event is obvious from the first two lines:

*I held out the shot mallard, she took it from me,
looped its neck-string over a drawer of the dresser.*

While this is of some interest, there is no major reaction from anyone, apart from Daniel.

This constitutes the major theme of the poem – the shock of insight, the moment of awareness of a child's first encounter with death – 'the world stilled'. The child's reaction is shown in physical body language – 'a step

forward, a step back ... moving to touch, his hand out'. He is too young to possess a language capable of expressing his thoughts and feelings, so he uses pictures and the senses to attempt to comprehend this new experience: 'I thought there was water on it ... but there isn't'. Water may suggest life, as he associates the duck with its natural element, alive. Daniel's struggle to understand and communicate is sensitively and accurately described in realistic detail. The mother plays the role of protector and educator as she gently leads him towards this new knowledge. He feels comforted, 'saw the gentleness in her face and his body loosened', and is relieved that his communication has got across, that 'his wing-drag of sounds was enough'. The poem makes us aware that this is a very delicate and significant moment for all concerned.

The use of contrasts plays a central part in the structure of this poem. The duck is at the end of its life, Daniel at the beginning of his. The image of the duck when alive, 'arrowing up out of black sloblands', contrasts with the dead bird 'like a weighted sack –/all that downward-dragginess of death'. The dead bird is brought into the full-of-life kitchen, 'warm, lit, glowing'. These contrasts reinforce the issues raised – death, life and the understanding of it all, particularly for a child.





ANDREW HUDGINS

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THE CADILLAC IN THE ATTIC

Introduction

This poem was first published in 2003 in Hudgins' book *Ecstatic in the Poison*. The poet adopts a third person narrative style for most of the poem, recounting an urban myth of a tenant who rebuilt a Cadillac in the attic of his rented accommodation. The typical dry humour of Hudgins is evident in the poem as he ponders the reasons for such an activity.

A reading of the poem

The poem begins by acknowledging the various versions of the story that exist, 'After the tenant moved out, died, disappeared – the stories vary'. Nothing about the story can be trusted except for the one vital piece of information – there was 'a Cadillac in the attic'. The enormity of this feat, the sheer size of the task baffles the poet. The refrain 'a Cadillac in the attic' is repeated at the end of each stanza, to convey his disbelief.

The characters in the poem share the poet's disbelief. The landlord comes downstairs and is 'bemused' as he tells his wife what he has found. The description of the car is realistic. This is not a gleaming example of chrome and alloys, this Cadillac has 'sloppy paint, bald tires, / and orange rust chewing at the rocker panels'. But despite the grubbiness of the car, the fact remains

that it is in the attic. The long vowel sounds and repeated consonants emphasise the sense of wonder felt, 'but still and all, a Cadillac in the attic'.

The poet then engages on a flight of fancy, imagining the ordeal the man had endured. Each element of the car, 'transmission, chassis, engine block, even the huge bench seats' had to be maneuvered and manipulated into the attic. The verbs Hudgins uses illustrate the difficulty of the task as he 'battled' and 'heaved' each item up the folding stairs into the attic.

The final two stanzas are the poet's reflections on the story. Up to this point he has been the objective observer but now he asks the question 'Why'd he do it?' The poet speculates but he surmises that 'we know why'. The universality of human emotion and desire is captured by the poet. We, the readers, are drawn into his speculative guesses with the inclusive pronoun 'we'. We join in his conspiracy. We know why the man did it, 'for the looks / of astonishment he'd never see but could imagine. / For the joke.' We acknowledge that sometimes we do things, not for immediate gratification, but sometimes for a reaction we may never see. Perhaps this is how the poet feels about writing poetry. He writes for an audience he may never see, some of his work may never be appreciated but he writes anyway.

In the final stanza the poet reflects that 'we aren't sure what it means' but he must have done it for pleasure. The pleasure the poet visualises is, of course,





in the sound of the words. The poet focuses on the musical nature of the words, 'all those short vowels/and three hard clicks'. For him the ultimate pleasure is in the creation of poetry. The sounds the words create is all the pleasure he needs and so the Cadillac in the attic comes to represent all artistic endeavour. It may not be noticed or appreciated or even understood, but he will continue to create.

Theme: creating art and the American dream

Andrew Hudgins has said in relation to this poem 'I wanted to ruminate on why someone would put so much work, effort and expense into an effect that might go unnoticed, and if unnoticed, unappreciated' and he compared that effort to some of his writing. The mammoth task of taking apart a Cadillac car, hauling it piece by piece up to an attic and then reconstructing it is beyond the grasp of most people. There are many reasons not to undertake such an enterprise. The poet feels that writing poetry is something similar, but he still undertakes the task for the pleasure it brings. His delight in words is evident in the final lines of the poem, 'the pleasure on his lips of all those short vowels/and three hard clicks'.

The American dream is often symbolised by the big brash American car, the Cadillac. The tailfins, expanses of chrome, white interior and huge length represent the excesses of American culture. Associated with films of the fifties and sixties, the Cadillac represented freedom and individuality. The car was renowned for its size and so the effort of taking it apart and hauling it up to an attic becomes even more laborious to undertake. By

reconstructing the car in the attic the unknown tenant lives the American dream. He has fulfilled his dream and completed what he set out to do, regardless of how nonsensical it may seem to everyone else.





ANDREW HUDGINS

THE GLASS HAMMER

Introduction

This poem is part of an autobiographical collection of poetry about Hudgins' childhood in the American south. This poem is the first poem in the collection and details a traumatic childhood event from the child's perspective.

A reading of the poem

In this short narrative poem Hudgins recounts an event from his childhood where a simple accident – when he broke his mother's crystal ornament – takes on greater significance. In the first line the harsh alliterative 'knickknack crystal hammer' echoes the hammering sounds the boy expects to make with such an implement. The fact that he describes it as his mother's knickknack suggests her presence throughout the poem. She seems to be omnipresent, aware of his intentions before he does anything. The crystal hammer, unlike the glass hammer from the title, appears like a mystical item from a fairytale. It 'shone on the shelf' and its presence seems to call to the young boy. The mother's voice intrudes on his dreaming. Hudgins uses a narrative device when the voice of the mother is quoted directly and her southern drawl can be distinctly heard in the colloquial 'play-pretty'. The onomatopoeic 'Tap, Tap' shows the boy's disregard for the injunction not to touch the

hammer. Again the mother's voice is heard, but this time in block capitals with additional spacing. In this way Hudgins captures the raised voice and paused emphasis of the mother's warning. The universality of the dialogue means it is immediately recognisable to most people. The exasperation of the mother warning the child not to touch something is obvious, but so also is the overwhelming knowledge that this warning will be ignored. For the young child the temptation is simply too great.

The child's joy is revealed in the 'ha!' in the first line of the second stanza. The child's actions in sneaking back to the hammer are no surprise to the reader. Like a character in a fairytale he is 'enchanted' by the mystical object. His diminutive size is suggested by the verb 'heft', as if it took great effort for the child to lift the object. This magical object is held to his eyes and through it he sees a new world. Like Alice through the looking glass or a Tolkien adventurer, the child's vision is distorted and the living room begins to 'shift, waver, and go shimmery'. The hammer is a portal to an enchanted world where such things as crystal hammers are possible.

The enjambment between stanza three and four, where the room is 'haloed/ with hidden fire' echoes the transition to the world of the imagination. The familiar room now seems unfamiliar, ordinary objects are given significance and magical power, 'Our worn green sofa glowed/and lost its shape, as if some deeper shape/were trying to break loose'. In this imaginative world





there is a hint of danger, a threat of things beyond the child's comprehension. All the typical features of a southern living room, including the cross-stitched pictures, lose their stability and become 'smeared into one another'.

The sense of foreboding that had been building since the first stanza with the 'Tap, Tap' of the hammer and the mother's repeated warnings builds to a climax in the fourth stanza. In a typical childish manner the boy 'scrounged' a nail. The detail given by Hudgins that the nail was 'rust flecked' adds to the sense of authenticity of the memory being shared. The simple action of the boy, 'and hit it', allows a momentary pause. Then, as the events unfold, the poet builds the pace of the lines, 'the hammer shattered in my hand./Blood splattered on my shorts. I screamed'. Each action leads to the next. The boy, who up to this point has been the primary actor in this drama, suddenly becomes powerless as he 'was snatched'. There is no detail of who grabbed him but he is literally whisked off his feet. The next sequence of events is shortened to just the appropriate verbs, 'stitched, cooed at, spanked,/embraced'. The list seems contradictory and yet captures the warring emotions of a parent in a moment of crisis, torn between concern and worry for their child and anger that the warnings given had not been listened to.

The final stanza of the poem contains the double reflections of the child and the poet. The warning given to 'never, never, never do that again' seems illogical to the child. The hammer, being broken, cannot be broken again. The literal logic of the child misses the implicit warning of the parent to follow her instructions in future. It is almost inevitable that the child will, therefore, do a similar thing

again. But from the poet's perspective another truth is revealed. The fragile hammer, and 'the gorgeous world it held', is symbolic of his entire childhood. The mystical world he remembers is seen through the distorting lens of time and as time has passed the age of innocence he is trying to recapture can never come again. The poet is left with the knowledge and self-awareness that as he writes his autobiographical poems, the times he writes about are distorted by the process but are imbued with a magical aura by being immortalised in the poetry. The hammer itself has lost its magical power and from the adult perspective is now just a 'glass hammer' from the title.

Narrative style

The poem is written in the first person. The poet takes the persona of his younger self and explores his fascination with his mother's crystal knickknack. The mother's voice is directly quoted which brings the reader back in time to the event in question. This immediacy and the emphatic tone of the mother in the line 'PUT THAT THING DOWN', lend an authenticity to the poem.

The poet is not afraid to reveal his precocious personality as a child. He ignores his mother's warning with disastrous consequences. The child's perspective is enhanced by the use of the childish vocabulary. Words and phrases such as 'go shimmery', 'scrounged' and 'smeared' seem to come directly from the child's mouth in contrast to the 'pondered' of the poet in the last stanza. When the inevitable disaster strikes, the short sequence of events blur, just as they would have done in his memory. The slow build up to the child's actions contrast with this quick slideshow of





movement. The movement is conveyed by alliterative sibilance of the verbs used: 'shattered', 'spattered', 'screamed', 'snatched', 'stitched' and 'spanked'. The last stanza contains the reflections of the child and poet. The pace slows and the final line ends with a wistful note, 'despite the gorgeous world it held'. This yearning for the unattainable world can refer both to the magical world envisaged by the boy through the hammer and also the ephemeral world of the past viewed by the poet through his memory.

Imagery

The 'crystal hammer' in the first line contrasts with the 'glass hammer' of the title. A glass hammer is a pointless object, it cannot fulfil its function due to its material. In the first line, however, it becomes a crystal hammer. Crystal is of much greater worth than glass and elevates the object to something reminiscent of a fairytale or mythology. Tales of trolls and fantasy worlds abound with such strange objects that have mystical powers to enchant the holder. The boy in the poem is enchanted by the thoughts of the crystal hammer and despite the admonishments of his mother he cannot resist the temptation to pick it up. The language used by Hudgins reinforces this sense of magic and mystery. The room he is in becomes 'shimmery' and is 'haloed/with hidden fire'. The hammer seems to reveal another layer of reality, invisible to the naked eye. This world of imaginative fantasy is cruelly shattered when reality intrudes in the form of the boy's injury. The images used in the last two stanzas are concrete and graphic, 'Blood spattered on my shorts', 'my fat bloody feet'. These images contrast with the enchanted images in the preceding stanzas.





