

Gillian Clarke

'Harvest at Mynachlog'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 9 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 10 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 10 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 11 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

The context for this poem is a farm in a specific part of west Wales but it could also be also seen as a *leitmotif* for Gillian Clarke’s poetry and her life, too. Her home has been a smallholding in Ceredigion for much of her adult life. It is a place where she works and writes, but it is also perhaps the lodestar to which she returns from her journeys across the UK and Europe to share her vision of the world through her poems. Hers is a vision that celebrates the local – as in this poem – but it speaks too of universal concerns of love and loss. Clarke writes about climate crisis and war, our inter-connectedness and our links to each other, and she frequently asks us to be aware of our responsibilities to our planet. Many of her poems sing of the land and its people, both throughout history and in the context of today’s increasing technological connections and challenges. Clarke was National Poet of Wales from 2008–2016, and was awarded the Queen’s Medal for Poetry in 2010. She often reads and talks to pupils and performs at literary festivals.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title of the poem includes the word **'harvest'**, a time of natural fruition before winter, and the sonic techniques of full rhyme, sight-rhyme, half-rhyme and alliteration are all used to intensify our sense of the rhythms of rural work. But though the poem may be set in late summer or autumn, the pilot's life is cut short in the 'springtime' of life, supposedly late boyhood or early adulthood. These contrasts signal the tensions between life and death, continuity and transience, that shadow the poem.

Form.

There are seven stanzas of varying lengths, some of which resemble stage sets for a play. Aristotle's dramatic unities of time and place seem at first to be observed, but this unity is disrupted when we learn of a tragedy that has taken place off-stage, in times past (presumably the Second World War) and in another country.

The journey of this poem takes us into times past and then circles back into the present. It uses flashback (*analepsis*) and foreshadowing (*prolepsis*). The location of the poem is probably a field on a farm in Mynachlog-ddu in west Wales, near the Preseli mountains. The Welsh word **'mynachlog'** means monastery, and the parish once belonged to St Dogmael's Abbey, so perhaps there had been a monastery farm at this site for a long time. A constant feature of Clarke's poems is a specific setting in time and place, but also a fierce attention to the concerns of the world. In this poem the juxtaposition of one field with a tragedy that is both specific and universal, occurring at all and any times, is used to powerful effect. The farm workers' anecdote about a **'boy'** in a plane who died **'On an English cliff'** invites us to remember the mythical downfall of Icarus, Bruegel's painting of that story and W.H. Auden's response to the Bruegel painting in his poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. (Icarus was the son of Daedalus, a famous craftsman. He created wings of wax for himself and his son, but Icarus failed to heed his father's warnings and flew too close to the sun causing the wings to melt. He fell into the sea and drowned.) The location enables us to appreciate the layers of space implied by the story in vertical terms: our eye is guided from the cut field up to the top of a harvesting machine and then towards the sky. Using techniques such as these, the poem emphasises how we share our stories and our lives.

The fact the speaking voice shifts between pronouns **'we'**, **'I'** and **'they'** gives the role of each and every participant in the narrative equal weight. Significantly, no-one is named, and the unnamed boy thus becomes any child, the tragedy a universal one. If this is a farm that Clarke visits rather than lives at, not all the names may be known to her, but this 'anonymity' intensifies the idea of a universal, shared sorrow by the end of the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-6.

There are references to temporality throughout the poem, and this is signalled in line one with the phrase **'At last'**. The first stanza creates a vivid scene through the use of visual imagery: **'the women come with baskets'**, and there is a **'daisied cloth'** covering the bread. The bread has supposedly been made by hand, and the embroidery on the tablecloth too. In her collection *Letter from a Far Country* Clarke speaks of how in previous generations women seemed to have had time on their hands, yet were always working and watching. We are also drawn in to watch these timeless rituals from our position in the present moment.

This is the longest stanza, and there are two possible reasons for this. The first is that it is designed to convey the impression that the workers in the field have been waiting for their meal for a long time; the rhyme in line 1 of **'At last'** and **'baskets'** intensifies the eagerness with which the workers have been anticipating the food arriving because one of the functions of rhyme is to activate our aural memories (that is, **'baskets'** takes us back to **'At last'**). But this stanza might also be given importance because it sets the scene of action for the rest of the poem, and offers a sense of a continuity of time, both in practice (the field has been farmed and harvested for generations) and in memory (some of the families working at the harvest have apparently lived in the same area for many years).

Stanza 1 creates a lyrical, pastoral scene and the poem begins *in media res*, in the middle of the action and probably in the middle of the day, when the sun will be at its strongest and the heat in the field at its most intense. The consonance of **'sweet'** and **'vast'** in lines 4 and 5 creates a sense of the abundance of what is being offered to the workers. **'sweet'** and **'vast'** are both extremes, one of taste and one of size. Here the sound echo gives a sense of expansiveness, although the meal is simple: the speaker mentions bread and tea.

The speaker is both an observer and a participant, and this is a constant feature of Clarke's poetic life: she works and she writes – in fact, work and writing are strongly interrelated for the poet. In his poem *Digging* Seamus Heaney suggests he has traded the spades used by his father and grandfather for a pen: the writing becomes his work and he feels the land has been left behind. In Clarke's poems there is not that dichotomy. She is working in that field and also watching and listening as well as writing about it, celebrating the land through manual as well as literary labour.

We are not told whether the conversations described in this poem are in Welsh or English, although we can speculate about that. As in Dylan Thomas's poem *Fern