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GARY SOTO

ORANGES

A reading of the poem

Gary Soto frequently writes in autobiographical or confessional mode, often focusing on the lives of young people and the difficulties of adolescence.

This is a narrative poem told by a young boy, nearly a teenager, who is taking his first walk with a girl. Every detail of the weather, her house, her face, the places they walked, the shop, etc. is etched in his memory with such clarity that it is like watching a film through his eyes. But he leaves us, the readers, to interpret the significance of all this for ourselves.

The narrative voice he uses to take us into the story has the simplicity of speech:

*The first time I walked
With a girl, I was twelve,
Cold, and weighted down
With two oranges in my jacket.*

What is impressive is its very ordinariness. This is not the romanticised ideal of sun-kissed beaches; it is winter and he is cold. He is carrying a simple gift of two oranges, thinking perhaps to impress her. The simplicity and innocence of this is wonderful. Perhaps he does feel some tension in the situation,

'weighted down' by the oranges. He is acutely self-aware – he can hear his steps and see his breath in the frost. And through this urban winter landscape he heads towards her house, which is a permanent source of light, a beacon in all weathers. The reader cannot help feeling that there is symbolism at work in his journey towards the light. We could regard these first 11 lines as the introduction to the story.

Lines 12–21 might constitute the second movement – the meeting and greeting and the journey to the drugstore. Once again the poet's eye for ordinary detail is impressive. First a dog barked at him, until

*She came out pulling
At her gloves, face bright
With rouge.*

Though she has worked on her appearance, any suggestion of false perfection is undermined by the ordinary rushed gesture of pulling at her gloves.

Perhaps she is also feeling some tension. The understated greeting, which is shy, personal and friendly rather than romantic and showy, catches perfectly the relationship between them:

*... I smiled,
Touched her shoulder, and led
Her down the street*





The drugstore (lines 22–42) provides the setting for the moment of high tension and drama. Once again, the sharp level of observed detail makes everything real – the tiny bell, the saleslady, the narrow aisle of goods, the ‘candies/Tiered like bleachers’. It is so authentic that the arrangement of sweets should remind the boy of the tiered seating in a sports field. Her delight at being asked to choose is beautifully understated and observed in close-up:

*Light in her eyes, a smile
Starting at the corners
Of her mouth.*

Then he is faced with one of the dilemmas of teenage lovers everywhere – money!

*... I fingered
A nickel in my pocket,
And when she lifted a chocolate
That cost a dime,
I didn't say anything.*

That last line captures all the tension and the drama. His solution is spontaneous and ingenious. He took out the nickel and an orange and ‘set them quietly on/The counter’. There follows that critical moment of complete understanding and complicity between the boy and saleslady. It is a moment of insight and generosity, and perhaps of romantic memory on her part and of breath-stopping tension on his. It is one of the few moments in this poem when the poet interprets – he states what the saleslady is thinking. But no words are spoken. In fact, nothing is

said in this entire poem. It is a love poem without words and the communication is all the better for that.

His reward comes in the final section (lines 43–56), as with renewed confidence ‘I took my girl's hand/In mine for two blocks’. Suddenly, everything is transformed as she unwraps the chocolate and he peels the remaining orange. The metaphorical transformation of the orange into glowing light and fire dispels the grey weather, the tension and the uncertainty. It is a moment of delight, illumination and love.

This poem has all the common structural elements of the classic love quest: the journey to the girl; the test or challenge; passing the test and winning; and success, which is happiness together. But one aspect that is particularly noteworthy about this poem is the innocent happiness of the emotions conveyed. Consider the following elements: the simplicity of the gift of oranges; the smile and gentle shoulder touch of his greeting; the ‘Light in her eyes’ at the drugstore; his offering of the orange in payment and the saleslady’s understanding of young love; the hand-holding ‘for two blocks’; and finally, the peeling of the orange, which releases all that fire of emotion. That final image of brightness links back to the image of the porch light of her house that ‘burned yellow/ Night and day, in any weather’. She is the light that attracts him; he is journeying towards her out of his winter and his gift of the orange achieves the power of the sun.

Another noteworthy aspect is the absolutely unspectacular, everyday ordinariness of the setting and the context. Consider such details as the frost cracking, their winter breath in the air, the





unromantic journey across 'A used car lot' and 'Fog hanging like old/Coats between the trees'. The place of challenge and risk and ultimate success is a little corner shop! And happiness is walking hand in hand for two blocks in the winter streets, with 'A few cars hissing past'. This is first love in the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday.





JULIE O'CALLAGHAN

THE NET

A reading of the poem

Although the first line of this poem consists of only five words, it makes for a brilliant opening. The poet's dramatic declaration – 'I am the Lost Classmate' – instantly stimulates our curiosity: what does the term 'Lost Classmate' mean; how is she 'Lost'? Before we can answer either question, lines 2–5 sweep us off on a high-speed chase with this 'Lost Classmate' through the 'superhighways' and 'byways of infinite cyber-space'. It is a desperate race to avoid the pursuing 'class committee' who are looking for the poet's 'lost self': the person that she was when she attended Sullivan High School all those years ago. O'Callaghan has created such an incredibly vivid scene in the first stanza that it comes as something of a shock to realise that this chase takes place in a landscape that does not exist in any real, concrete sense, but in the 'superhighways' and 'byways' that belong to the abstract world of the Internet.

The pace of the poem slows down and the tone becomes less emotional as we move into the second stanza. The poet gradually reveals the reason behind the breakneck pursuit in the first stanza: the Internet is being used to organise a class reunion that she does not want to attend. In spite of the intensity of her desire to avoid this situation, curiosity seems to get the better

of her and she cannot resist regularly logging on to 'watch the list/of Found Classmates' as it continues to 'grow by the month'. Suddenly, the poet's feelings erupt once more in lines 9–15 as she imagines just how awful the reunion will be: the 'Found Classmates', who have not met for thirty years, will be enclosed like cattle in a 'hotel ballroom', decorated, no doubt, by the ever-active 'class committee' with faded and battered objects of '70s paraphernalia' while outdated 'hit tunes' blare out. She sees this reunion as an attempt to return to the past and it is clear that she has no desire to go back to that time. Indeed, the strength of her negative feelings about this reunion is evident in her declaration that the night should not be seen as a celebration of the classmates meeting again after thirty years, but as a celebration of the classmates not having to meet for thirty years when, as she sees it, they all had 'freedom from each other'. Her use of the word 'freedom' suggests that she felt trapped, maybe even oppressed, during her time with these people. Perhaps there is a hint that she was forced to become the 'self' that she does not wish to return to by her experiences with her classmates or, indeed, the school environment.

In the fourth stanza her curiosity triumphs once again and she takes another 'peek at the message board'. One of the 'Found Classmates' turns out to be her 'locker partner', a term indicating that any connection between the two existed for practical purposes rather than out of friendship. The poet's rather





isolated position is further reinforced by her puzzled reaction to this girl, who seems to live some distance away 'out in California', enthusiastically preparing to travel so that she can meet up with her 'old school chums'. There is the strong suggestion here that the poet was never a part of this group of 'chums', or any other group, as she has no fond memories of 'old school chums' to encourage her to travel.

In the final stanza, the full truth of the situation is revealed. The poet declares that she will continue to 'evade the class committee' until the reunion is over. She is determined not to go back, not to return to that 'lost self', presumably because she now feels that she is a very different 'self'. But the final three lines of the poem indicate that her determination to draw a line between her present 'self' and her past 'self' may not be quite as definite as she would like it to be, for in the final lines of the poem she reveals that her way of avoiding being found by 'the class committee' is to do what she has 'always done', that is, to 'slip through the net'. So it would seem that in this respect she is still behaving as she behaved while she was at school. Perhaps her 'lost self' is not quite as lost as she would like it to be?

Imagery

Although this is a relatively short poem written in everyday, conversational language, O'Callaghan's imagery is both vivid and intricate. Her imagining of the night of the class reunion is wonderfully vivid and conveys her horror at the idea. We can feel the heat and the nervous tension of the 'Corralled' middle-aged classmates packed into the 'hotel ballroom'. We can hear

the noise as the 'Found Classmates' try to shout out their news above the blaring 'hit tunes'. We can see the old, rather ridiculous-looking 1970s objects that have been dug out of attics and hung on the walls.

Perhaps even more impressive is the way in which her use of imagery around the concept of 'the net' cleverly blends the real with the unreal, the abstract with the concrete. In the first stanza the very 'real' chase scene occurs in the 'unreal' world of the Internet. In the final stanza, the abstract concept of her favourite method of behaviour is conveyed by the concrete image of her physically moving to 'slip through' a physical 'net'.





JULIE O'CALLAGHAN

PROBLEMS

A reading of the poem

This poem begins quite suddenly, with the line 'Take weeds for example', giving the impression that we are joining in on a conversation that is already underway. Indeed, O'Callaghan develops this conversational aspect as the poem continues: her speaker uses everyday language, 'But forget about weeds'; the structure of the phrases is that of normal conversation, 'We won't even go into/how leaves block up the gutters'; and her use of questions also adds to the impression that this is a conversation with someone else: 'ever thought about that?' She does, however, use some poetic devices but in a very subtle way so that the conversational aspect is not lost. For instance, the rhyme in the phrase '**thuggish slugs**' adds to the humour of the image because the broad sound 'ugg' reinforces the meaning of the words so that we can imagine an army of Sumo wrestler-style slugs advancing on the garden.

What is not entirely natural, however, is the way in which the speaker in the poem simply lists off a huge number of occurrences that are regarded as problems. The list begins with weeds, then moves on to leaves, followed by snails and slugs, blocked gutters, water left in baths, wasps, storms, grass growing between bricks and locking windows.

Usually a conversation involves people taking turns to talk, but here the speaker does not even pause to take a breath but speaks in short bursts that come out at a very quick pace: 'There is the wasp problem,/the storms problem'. The impression is that this speaker feels very strongly about all of these problems – they are a source of deep agitation. Again, O'Callaghan cleverly builds up this idea of agitation by making the speaker ridiculously exaggerate the seriousness of these problems ('and hordes of thuggish slugs/ will invade') and use emotive and rather offensive language about the attitude of other people to these problem: 'Hey, knuckleheads!' The speaker's tone borders on the hysterical, jumping from problem to problem and throwing out questions without allowing time for them to be answered.

Finally, in the last two lines of the poem, the speaker recognises that others do not feel as he or she does. But rather than question his or her own attitude to these problems, the speaker takes the view that other people simply 'don't appreciate/how many problems there are'. There is the clear indication that they feel this proves that they are absolutely correct in calling everyone else 'knuckleheads'.

Theme

This poem illustrates how viewing relatively minor incidents in life as problems can lead to obsessive worrying that will, just like weeds, 'overrun ... your life'.





Dramatic monologue

O'Callaghan uses the device of the dramatic monologue very effectively, as in the course of this poem she allows her speaker to reveal his or her true character. Her lone speaker appears to be speaking to a listener who is given no opportunity to contribute to the conversation. This shows a streak of arrogance on the part of the speaker. The agitation that the speaker feels about relatively minor problems would be amusing if it were not for the rude, dismissive tone that is used about the other people who do not think as he or she does. Similarly, the speaker's use of exaggeration to try to prove that these are indeed big problems results in some ridiculous images, such as that of the 'hordes of thuggish slugs'. The speaker is self-opinionated, as is revealed in the stubborn way he or she persists in believing that his or her view is the right one.





OL 2019

OL 2021

MARY O'MALLEY

CAOINEADH MHÁIRE

Note on Joe Heaney

Joe Heaney (Seosamh Ó hÉanaí; 1919–1984), a native Irish speaker from Carna, Connemara, Co. Galway, was a gifted, iconic sean-nós singer. In 1947 he emigrated for work to Glasgow where he married Mary Connelly, whose family was from Carna, though she had been raised in Scotland. They had four children but the marriage was unhappy. Joe worked for a time on building sites in London where he was introduced to the folk music scene. Mary died from tuberculosis in 1966. In 1965 Joe emigrated to the US where he tried to make a living from his music, with songs that spoke of exile, famine and cultural identity – issues that were significant for Irish and Irish-Americans. He was given some support from Irish-Americans and later, from cultural department of universities but overall he found it difficult to survive on his music alone and for many years worked as a doorman at a New York hotel.

He is particularly famous for his version of 'The Rocks of Bawn' (The White Rocks), a song about the hard life of farm labourers on the west coast of Ireland, for whom even enlisting in the British Army seemed preferable. Among the religious songs that Joe Heaney made famous were 'Óíche Nollag' and 'Caoineadh na dTrí Mhuire', which is referenced at the end of the poem. Joe Heaney is buried in Carna.

A reading of the poem

The voice in this poem brings us Máire's meditation on how she experienced love in her life, from the first attraction and falling in love, through being abandoned, to her final evaluation on the worth of it all, as death takes her.

The poem opens with a casual conversational question that shows how vulnerable she is.

*Why do we love men that are bad for us –
are we that weak?*

But she answers it with a touch of wry humour, a throwaway comment, 'Hardly the kisses', and she follows up with an aphorism or wise saying that sounds like a translation of an Irish seanfhocal – 'fruit in the mouth soon melts'. This reminds us that everything is temporary and sets the whole experience of love in that context.

There were subtle signs even at the beginning – but she took no heed: his dark romantic eyes 'never settled on me right'. Above all else she was lured by his singing voice, described in a very sensual way as 'mouth music'. The 'something old' (from the past; long established; time-honoured) quality of his voice made her to fall in love almost literally, 'took the city ground from under me'. Part of the attraction was that his voice carried her back to where she originally came from – Connemara and the fishing villages. So even





Glasgow seemed transformed with images from home:

*and brought little yellow shells
scattering up the back streets of Glasgow.*

And he was handsome 'like a stag' – a wild majestic animal, masculine, leader of the herd.

In hindsight, she feels that she was distracted by the longing for home, which he brought near – 'felt the fine sand/Between my toes' and that she should have settled for someone more 'ordinary':

*I should have run
to the nearest forgettable city boy
and chanced the ordinary*

Wise maybe, but this is still a sad and dispiriting image, suggesting that life is better and safer lived in the risk-free, ordinary zone.

but he sang and I was caught.

*I listened as the hook eased in,
listened for the blas he put on my name*

In the end it all came down to the singing voice.

Consider the words she uses to describe the experience of falling in love – 'lured me'; 'I was caught'; and 'the hook eased in' (an image from home and fishing). These words almost suggest entrapment, that she wasn't really free to choose. We talk about 'falling in love' as a romantic experience but these images are not romantic, they are somewhat disturbing. These are hindsight

insights of course but they do prepare us for the images of abandonment in the last three lines of this stanza:

*until all I could hear was my own breath
like the tide in a cave, echoing, going out
and the children crying.*

It is a powerful, evocative, psychologically scary metaphor in which her whole existence has been reduced to the sounds of her own breath, 'like the tide in a cave... going out', a primitive existence. No song now, just the sounds of the children crying.

The imagery of her death, in the final stanza, must count as one of the most savage, cruel, primeval but brilliantly visual metaphors for death, ever. It works on a mythological level (see the notes that follow the poem in your text book) but it is most effective at the basic animal level of nature, red in tooth and claw. The grey crow is carnivorous, a killer of newborn lambs, for instance. And this crow 'settles' on her chest. Have you ever seen a crow settling on a wire – getting a proper grip? And 'he took his time' as he fed on her. Tuberculosis, usually affecting the lungs, was a slow killer.

'A high price for a slow song' is her bleak, ironic comment, introducing the last two lines from 'Caoineadh na dTrí Mhuire', one of Joe Heaney's favourite songs. Yet, despite the irony, Máire's voice and her grief is linked to the grief of Mary who lost her son to crucifixion and who speaks these lines in the song.

The voice

We could read this poem as the voice of women, the female perspective on unhappy love.





At first we hear the honest, vulnerable, somewhat self-disapproving voice but with a touch of mocking humour still, the younger voice.

Then there is the voice of falling in love, the romantic voice, falling for the one who was different, not ordinary; falling for the handsome, wild, animal magnetism of him; but above all else falling for the power of the voice, the 'mouth music'. There follows the voice of loneliness and the voices of crying children.

The voice of regret is heard in the third verse but most forcefully in the final stanza where it merges with the voices of perverse fate, irony and grief. This voice of lament is given a universal and timeless significance by linking to the grief-stricken voice of Mary who lost her beloved son to crucifixion. And so, it becomes the universal voice of women's grief.

Sounds and images

Music is central to this poem and the sensuality of sound is sometimes developed in the imagery here. Singing is pictured as 'mouth music', suggesting it can be tasted as well as heard. She listened for the 'blas', which literally means 'accent' but it also carries the meanings of 'flavour' or 'taste'. And there are other sensual images – for example even though she is dismissing the kisses she does so with a very sensuous image – 'fruit in the mouth soon melts'.

Much of the imagery comes from nature. Some are strong single images such as the wild masculine stag or that frightening metaphor for her fatal disease as 'A grey crow settled on my chest', carrying all the associations from Irish mythology. But the sea also provides many of the images; that fishing image 'as the

hook eased in,' for example, and 'the fine sand between my toes'. Quite a few of the sea-connected images appeal to the ear also, such as that of her own breath 'like the tide in a cave, echoing, going out'. Also:

*little yellow shells
scattering up the back streets of Glasgow.*

Finally, there is that sung lament in the last lines of the poem, "A Pheadair, a Aspail, an bhfaca tú mo ghrá bhán?/Ochon agus ochon o". Many of the sounds and images evoke Connemara, birthplace of the poet and of her subjects in the poem.

Language

There is a wonderful casual, conversational structure to the language. You can hear it spoken, in lines such as 'Oh he was handsome, though,'; 'Why do we love men that are bad for us –/Are we that weak?'; and others. There is a cleverness and adroitness of phrasing that can create a pithy saying – 'A high price for a slow song'.

Colloquial expressions are used – 'that took the city ground from under me'; 'took his time'; and 'never settled on me right'. Some of these, and others, show a strong influence from Gaeilge, or are Anglicised Irish modes of expression. The 'blas he put on my name' is a translated Irish expression, for example. 'Fruit in the mouth soon melts' is an aphorism structured as an Irish seanfhocal.





MARY O'MALLEY

CEALTRACH

This poem is situated at a time in Ireland when the Christian religion applied strict rules and principles to many aspects of living and dying. For example, the unbaptised were not given religious funerals. As the poet says, 'That Christian religion was hard'. Consequently, mothers mourning stillborn or infant deaths didn't have the support of formal church funerals where their grief could flow openly and where they might find some relief and comfort.

There was a culture of silence and secrecy about these losses. In the poem, there seems to be a sense of furtiveness about the burials 'by the sea's edge' or in unblessed graveyards on the boundaries between properties – in a sort of no man's land. These infants were 'unnamed', non-persons, without identities. Everything about them was in-between: how they were categorised ('half-human, half-soul') and where they were buried ('straddled boundary walls'). There is something profoundly lonely about the image of them 'left/ to make their own way on the night shore'.

Part of this culture of secrecy had to do with protecting the other children from the harsh realities of life. As the poet says:

*The unbreachable
silence of women protected us
from terrible things.*

But, of course, little ears overheard 'the dread whisperings', their imaginations went into overdrive and they 'peopled the swarming spaces with ghosts'. Yet, they never knew for sure.

So, the mothers were left to mourn alone, in the field, the cowshed or 'the shadowed alcoves of their church'. It is almost as if this was something shameful, a failure, to be confined to the shadowed corners of life. Perhaps this was how they felt. Certainly they were tormented by their dreams. The poet lays the blame for their suffering on the religion of that time, which:

*left mothers lying empty,
their full breasts aching, forever afraid
of what the winter storms might yield,
their own dreams turning on them like dogs.*

The poet's distress and anger is evident in these harrowing, intimate images, where the pain of loss is shown both in the women's physical bodies and in their psychological fears and nightmares.

She is also cynical about the advertised romantic view of the west of Ireland at that time, as she lays bare the suffering and poverty behind the picture-postcard image:

*where did mothers
do their crying in the two-roomed cottages
so beloved of those Irish times?*





OL 2020

OL 2022

CAROL ANN DUFFY

VALENTINE

A reading of the poem

This is a love poem, but it is not a straightforward, romantic love poem. Indeed, in the first line we see that the poet is putting great emphasis on the fact that her love (the emotion and the person) is not ordinary, and therefore she is not going to give a traditional gift for St Valentine's Day, like a 'red rose or a satin heart'; instead, she is going to give her lover 'an onion'.

The rest of the poem explains why she feels she should give an onion to her lover. The onion becomes an extended metaphor. She points out that the onion can give light in a time of darkness, just like the moon. She examines the erotic nature of an onion. She compares the onion to a lover who brings out the truth regardless of the price. She says that a love affair, like an onion, can make the protagonists see sides of themselves that they'd rather not see. She talks about its taste, which is difficult to shift, but like the taste of an onion, a love affair can eventually end as well. Then she compares the inside of an onion to a wedding ring, but then she says that this is lethal.

All these images are harsh, and in a way they are cold. The poet seems to be bringing a wake-up call to her lover. The implication could be that they do not have a traditional romantic relationship, and therefore to give a traditional romantic present would be the wrong thing to do and would be dishonest.

At the end she adds her own caution: getting too close is dangerous; love can be 'Lethal'.

Tone

Duffy uses a forceful, matter-of-fact tone. There is little ambiguity. Note her use of the definite 'I will' and 'I give' instead of 'It could' or 'I offer'. There is a sense of 'these are the facts; if you don't like them – tough', though there is a little hint of teasing in the poem as well.

Structure and language

Duffy uses very few formal traditional poetic devices, though she is careful with her use of sound, especially in such lines as

Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips

The metre in the poem seems to be purpose built. She varies her line lengths a lot, even giving one word to one line. What do you think the significance of these small lines is?





PAULA MEEHAN

THE RUSSIAN DOLL

A reading of the poem

In this poem, Paula Meehan uses straightforward, conversational language and vivid imagery, appealing to the senses of sight and touch, to describe her experience of buying a Russian doll for her daughter.

The first line in stanza 1 immediately places us in the story of the poem with Meehan's explanation that it was the dolls' bright 'colours' that attracted her attention. She goes on to describe how when she looked at the dolls, she realised that the wonderful colours that had been used to paint them came from plants that grow in hot climates. However, for her this sun seemed to be 'far off' and the 'dry weather' that the colours reminded her of was only 'promised'. In this way, lines 1–4 suggest that the poet lived in a very different type of climate to the one that she was reminded of by the Russian doll.

In lines 5–10 we learn that one of the main reasons that the poet decided to spend her 'fiver' on the doll was, in fact, the climate where she lived. The images that the poet uses in this stanza help us to both see and feel the 'January' weather: it was so 'grey all month and damp' that it got into the 'bones', along with a 'Bitter' cold caused by 'a wind from the north'. Apart from this weather being physically difficult, it was also mentally and emotionally draining because it triggered thoughts of 'our dead', adding to the

mood of sadness and depression. This is certainly a description of a climate where it would be difficult to feel cheerful or in the mood for a celebration.

However, it is clear from lines 11–13 that the poet's mood was cheered up by the doll. Carrying this brightly coloured 'gift wrapped' doll, she felt as if she herself was 'wrapped' in a bright, warm, God-given glow, a 'Holy Fire'. This protected her from the 'January' weather during her 'seven miles' walk home with her 'face to a wind from the north'. Then, in lines 13–16, she describes how the world around her also seemed to be cheering up: the glowing yellow of 'the first primroses' signalled to her that January, and winter, were coming to an end, and the 'smoke from the chimney' of her home reminded her of the physical and emotional warmth that waited for her there.

In the final stanza the poet explains that she knew that her daughter would also feel that the doll was more special than eating a dinner. She too would love the 'gaudy' colours of the doll and would be delighted by the surprise of 'what's in her'. For this poem is more than a narrative about the poet bringing home a Russian doll to her daughter. It is the story of the poet bringing her daughter a celebration of life: the life that was beginning once again in their world with 'the first primroses'; the life where the 'far off sun' would return to banish the 'grey' and the 'damp'; the life that was to be treasured to honour those who were 'dead'; and the life that was made magical by plants that could be turned into bright paint colours to decorate a doll filled with lots of





surprises. It is no wonder that the poet was pleased that a ‘fiver’ for the doll was ‘all they asked for’.

Creating a mood

Although this poem is only twenty lines long, Paula Meehan succeeds in creating two very different moods in the piece. The term ‘mood’ refers to the feelings and atmosphere that are created in a poem or in a section of a poem. Here, Meehan creates these two moods by skilfully building two very different sets of images into her poem.

In this poem Meehan wants to express the differences in mood between the ‘January’ weather and the weather that she associated with the Russian doll.

The images that she uses to describe the ‘January’ weather are in lines 7–10. The first image – ‘It had been grey all month and damp’ – appeals to the sense of sight with the word ‘grey’ and touch with the word ‘damp’. This triggers memories in us, the readers, of experiencing such weather so that we begin to experience this image physically. This is further developed in the second image, ‘We felt every year in our bones’. This image moves us on towards recalling not only the physical effects of January in aches and pains, but also the emotional and psychological effects, as the harsh weather makes everyone feel as if life is a struggle. The third image is ‘and our dead had been too much with us’. This takes us fully into the emotional and psychological effects in that it suggests feelings of depression and sadness. The final image, ‘January almost over. Bitter’, does nothing to lift these feelings. Although the poet does say ‘January almost over’,

there is little feeling of hope in this phrase; instead, it expresses the grim determination to keep going. Similarly, the word ‘Bitter’ can be applied not only to the cold, but also to life in ‘January’. In four images the poet has helped us to physically, emotionally and psychologically experience the negative feelings and the depressing atmosphere inspired by the month of January.

If we examine the images that Meehan links to the weather that she associated with the Russian doll (in lines 1–4 and lines 11–14), we find ourselves experiencing a very different mood. In lines 1–4 the poet describes bright colours – ‘carmine, turmeric, indigo, purple’ – so that we see a world that is much brighter than ‘grey’. The image of plants growing in the warmth of ‘the light of a far off sun’ and the image of ‘dry weather’ appeal to the sense of touch. Thus, we are encouraged to remember our experiences of these. There is also a feeling of excitement as the poet describes how she spotted this wonderful gift. Again, this is an experience that we can all relate to: the discovery of the perfect present for a loved one. In this way, the images in lines 1–4 create a positive mood with feelings of physical warmth and an atmosphere of excitement that is directly linked to the Russian doll.

This positive mood develops in lines 11–14 as the poet describes how it seemed to spread out from the doll to her, and then on out into the countryside. The image of the poet carrying the doll ‘like a Holy Fire’ is not meant to be taken literally: the poet is not carrying a fire. This is a comparative image because the poet is comparing the way in which the doll made her feel with her ‘face to a wind from the north’ to the way that she would feel if she were carrying ‘a Holy Fire’: that is, warm, protected and happy. The





image of the 'first primroses' brings together two ideas that we met already in lines 1–4: the idea of bright colours, the yellow flowers and the idea of plants growing. Here again, we can all relate to the poet's delight at seeing the first flowers blooming after the hard winter months.

Thus, through her two sets of images, Paula Meehan creates two very different moods in 'The Russian Doll'. On the one hand, there is the negative, sad and depressed mood connected to the 'grey', 'damp', 'Bitter' month of 'January' with its thoughts of death; while on the other hand, there is the positive mood of bright 'colours', 'sun', 'primroses' and growth linked to the Russian doll. As a result, it is easy for us to understand why the poet bought the doll, instead of the dinner, for her daughter.





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MOYA CANNON

SHRINES

This poem was first collected in Moya Cannon's fifth volume of poetry *Keats Lives* (2015).

A reading of the poem

You will notice the ordinary conversational voice of the opening, a voice that addresses us directly, as if we were present there.

*You will find them easily,
there are so many –
near roundabouts, by canal locks,
by quaysides –*

That second line says so much, so simply. The list of places where these many shrines can be seen keeps any emotion under control and it is left to the reader to evoke the human suffering behind each incident – whether by car or drowning, whether accidental or deliberate. The descriptive comment comes in the next line:

haphazard, passionate, weathered,

The word 'haphazard' describes how the shrines grew in an uncoordinated way through the random contributions of individuals, a sort of impromptu

memorial unlike the formal memorial of a gravestone. It also reflects the confusion and chaos surrounding sudden, unexpected death. But these haphazard offerings are also 'passionate' conveying the intense emotional love of friends and family. This is also reflected in the very personal nature of the contributions – 'real red roses', 'angels', 'hearts'. The word 'weathered' (discoloured by the weather) shows how long they have been there and evokes thoughts of time and changed circumstances.

The random variety in the shrines is brought together in the outrageous (in the circumstances) but effective image of the 'demented magpie', which might have collected such a mixture of colours, materials, textures and sounds. This leads the reader to wonder who may have left such items – red roses and hearts from those who loved deeply; a Christmas wreath from a family where the person was most poignantly missed on the first Christmas of mourning. Who may have left the wind chimes? And so on. In this way, these bric-a-brac images call to mind the many grieving families and friends in a very real way and personalise the grief in the poem.

The first section of the poem lists the locations and describes the shrines. In the second section, this consideration of the shrines prompts thoughts and images of actual scenes connected with the events.





*and we know
that this is the very place
the police fenced off with tape,
that a church was jammed
with black-clad young people*

These simple, stark images of police tape and a church full to capacity with young people all in black, make no attempt to describe the emotions involved. Instead, the images allow the reader to evoke the emotion for him/herself. ‘under the flowers and chimes’ could refer to the roadside tokens of mourning or to church bells and flowers – both familiar funeral rituals that give a framework to funerals and a structure to the numbness of the first grief-shocked days. But underneath the flowers and chimes ‘is a great boulder of shock’. Once again, the image does the work, evoking the immense, almost physical, crushing weight of shock that immobilises a person. We are left with the feeling that nothing and no one can help.

*with no one to shoulder it away
to let grief flow
like dense tresses of water
over a weir.*

Even though the logic of the statement in the final four lines states that no one is able to shoulder away the shock and allow people to grieve, the sense of movement in the image brings the grieving into existence and we feel the flow of it, that waterfall of tears. And yet there is something almost comforting about the image – the ‘dense tresses of water’ like brushed locks of hair.

There is a sense of release in the flow even if it is powerful and downwards.

Imagery

The power of ‘Shrines’ relies almost totally upon visual imagery – from the neutrally listed places (roundabouts, canal locks, quaysides) to the poignant memorial tributes that make up each shrine. These images spark other images in the reader’s mind, a sort of poetic chain reaction, just as the Christmas wreath evokes a bereaved family. They set us thinking. Were the wind chimes perhaps a favourite, from a garden somewhere or a bedroom? Who loved sunflowers? The suggestive power of simple detail in this poem is powerful and mind-opening. And all the while, the grief in this poem is building behind all the little details, into ‘a great boulder of shock’, an unexpected metaphor that reminds us how helpless we are in the face of tragedy.

Themes and issues

‘Shrines’ focuses our attention on how fragile young people are in the face of accidents, illness, depression. It depicts vividly the shock and grief that follows an untimely death. It also shows the solidarity of young people in mourning friends. But above all, it deals with the human need to commemorate and remember our dead.





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RANDOLPH HEALY

FROGS

A reading of the poem

This is a poem driven by care for the ecology of the earth and by worry about the consequences of experimenting with nature, however considered necessary or even well-meaning they may be.

The poem opens with his recollection of a calm pastoral scene that he encountered in a secluded part of the grounds of Glenart Castle, Co. Wicklow (then used as a house of studies for men in training to be priests), where he found:

a large stone pond.

The waters of solitude.

Friends.

The word 'solitude' can mean privacy, seclusion, remoteness (in a positive sense) or, it can have negative connotations of isolation and friendlessness. The poet certainly does not consider himself friendless here. 'Friends' is an unexpected term to use about frogs but one that conveys a relationship that is personal, like friendship. This sets the tone for the poem, which is one of awe and respect for the creatures' ancient ancestry and their navigation abilities but also one of disappointment at the way they have been treated in past and are treated in modern times.

In the second stanza, where 'Friends' have been raised to the venerable status of 'Patriarchs', his sense of awe at the frogs' ancient ancestry is expressed in a mathematical equation, demonstrating by how far they pre-date humans. It is also expressed in the mind-opening astronomy image:

*the galaxy has rotated almost twice
since they first appeared.*

He is disappointed by the 'grudging' (to bear ill-will) references to frogs in the Bible, where they are associated with plagues and evil spirits or demons. But not all history has treated them badly. In Ancient Egypt they were honoured by being incorporated into the hieroglyphic written language:

*The hieroglyph
for the number one hundred thousand
is a tadpole.*

The poet is critical also of how frogs are treated in science experiments for the sake of education:

*Their numbers have been hugely depleted,
principally by students.*

Ironically, the clinical language of science serves to emphasise the horror of the experiments: 'Sever'; 'Suspend'; 'irritate the breast... with acid'; 'Sever the





foot'. This unemotional language of scientific observation tries but cannot totally disguise the reality:

It ceases to breathe, swallow or sit up

...

Locomotion and voice are absent.

But there is evidence that the voice of clinical observation is beginning to give way to a more human reaction: 'It will grasp and hang from your finger.' This leads to the emotional explosion of his reaction to the possibility of his daughter rearing frogs:

This year, thirty two, I said

"I'll be damned if Maureen has frogs"

And dug a pond.

So, the outburst dissolves into the self-mocking humour of the third line. Fathers usually give in to daughters! While this was a much gentler experiment, it still ended in near disaster for the frogs.

At the end of the poem Healy shows a poetic appreciation for the frogs' beauty and agility, using their more romantic sounding French name:

Light ripples down a smooth back.

La grenouille.

Gone.

The word 'Gone' refers to the frogs' ability to disappear and hide in the under growth but it may also hint at the possibility of their long-term disappearance and extinction.

While the poet continues to use astrological and mathematical imagery and language, as in *Primula Veris*, together with biblical and ancient historical references and images to make his point, there seems to be more obvious emotion and feeling in this poem. His emotional connection to these creatures is revealed in his awe and respect for their ancientness, his disappointment at their treatment in the Bible, his distress at the way they are used for experiments and that final hint of fear for their extinction.





RANDOLPH HEALY

PRIMULA VERIS

A reading of the poem

From the title and a reading of the first five lines we could be forgiven for thinking that this poem is mainly about a flower. Indeed, the first lines provide a minutely accurate and also poetic description of this common country flower, also known as 'cowslip'. As a scientific observer, the poet records all the details. He notices the long stem that holds, at the top, a cluster of little flower heads and the tapering section of each that opens out suddenly into yellow petals that are blown about. His accuracy extends to describing the bunch of blotched leaves at the base of the stem. From this description you could actually draw the flower. Yet, the images through which these details are conveyed are poetic. For the flower part we have the colourful, feminine images of 'elf green bodices' and 'yellow pinafores'. Even the less poetic leaf section is brought to life for us, in its ordinary, vulgar feeding life:

*a mob of blotched leaves
belching and gulping, stiff with liquor.*

Spotty leaves and vulgar feeding habits might suggest a more male image? (Is there a deliberate association with Sister Mary's 'gougers'? And is the poet having fun here at their expense? Hold that thought for later.) Following the

close-up image of the plant's parts, there is a shocking switch of focus as the lens suddenly widens dramatically to locate the flower in the context of millennia of time and light years of space. This common flower watched it all – the movement in constellations and the changes in language over time. (Just read Shakespeare to see the change over a mere few hundred years).

As a feature of his method, Healy creates dramatic, mind-opening contrasts – one minute, down in the dirt with leaves and the next up in space and time. And he leaves it at that. There is no attempt to draw conclusions or express emotion or comment in any way. He leaves it totally up to the reader to experience the concept and formulate his or her own thoughts on it.

In the third stanza the reader is then plunged, again dramatically and unexpectedly, into Sister Mary's challenging class of bad mannered, illiterate 'gougers' (the rough sound of that word really carries the full force of its meaning – a good example of onomatopoeia) that she had to coax 'to varying degrees of joined-up writing'. This last concrete image indicates how backward and primitive the students are, educationally, and also carries a hint of the disapproval felt by the poet. But there was no sarcasm from Sister Mary as she 'coaxed'. The dictionary definition of 'coaxed' glosses this as 'persuaded gradually or by flattery' and it is an apt word that captures exactly how she motivated them. Consider what a contrast this is from the wonders of space and the slow change of language usage over time in the preceding





stanza, to this struggle for basic literacy and the sorry state of some members of humanity.

The theme of language is continued in the fourth stanza, this time or a grand scale. We are back in space listening to the language of the universe, the music of the spheres. This 'great arching cadence' recognises our world as life-creating but in a timeline so vast that human epochs are mere clauses or bits of a sentence in it. Once again, the poet has set up a contrast between the language literacy level of the 'gougers' and the language of the universe – without comment.

In the final two lines there is a suggestion that there may be some kind of coherence, that the cowslip is somehow the link between the heavens and the earth.

*root shoot and flower
stitching together the heavens and the earth*

Notice the absence of a full stop at the end. This is an idea we are invited to continue exploring and discussing.

In *Primula Veris* we have a poem of ideas, a philosophical poem that draws attention to the vastness of the universe in space and time, and its sophistication. The poem invites us to consider this. By way of contrast it shines a spotlight on the drudging, unenlightened lives of some people. Yet we all have the capacity to wonder if the right context is set, as it is in this poem. So there is hope for ordinary people. Just as this ordinary flower witnessed wonders, perhaps Sister Mary's 'gougers' will make wondrous speculations someday.

Some general thoughts on Healy's poems

Healy's poems are unique in some ways:

- His poetry uses mathematics, astronomy, and historical and scientific data as if he was logically building an argument.
- He uses a logical framework for his poems, and presents the reader with propositions and statements of evidence. Consider the structural flow of *Primula Veris*: from a flower – to the universe, an entity of change, that sees constellations kink and bend and grammars change over slow time – to a literacy class – to the language of the universe, the supposed music of the spheres. See how the propositions are linked?
- But, as we saw with *Primula Veris* in particular, Healy allows his readers to draw and develop any conclusions and insights for themselves. He sets up the structure of ideas but we must think it through.
- The logical structure to the poems does not mean that emotions and feelings are excluded, as we saw in 'Frogs'.
- This is what 'a poetry of ideas' looks like.
- His learning is impressive and wide-ranging, with references to astronomy, genetics, mathematics, Ancient Egypt, Greek philosophers and the Bible.
- Images range from the human to the natural world to the universe.
- Healy's control of language is fine-tuned; his descriptions are accurate yet poetic, such as in the 'Sever its brain' section of 'Frogs'.





OL 2020

OL 2022

LINDA FRANCE

IF LOVE WAS JAZZ

A reading of the poem

Linda France is drawing parallels with love and jazz, comparisons that are ultimately unfavourable to love, though that judgement is camouflaged somewhat in the first five stanzas, which show the poet's obvious enjoyment of the sensuousness of both music and love. In these early stanzas she seems still hopeful about love.

*If love was jazz,
I'd be dazzled
By its razzmatazz.*

These lines could be read as a play on the old adage that 'love is blind'. She would be dazzled, temporarily blinded, overpowered by its 'razzmatazz'. The resonating sounds of 'jazz', 'dazz', 'razzmatazz' through the stanza (like the sound of a car revving!) create the impression of impatience and excitement, a desire to be off. The notion of glamorous excitement is carried by the word 'razzmatazz'. But that word also carries a negative meaning – 'insincere activity'. It is worth noting that hint of negativity, even in the first stanza.

Each of the next five stanzas are devoted to an individual jazz band instrument. In the second stanza the poet yearns to submit to love, as she

does to its jazz alternative, the saxophone – to melt like wax (perhaps a suggestions of becoming flexible as jazz is in its improvisations) 'in its brassy flame'. 'Flame' has connotations of both attraction and danger in that image. Perhaps a desire to burn with love?

'If love was a guitar', she would play on it in double time, a fast, energetic virtuoso performance that carries all the unpredictable improvisations and dynamism of jazz music – 'Eight to the bar'.

The sensuality of the music is caught in the fourth stanza.

*If love was a trombone,
I'd feel its slow
Slide, right down my backbone.*

Those s sounds (sibilance), that run-on from the second to the third line, carry this physical sensation. The sensuality of both the music and love merge seamlessly here. It is probably the high point in the poem where the ideal and the actual are closest. This is how she imagines herself caught or snared by love.

*If love was a drum,
I'd be caught in its snare,
Kept under its thumb.*





But does she really want to be ‘Kept under its thumb’, in this crude phrase about domination? We can’t be sure. The wordplay on ‘snare’, with its double meaning as a snare drum or as a ‘trap’ or ‘temptation’ draws attention away from the sensuality of the previous stanza and prepares the reader for what follows.

Form disintegrates in the sixth stanza – an abrupt, two line, change of rhythm prepares for the changes of view, mood and emphasis in the eighth stanza. Meanwhile, the poet prepares for those changes in the seventh.

*If love was jazz,
I'd sing its praises,
Like Larkin has.*

The poet Philip Larkin loved jazz but was quite cynical about love and didn’t believe it was the antidote to human misery. So the negativity about love is gaining prominence in this stanza.

*But love isn't jazz.
It's an organ recital.
Eminently worthy,
Not nearly as vital.*

There is a very different tone in the eighth stanza; the poet is now openly critical and judgemental about love. People don’t dance to an organ recital! It may be powerful but it is sober and sedate in comparison to jazz. It is not at all complimentary about love. There is also the hint of a smutty pun here. Love is damned by faint praise – ‘Eminently worthy’ is a ‘weasel phrase’ that praises without any enthusiasm. Love is also ‘Not nearly as vital’ – not nearly as essential to life nor full of life. This new mood is carried

in the broken-up rhythm of this stanza, which no longer has the fluid run-on lines but instead is constructed in three separate sentences that block that fluid rhythm. This, the eighth stanza, explicitly conveys the poet’s disillusionment with love and this is carried into the much-quoted final stanza.

*If love was jazz,
I'd always want more.
I'd be a regular
On that smoky dance-floor.*

Here, there is an air of wistfulness or regret that love doesn’t measure up to her ideal, jazz.

In an article in *Urthona* magazine (Issue 14, Autumn 2000) Linda France outlines the various and ultimately energising effects that she experiences from jazz:

'I can listen to a piece of jazz and feel opened, unsettled, soothed, sad, wild or aroused. Whatever, I always feel more alive.'

She goes on to explain the physicality and sensuality of the music which, as we saw, is evident in ‘If Love was Jazz’:

'Jazz has always had a strong connection with the physical body – heart, breath, voice – associated with worksongs, worship, dance, and sex. The name itself comes from the Negro slang – jass – a word for sexual intercourse, reflecting the passion of the music, its appetite, energy and openness. I defy you to listen to a good piece of jazz and not move some part of your anatomy.'





In this article, she also draws attention to the effects of the beat or rhythm of jazz:

'The way jazz is built around irregular and simultaneously opposing rhythms challenges and provokes me.... In the pursuit and departure from the 4/4 marching rhythm at the heart of jazz – fooling around with the beat – I can hear echoes of the contradictions of the human condition, our contentment and our striving.'

The combined musical and philosophical point she is making here is that the irregular rhythms of jazz mirror and express the conflicting elements of our human nature i.e. our opposing states of contentment and our struggle to do better.

In 'If Love was Jazz' she utilises this experience of jazz as she experiments with irregularities of rhythm in order to create different moods and feelings. Consider the first five stanzas. There is a controlled and regular framework to these stanzas. Each one consists of three lines, begins with the same phrase, 'If love was jazz', and has a consistent rhyming scheme of the first line with the third. But within this consistent framework there is variety of rhythm. For example, consider the structure of the second stanza, beginning 'If love was a sax'. It begins with a two-stress line, then lengthens into a longer three-stress second line, which conveys her desire to give in ('melt') to its passion ('brassy flame'). The stanza concludes with the poet's speedy surrender in the very short third line, which would probably be read with a single stress falling on the last word 'wax'. So, the structure of the stanza exactly mirrors her temptation and swift surrender. You could also

consider how the stanza 'If love was a trombone' exactly mirrors the poet's feelings. The three stresses of the opening line shrink to two in the second but then run on to what would probably be read as a five-stress long final line. And so, it communicates, almost physically in its form, the slow, languid enjoyment of that sensual feeling.

Overall, it is reasonable to suggest that, despite her emotional subject, the poet is very much in control of the structure of the poem and she uses this structure to mirror the moments of dramatic intensity of emotion.





OL 2019

OL 2020

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

THE SUN

A reading of the poem

The poet here takes on the persona and voice of a *Sun* reader and creates a stinging satire in which the vices and nastiness of the reader, and by implication all *Sun* readers and *The Sun* newspaper itself, are exposed and mocked. The speaker is revealed to be racist, xenophobic (a dislike of foreigners), jingoistic (the belief that one's own country is always right) and sexist. Indeed he is anti-anything that is different and shows a nasty side that enjoys the witch-hunting of public figures.

So this *Sun* reader, encouraged and nourished by the newspaper, candidly, even proudly, displays his racism, in lines such as:

'I believe the Blacks are bad' (line 1)

'Jungle bunnies play tom-toms,' (line 12)

'Black people rob' (line 19)

He is sexist about female roles ('Women should cook') and views women only as sex objects:

*And every Englishman love tits
I love Page Three and other bits,*

His hatred and fear of foreigners ('I am not too keen on foreign ones') is expressed and the hypocrisy of this stance is underlined by the very next line:

But I don't mind some foreign bombs

His patriotism is expressed in a loud and aggressive way, with a sense of superiority (jingoism):

*I believe Britain is great
And other countries imitate*

He stereotypes everyone. In his thinking everyone conforms to a type:

- Hippies ('Every hippie carries nits')
- All Englishmen treat women as mere sex objects ('And every Englishman love tits')
- Labour is crazy ('The Left is loony')
- Poets are charlatans ('And every poet is a crook')

There's also a confession of a nasty side to this *Sun* reader: he takes pleasure in the discomfort and suffering of others, in the witch-hunting of public figures about their sexual orientation that *The Sun* newspaper engaged in.

*I like playing bingo games
And witch-hunting to shame a name*





The fact that witch-hunting is coupled with that intellectually taxing pastime, playing bingo, suggests that he doesn't have any sense of discrimination about moral values. Witch-hunting and playing bingo rate equally in his eyes. Considered all together, this is quite a damning character analysis of *Sun* readers.

There is another theme snaking through this poem – the power of newspapers. Consider how the reader is influenced by the newspaper. He seems to 'parrot' the views and language of *The Sun*, about the loony left, for example. He accepts without questioning:

*And every poet is a crook,
I am told – so I don't need to look,
It's easy in The SUN.*

The poorly educated are particularly vulnerable. Here, he seems incapable of analysing the media and isn't even able to discriminate between newspapers.

*But aren't newspapers all the same?
So why not read The SUN.*

The Sun reader has two moments of honest self-insight – the first in line 15 when he admits 'I love lies' and again towards the end:

*Don't give me truth, just give me gossip
And skeletons from people's closets,*

But this moment of honesty is totally outweighed by his need to belong to the crowd.

*I wanna be normal
And millions buy it,*

Newspapers confer a kind of group identity on their readers and he needs this sense of belonging, even when he may know that he is being manipulated:

I am blinded by The SUN.

There is a suggestion here that he realises that his freedom to choose has been taken by the newspaper ('blinded'); that he has been 'educated', influenced and formed by *The Sun*. He is, you might say, a son of the SUN! For that, he earns some small degree of sympathy from us.

The poem is a pretty damning indictment of British society, or indeed any society, our own included, that displays such intolerance and blind prejudices, but shrugs them off and doesn't act on the rare insights into its own witch-hunting and lying soul – and still lays claim to greatness!

Rhythms and music of the language

With either three or four stresses per line, there is a kind of chanting beat to the rhythms of the poem. The rhymes also accentuate the beat. Frequently, the poet uses full rhymes, such as 'bad/Mad/had'. Sometimes half-rhymes are used, such as 'gossip/closets', where the initial syllables of the words rhyme.

The refrains about 'The SUN' also contribute to the repeated rhythms of the poem. But these refrains, with their subtle differences each time, also contribute to the development of the theme. In the first refrain, 'So I read The SUN', the reader is confirming that he reads the paper because he finds support for his own views there – those expressed in the first four lines. The





second refrain confirms that this is a daily addiction. We discover that he relies on it for foreign news, in the third refrain, 'But, I read The SUN'. By the fourth refrain, *The Sun* is doing his thinking for him:

*And every poet is a crook,
I am told – so I don't need to look,
It's easy in The SUN.*

By the fifth refrain, – 'I stare into The SUN' – he has become mesmerised by Page Three. In the final refrain, 'I am blinded by The SUN', he acknowledges that the paper has obscured his view of life and of the world. So the refrain, in this poem, is not just the usual repetition, it also deepens our understanding of how newspapers can influence us.

'Dub poetry' is a form of performance poetry where the words are spoken over Jamaican reggae music rhythms, providing a type of chanted speech. The chant rhythms of this poem contribute to the force of the convictions expressed.





OL 2020

OL 2022

EILEEN SHEEHAN

MY FATHER, LONG DEAD

A reading of the poem

Eileen Sheehan's first collection, *Song of the Midnight Fox*, contains many poems in remembrance of her mother and her father. The bond with her father appears to have been particularly strong, and his death a searing loss for her. In the poem 'My father visits my dream', a humorous inversion of the usual ghost story, her father gently scolds her for haunting him:

*you must stop
intoning my name
like a prayer, calling me
calling me back, I have no desire*

*to be there, you must stop
with your knockings
and rappings, stay out
stay out of my head*

*girlen can't you see that the living
have no business haunting
the dead and he laughed
the same kindly laugh*

The poem ends when she awoke:

*and suddenly he was everywhere
I had found him again.*

We could view 'My Father, Long Dead' as a continuation of this earlier poem, developing the concept that 'he was everywhere'. Now, for her, he is in the continuous present.

She no longer visualises him as a body. He has become air, weightless, incorporeal. He becomes present in the scents he was associated with – pipe and turf smoke and the scent of resin from the timber that he handled. She recalls him in the presence of nature: in the ordinary beauties, 'foxglove,/ buttercup, tree bark'; in the beautiful but insubstantial aspects, such as the shimmer of changing light on the moving waters of the river; in the shy secretive animals – 'deer in the thicket' and the 'badger at dusk'; and finally with the threatened, almost extinct corncrake.

She associates him with a bygone era in history:

*Become grass
on the road to the castle*

*Become mist
on the turret*





Until, finally, and probably linked with the castle image, he has achieved hero status in her child's imagination and continues to live on in that image. Yet, there is also the awareness, in these final lines, that the memory of her father is, to some degree, 'created', made up, as is the case with many memories of our loved ones.

In this poem, we can trace the movement of imagery and concepts from the insubstantial (air, light, scent) to the more substantial 'grass/on the road to the castle'. There is a movement also from the impersonal to the personal, at the end:

*Become dark-haired hero in a story
written by a dark-haired child*

Even if that too is the product of her child's imagination.

This is a personal poem dealing with the loss of a beloved figure in the poet's life. But it is a very different kind of memorial poem. It does not focus on feelings of grief, sorrow, loneliness or separation. It is unsentimental (except for a hint of it in the final two lines). What it does have is a strong spiritual quality; there is a type of pagan mysticism in the way that the father's presence is made tangible through the many aspects of nature. This spiritual quality is also present in the patterns of language. The repetitions and rhythms of the language sound very like those of prayers and chants – 'Become scent'; 'Become light'; 'Become silence'; and so on. And it is these rituals of spirituality that lift this poem to a different level of understanding about death – that the dead are still with us, both in our stories and in our memories but perhaps also, in a mystical sense, in the world around us.





OL 2021

OL 2022

KATE CLANCHY

DRIVING TO THE HOSPITAL

A reading of the poem

The words 'driving to the hospital' usually provoke a rise, of varying degrees, in one's worry levels, whether it's for visiting a friend or loved one or for an emergency, blue-light journey. It's not at all like that in this poem. Has aside from the hint of drama in the possible shortage of petrol, it is all wonderfully calm, with 'the city nursing its quiet' and the woman's wish to arrive 'with barely/a crunch on the gravel'. There's even a sense of freedom, perhaps of enjoyment in the slight risk of freewheeling, which is also practical in that it saves a little petrol. The man, too, is calm and reassuring – 'smiled kindly', 'eased the clutch gently' and 'patted my knee'. That gesture reminds her of a previous one when they were first going out together when it was accompanied by the words 'I like driving with my baby', which sound like the lyrics of a love song from the 1960s. She recalls that she 'wondered/why my heart leapt and leapt'. Even though she didn't rationalise it in words at the time, this was the moment her body recognised the heart-jolting awareness of being in love and perhaps also looked forward to motherhood. Even now, the energy generated by this feeling of love surges powerfully out of the calmness of this journey, in this quiet, gentle poem. And it is only right that it should, in what must be the ideal journey to hospital for the birth of a baby.

The poem deals with a significant journey that is often overlooked in literature and in life – that journey to be born or to give birth. We seem to attach more significance to end of life journeys than to those at the start of life. This poem attempts to remedy that with a magical journey, made in an atmosphere of surreal calmness and of love between mother and father. There is also a certain mysteriousness about it, in that the reason for the journey is not specifically mentioned. However, there are clues if we have been reading carefully – 'the city/was nursing its quiet'. As well as referring to the profession, the term 'nursing' is also used to describe breastfeeding. There is also an ironic reference to it in the words used earlier by the father, when they were courting: 'I like driving with my baby'. Now it refers to two babies! Finally, perhaps this is also the fulfilment of what she felt when her heart 'leapt and leapt'.

This is a personal, 'confessional' poem about motherhood. When asked about the line between privacy and public art in poetry, Clanchy said:

the confessional line is a very difficult one to draw, because you want to be true to yourself and yet more interesting for others. And not to sentimentalise oneself is very difficult.

She walks that line very well here by focusing on the details of the journey, interlinked with the details of an earlier journey. And it is only at the very end of the poem that the emotion bursts out.





The sounds and music of language

There's nothing as obvious as a rhyming scheme in this poem yet there's some subtle repetition of end sounds in 'city', 'barely', 'gently', 'exactly'. There's also a chiming of repeated vowel sounds within lines and words, for example 'freewheel'. See also the repetition of the long 'i' sounds in 'liked', 'arriving', 'smiled kindly', 'driveway', 'like driving' and 'time'. One is conscious that this is a poem that has been subtly worked rather than just an emotion released.





COLETTE BRYCE

SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE DARK (WITH CIGARETTE)

A reading of the poem

In this poem the poet shares some thoughts with us and hints at her feelings after the break-up of a relationship.

The poem is structured in three movements, like a play. The first sets the scene – the poet ‘wakeful/as an animal’ at 4 a.m., sitting at the window, smoking a cigarette, looking out onto the street. In the second movement we find out that despite ‘moving on’ two months ago, her former partner has not yet picked up the car. This section focuses on the car, the only remnant of the relationship. In a cleverly crafted third movement, the winking security light of the car links us back, through a series of connected images, to a figure smoking in the dark. Overall, we are taken on a circular thought journey, through a story told with wit and humour in an attempt to hide the feelings of loneliness.

*To sleep, perchance
to dream?*

These opening lines are taken directly from Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, beginning ‘To be, or not to be’ (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1). In this soliloquy, talking to himself, just as the poet is here, Hamlet considers

whether death would be preferable than continuing to struggle with his unhappy life. Ironically, Hamlet’s debate with the issue turns on the word ‘dream’ – not knowing what dreams might come with this ‘sleep of death’ makes him rethink. While the poet here longs for sleep and perhaps pleasant dreams, the phrasing she borrows from Hamlet has darker and more troubling significance. As if she realises the danger of acknowledging the depth of her misery, even to herself perhaps, she jolts us back to the present, breaking with the poetic phrases of Shakespeare in the sharp, everyday language:

*... No chance:
it’s 4 a.m. and I’m wakeful
as an animal*

Then the reason for her wakefulness is revealed – ‘caught between your presence and the lack’. Her departed lover is still present in some ways, perhaps in her head and through the car, as we find out later, but she lacks his presence in any real sense. This is her dilemma, and another connection with Hamlet, who was beset by dilemmas. He was constantly debating two opposing ideas and so ended up unable to decide on a course of action, for the most part. That connection is still there in the next line when she uses the archaic word ‘realm’, often used in Shakespeare, to describe her state: ‘This is the realm insomniac.’ All these allusions and connections to Hamlet hint at a more troubled state of mind than is made explicit.





This opening movement concludes with the silhouetted figure on the window seat looking out, lighting a cigarette from a slim flare. It could be a screen shot from an old romantic movie. Indeed, that is suggested when the street is described as ‘a stilled film, bathed in amber’. But it is not love fulfilled – rather, it is the solitary image of an abandoned lover from the romantic movie that we see here.

The second movement opens on an ordinary housing estate with romanticised addresses like ‘Riverside Drive’. The single moving vehicle seems to emphasise her own solitariness, particularly since she welcomes it as ‘a sign of life’. Lines 15–18 play on the phrase ‘moving on’, a cliché that is used unthinkingly to describe the end of a relationship, as if it was as easy and painless as moving on in traffic – a phrase that belies the pain and hurt in the break-up. Here, the poet contains any emotion by focusing on wordplay and verbal wit:

*and two months on
from ‘moving on’*

She also draws attention to the irony that despite having used the phrase ‘moving on’, he hasn’t yet managed to move his car! It ‘waits, spattered in raindrops like bubble wrap’, as if it was something precious to be protected. Was he more protective of the car? With disarming self-honesty she acknowledges her ability to go off on a tangent rant about cars and pets looking like their owners, though she rather dignifies it by describing it as a ‘riff’, which is a repeated phrase in jazz or rock music. But she decides not to ‘go there’, in American speak (yet another wordplay on the ‘moving on’ theme), because his car is a ‘clapped-out Nissan

Micra’. The point is made without appearing to be made! And from the musical riff she took off on, she comes down to earth and the less romantic reality of the ‘clapped-out’ car she has been driving illegally at night. She gets some fun imagining his horror at her treatment of the car: ‘Morrissey ... jammed in the tape deck now and for eternity’. The movement ends on a moment of wicked humour.

The tone drops back to a conversational mode at the opening of the final section, like a very ordinary ‘joke over’ sort of conversation: ‘no. It’s fine, all gleaming hubcaps’. But the details betray the emotion – ‘seats like an upright, silhouetted couple’ (which they no longer are). Also she thinks that the wink of the small red security light ‘could represent a heartbeat or a pulse’ (both of which have traditionally had romantic associations) or even represent ‘loneliness: it’s vigilance’. The metaphor has led her to the hard truth of her own situation – the loneliness that keeps her awake and watchful. But she recovers quickly, pulls back from the emotion of loneliness and reconfigures the image into that of a ‘lighthouse-regular spark/of someone, somewhere, smoking in the dark’. She is back to safe, impersonal anonymity: ‘someone, somewhere, smoking’.

This movement towards and away from the danger of being emotional has been a pattern throughout the poem. She plays it as a poetic ‘riff’ all through, shying away from the hurt feeling, taking refuge in wordplay and humour. In this it is a delicately balanced poem with feelings kept in check in case they overwhelm her. The emotional tightrope that she walks creates a marvellous understated sense of tension.





Images of brief, transitory light are to be found throughout the poem: the glow of the cigarette and the slim flame of the lighter in the first movement; the slow vehicle 'pushing its beam'; the winking of the small red security light; the 'lighthouse-regular spark/of someone, somewhere, smoking in the dark' as a conclusion. Perhaps the suggestion is that love is transitory yet always to be found with 'someone, somewhere'. Some images in the poem convey her solitariness: the lone figure watching the almost deserted streets; the 'lighthouse-regular spark'. The image of the car is probably the most unexpected in a love poem. It is modern, an icon of the times, an alternate love object. A remnant of his presence and yet a reminder of his absence, it gives form to her dilemma, 'caught between your presence and the lack'. Ironically, she has a lot in common with the car, abandoned and still keeping lonely vigilance.





DAVID WHEATLEY

CHRONICLE

Themes and issues

This poem is a reflection on generations of a family and on the love and commitment to their native place, or *áit dúchais*, they all share in varying degrees over the different generations. The grandfather is the most seriously entrenched, even berating his son, the poet's father, for living in Bray – twenty miles up the road and still in Co. Wicklow! It is too close to 'town', i.e. Dublin. The son did not keep up the family tradition of farming, yet he still works in Co. Wicklow, 'preferring to trundle his taxi along the back roads'. He is still a part of the landscape. Despite the poverty of the land, people farm it rather than move. There are 'Clannish great-uncles somewhere nearer the mountains ... farming their few poor roods'. The poet himself is somewhat distanced from this fierce loyalty and freely admits 'Cattle, accents and muck: I don't have a clue'. Yet even he is not totally immune to the power of the landscape as he climbed

*... the uncarpeted stairs to look at the mountains
hulking over soggy, up-and-down Wicklow.*

Even the schoolchildren write poems about 'wet and wonderful Wicklow'.

The dominant features of the landscape are 'dirt tracks, twisting lanes and third-class roads', 'back roads', 'up-and-down Wicklow', 'farming ... poor roods', 'windy corridor' and of course the mountains appear five or six times. But the roads are all-pervasive in the poem, suggestive of journeys (ironically, not taken by some here), suggestive of the journey of life made by all. They even seem to be a symbol of the call of destiny or personal mission in life – 'before my father and I ever followed the roads'. The pace of life on all these journeys of road or of life is deliciously slow. The grandfather is 'chugging along the back roads' in his 'wood-panelled Morris Minor'. The father prefers to 'trundle his taxi along the back roads'. It is an accurate but somewhat romanticised vision of a bygone era, traced back through many generations of the family, to his grandfather's grandfather's grandfather. Altogether, it is a memorable, graphic story of bloodlines and roadlines.

Tone

The poem is structured as a reminiscence and, though a little romanticised, it is not nostalgic or sentimental. The poet's own personal distance from it all is asserted: 'I don't have a clue'. Yet there is a sense of enjoyment, perhaps even of quiet pride, particularly in the larger-than-life grandfather still remembered for driving through the barn door. This sense of deprecating fun and also the sense of irony (the ancestors, for all their love of place, are





buried outside the county line and there must be a hint of irony in the children's poetry) keeps any nostalgia firmly at bay. This is very much a poem of the modern generation of Irish people who can appreciate their heritage but are neither physically nor emotionally tied to it.





SINÉAD MORRISSEY

GENETICS

A reading of the poem

This is, of course, as the title indicates, a poem about genetics, the biological science that deals with heredity and variations. In this case, certain physical features of the poet's hands are the focus of the topic. But it is not any aspect of the physical inheritance that interests the poet. For instance, she doesn't examine any of the detail of her fingers or her palms. Genetics for her is not only about physical inheritance and physical identity, it is also about emotional inheritance and identity. And that's what is particularly unexpected and interesting about this poem.

Her sense of her family identity is powerfully conveyed in the first stanza. The thoughts are framed in the present tense, stated factually and in concrete, visual images: 'My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.' Here we have an image of intimate physical co-existence, 'in my fingers ... in my palms'. It is something tactile, continuously present and gives her a sense of emotional security and well-being: 'I lift them up and look at them with pleasure'. And she has absolute conviction about it, as we hear in that definite 'I know': 'I know my parents made me by my hands'. It is this powerful image of family togetherness, in a genetic sense, that sustains this poem through the revelation of difficulties that follow.

The change of atmosphere and circumstances appear abruptly in the second stanza. The extremeness of the separation is caught in the word 'repelled' in the geographical space ('separate hemispheres') and in the visual image of 'may sleep with other lovers'. Yet despite the almost cosmic sense of the break-up, her parents are still linked in her. This is conveyed in a beautiful, tactile, even loving image: 'but in me they touch where fingers link to palms'.

The third stanza follows the same pattern, opening with another image of dissolution: 'With nothing left of their togetherness but friends/who quarry for their image by a river'. Even the meaning is elusive here. There is nothing left of their 'togetherness' but the friends they had when they were married – that much is clear. Perhaps the friends are being compared to nineteenth-century gold prospectors, panning for gold in a river, looking to recover something precious but whose search was surely in vain. Now the only concrete and final evidence she still has of her parents' marriage is literally in her hands. She expresses this in minimalist terms: 'at least I know their marriage by my hands'. This is probably the lowest point of the poem.

The following two stanzas provide another unexpected change in mood and imagery – this time, a lift – which is expressed in predominantly religious terms. Stanza four opens with that child's image of hands joined to represent a church, with the two forefingers extended to make a steeple. When she opens her hands she still sees 'my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my





palms'. The image recalls the church wedding ceremony, an idea developed in the fifth stanza with reference to priest and psalms. This stanza concludes with the recurring optimistic note and image of continuity provided by the genetics metaphor. Her body is the living register on which their marriage has been recorded: 'My body is their marriage register./I re-enact their wedding with my hands.' This is a clever and interesting idea – a continuous living wedding that can be re-enacted by proxy by the child of their marriage. It is the triumph of genetics over the failure of human hopes and dreams.

This upbeat mood, rediscovered, is capitalised on and projected forward into the future with confidence and certainty in the final stanza, the only one of four lines. She and her partner will make their own DNA family chain as they 'take up the skin's demands/ for mirroring in bodies of the future'. She uses the legal term employed in wills, 'bequeath', to emphasise this inheritance to a future generation: 'I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.' This verse recaptures the image of family togetherness seen in the first stanza – 'So take me with you', 'I'll bequeath ... if you bequeath'. It concludes with that same note of certainty found in the first stanza, except this time it is plural: 'We know our parents'.

Overall in this poem there is a positive, if unusual, slant given to the idea of family – that despite break-up and geographic separation, there is a sense in which 'family' always survives and will continue to survive, in genetic coding. It is a poem that finds optimism and hope in science. It gets its cohesion and force from the way the recurring images of hands are used with subtle

variations to carry a range of ideas and thoughts on the theme. Consider the suggestions carried by hands through the poem:

- They are the source of definite knowledge about her family identity (stanza 1).
- They are the location where mother and father are still in contact, metaphorically (stanza 2).
- They provide definite evidence of the marriage (stanza 3).
- The religious image of joined hands shaped into a chapel recalls the romance of a church wedding.
- They also drive the imaginative idea of being able to re-enact her parents' wedding through that configuration of her hands.
- Finally, they carry that optimistic image of continuity in bequeathing fingers and palms to a future generation.





CAITRÍONA O'REILLY

OL 2022

INTERLUDE 12

A reading of the poem

Caitríona O'Reilly hints as to what her poem is about with the title that she has chosen for it: 'Interlude 12'. This tells us that the experience that she remembers, of working for the summer in Binn, was very different to what she had experienced before and would experience after, in her more usual way of life.

In lines 1–4, the poet's tone (the emotion in the poet's voice) conveys the wonder that she felt at the way in which European countries, unlike Ireland, which is surrounded by miles of sea, exist closely together on the one landmass. She was fascinated that Italy was only 'five miles further' from Binn in Switzerland, and yet it was a very different place. For her, Italy conjured up images of heat, sun and irresponsible showiness with its *gelati* (ice cream) and brightly coloured bougainvillea, while Binn had colder air and was far more responsible and law abiding, the perfect example of the Swiss approach to life. But she seems to have been happy to stay in Binn, as she refers to Italy as a 'rumour', suggesting that she never actually travelled the five miles to see it.

In fact, we learn in lines 5–9 that Binn had its own attractions for her: the godlike 'six-foot clean-limbed blondes' who were also there for the summer. O'Reilly uses short but vivid descriptions to convey the different men she

encountered. From one, she learned about a Norwegian author and his work, a German group and herbal tea. But this was not the only man that she met, nor all that she learned, for in lines 10–13 she describes her experiences with three other men: how she was called 'pure' in a 'nasty' way by one, experienced 'a failed seduction' with another and had a 'crush' on the third. From these four men, she learned about relationships between the sexes, about different cultures and about herself. The tone of these lines conveys the feelings of excitement, freedom and independence that the poet felt as she threw herself into all of these new experiences. She certainly does not seem to have been frightened or unhappy.

In lines 14–17 we see how the summer came to an end with 'thunder' and 'ice'. The poet's description of the way in which she 'bid a tender farewell to the urinals' is somewhat ironic (having the opposite meaning), as cleaning the urinals cannot have been pleasant. But 'tender farewell' does suggest the regret that she felt about the ending of her chance to experience a different world.

Her reluctance to return to her usual world and way of life is evident from the temptation that she felt to continue on to more new worlds by taking a 'Berlin flat' for 'three months'. But as the final lines of the poem reveal, she headed back to her normal life. At the airport, her tone shows none of the excitement or wonder of the earlier lines. Instead, there are images that





suggest how she felt in this, her usual world: trapped, like the kitten in the basket, and unhappily struggling to cope, as indicated by the kitten's wailing and the 'jittery pilot' trying to make sure that he would follow the right course. She had to accept that she 'was back': back to her usual life, back to her usual behaviour and, it would seem, back to feeling trapped and struggling to cope. For her, the 'interlude' was over.

Communicating experiences vividly

Poets work very hard to communicate experiences as vividly and as effectively as possible to their readers so that a poem is not simply reading the meanings of words, but actually sharing in the experience. Here, Caitríona O'Reilly uses imagery that appeals to the senses to convey her reactions, feelings and experiences in Binn. One excellent example of this is the image that she uses in line 4 to suggest her experience of breathing the cold, fresh air of Binn: 'where to breathe was like a sea-plunge'. This image is a simile (comparing one thing to another using 'like' or 'as') in that it compares her breathing in the cold air to the 'sea-plunge' to suggest more vividly what the experience was like for her. The poet appeals to the sense of touch by suggesting that feeling this air in her nose, mouth and lungs was like diving into the sea. This implies that the effects of the cold air washed over her both physically and emotionally, that it made her feel exhilarated, excited and alive. Clearly, this is much more effective than saying 'the air in Binn was cold and fresh'.

Similarly, her use of words from languages other than English vividly conveys her experience of living in Europe and meeting

people from many different countries and cultures. Learning words in a new language is always an exciting part of travelling and showing off by using them when we get home is even better. The poet uses 'gelati', the Italian for ice cream, and refers to the 'bier-garten' rather than the beer-garden. She also refers to a Norwegian writer, Hamsun, 'Kraftwerk', a German group, and 'Kräutertee', the German for an herbal tea. By using these words in their original form, rather than translated into English, we get more of a sense of the poet's experience of engaging with new languages and new ideas. Again, contrast this with the poet simply saying 'I learned some words in Italian and German'.





OL 2019

OL 2020

MARTIN DYAR

DEATH AND THE POST OFFICE

A reading of the poem

The title clues us in to the main issue at stake here – the death or closure of the post office. Within this framework, many ideas are raised about our attitudes to the value of community, culture, history and our sense of heritage.

The poem is structured as a dramatic monologue (one speaking voice) in which the speaker could be addressing a possible job applicant. At first, the tone of voice is neutral and brisk, as this task-focused voice of the bureaucrat dispenses advice in short, punchy sentences and phrases – ‘Find the place... half an hour... discuss the settlement. Consider, if it’s appropriate... Glance at the [account] books... Perhaps fill out some forms.’. These phrases suggest that this is really a superficial exercise; it is going to happen anyway. So his advice to the applicant is to just go through the motions, get the job done in as little time as possible. At this early stage the ‘boss voice’ even attempts some dry wit:

*For some of our lads their ways
are just too compelling.*

He also treats the applicant to the humorous ‘ball alley’ story about the Polish guy who accepted a guided tour of the locality from a ninety-two year old.

Through these instructions the attitude and point of view of the speaker begins to appear. Consider his openly dismissive, ageist and sexist comments – ‘These aul’ ones, these Cathleens, these Annies’. He then becomes very serious and pointed about the attitudes and qualities required for the post – directness, no emotional involvement, immunity to stories, no dreaming, no nostalgia for the past. He has no empathy at all for the people, the culture or the history of rural Ireland. First, he dismisses ‘dreamers’. The shades of meaning in the words ‘dreamer’ or ‘dream’ varies from the scenes in the mind of a sleeper to day-dreaming to having an ideal or aspiration (a vision of what can be achieved) or to imagine, to invent. He sees all dreamers as day-dreamers, with himself as the ruthless gardener: ‘we’ve had to weed out the dreamers’. Second, he dismisses stories:

*Immunity to stories, I find,
is the primary quality.*

Overall, he is warning the applicant against becoming enthralled, in any way, by the past: ‘Or find yourself cradled by the past’. The word ‘cradle’, a baby’s bed, calls up thoughts of the security and comfort of family and the





untroubled innocence of childhood. The speaker is probably using the word in a sarcastic or ironic sense here, suggesting that the applicant could allow himself to be comforted, like a child, by the stories of these women. He is dismissive of heritage and history also, in particular that fostered by the postmistresses:

*If the archive-harboured frailty
of the postmistress soothes you;*

The word 'harbour' can mean a place of shelter for ships or, to give shelter or refuge, or it can mean 'to conceal' (such as concealing an illness or criminal activity, for example). Used in conjunction with the word 'frailty', the harbouring of historical archives is seen here as a weakness, an idiosyncrasy, an oddness on the part of the postmistresses. There is also something insulting about the use of the term 'soothes', which is often associated with the comforting of a pained, ill or troubled child, as in 'soother'.

*if her wit grants you the lost farm
and maternity of the world;*

The speaker is concerned that all this talk of heritage could stir up in the applicant a natural need for rootedness and the dream of returning to his family's place of origin and the mother earth that nourished them – 'the lost farm and maternity of the world'. Instead, he paints a picture of the stark reality of the depopulated rural villages:

*if her isolated, dwindling village, a place
without a pub or a shop,
whose nearest decent*

sized town is itself desperately quiet –

He despises any kind of emotional involvement; feelings and emotions are regarded as a weakness.

*if these things move you...
What I mean is, if you can't meet
a forgotten countryside
head on, and calmly dismantle her,
fold her up, carry her out,
and ship her back
to Head Office, however ambiguous,
however heavy-handed or fateful,
however bloody poignant
the whole affair might seem to you;*

Ironically, for someone who has such distrust of feelings and emotions, he has worked up quite a head of steam here! The language he uses sounds like the business language of a removals firm but it is applied to a person's living and to a community service.

Drama and the use of language

The purpose of this entire speech was to convince the applicant to achieve the closure speedily and clinically and to warn him or her against developing an interest in or sympathy for any heritage or cultural issues involved. The thrust of this argument and the personal warning began in the second stanza – 'But if you're not direct/about the job?' The threat in this phrase is unfinished, left hanging as a question, but clearly implied. In the fourth and fifth stanzas the pressure is ratcheted up:





*if you can't meet
a forgotten countryside
head on, and calmly dismantle her,*

and also:

*if you can't stand your ground
when a steep moment
of hospitable chat and reminiscence
might tempt you to put
your mobile on silent,*

The repeated phrase 'if you can't' suggests inability and possibly carries a hint of understanding for that inability. But that hardens into:

*if you **cannot** accompany
an inevitable change*

'Cannot' sounds more emphatic, more confrontational and reflects his growing exasperation until he finally makes it crystal clear that failure would be regarded as deliberate obstruction and an undermining of policy:

*if you **will not** sign off
on expired things for us,
then, I'm sorry, but you are not our man.*

No job! And every word is spelled out, as the saying goes – no softening of the phrase into 'you're not' our man. The subtle change of phrasing, throughout the poem – from 'if you're not'; 'if you can't' to 'if you cannot' and 'if you will not' – provide the pegs on which the growing tension of this dramatic monologue

is heightened and increased. The sense of heightened drama is also found in the rhythms of speech, going from the short, directive sentences and phrases of the first two stanzas to the more lengthy and detailed arguments of the stanzas following. Indeed, practically all of stanzas four and five are contained in a single sentence. The poem builds to this final climax. It is poetry as drama – a fine, well-crafted speech, with precise control of language.

The speaker employs a range of tones throughout the speech. The tone of the opening stanzas is business-like, efficient, directional but combined with attempts at wit, as we saw. He uses catchphrases – 'we've had to weed out the dreamers' and 'Immunity to stories' to popularise his ideas with a kind of deceptive humour that hides their destructiveness. He can be quite sarcastic in his downputting of the applicant, for example: 'If the archive-harboured frailty/of the postmistresses soothes you;', 'blinded by plates of fruit cake'; and 'thinking a man need venture/ no further west than the brink he meets/in a mouthful of milky tea'. In this last example, he is mocking this armchair adventurer as having no idea of the tough realities of rural living if he considers a cup of milky tea to be at the brink or edge of dangerous challenges. Finally, the tone becomes quite ruthless from the fourth stanza onwards:

*fold her up, carry her out,
and ship her back
to Head Office, however ambiguous,
however heavy-handed or fateful.*





Imagery

The imagery can, at times, be graphic and detailed, allowing us to really see inside the post office – ‘the safe, the signs, the switchboard’; ‘sitting at an old table/under a clock’; ‘a mouthful of milky tea’; and ‘blinded by plates of fruit cake’. But the image that is most evocative of life in the post office and what happens when two worlds collide is found in the final stanza:

*when a steep moment
of hospitable chat and reminiscence
might tempt you to put
your mobile phone on silent*

Here the old world of chat and remembering comes face to face with the mobile phone and he might actually be tempted to put it on silent. Horror! It is an effective image that captures the central idea in the poem.

Themes and issues

We could read this as a political poem, a wake-up call to the slow death of rural communities, caused not alone by immigration but by the withdrawal of local medical, law enforcement and, as in this poem, communication services. This concerns not just recent technological developments but also the social aspects of communication. Rural post offices, in their day-to-day functioning, were places where people could meet and greet others who lived miles away from them, talk, share news, gossip, pass on information, recall past events and people, share a sense of heritage, of belonging together in a place – all activities that keep a community together. This is a poem that challenges our

sense of values; asks whether or not we should value people more than economic gains.

The poem also focuses a penetrating spotlight on how businesses operate. In this poem business operates with no respect for those whose livelihoods are being closed down, ‘these aul’ ones’. Nor will it tolerate any employee who might wish to take time and treat the people involved as human beings with their own culture and way of life, and perhaps learn from them. It is clear from this monologue that an employee, to use the current jargon, is a ‘human resource’ (HR), just another company resource, listed alongside assets such as capital, materials, buildings etc. and he is treated as such in this poem.

But perhaps the most pernicious threat in the poem is the attack on the value of stories because that is an attack on our thought processes and on our identity. Narrative is a primary act of mind – stories are the medium through which we make sense of the world. Our lives are presented in the shape of stories – the story of his/her/my life. We tell our story; we listen to the stories of others. History is a story – it tells us where we came from. To dismiss story is to deny how we think. It is also to dismiss culture, dismiss history, dismiss literature and ultimately dismiss poetry, music and song. All these contribute to our cultural identity. It’s interesting that quite a number of Martin Dyar’s poems tell a story. No prizes then for guessing what his attitude to the speaker might be!

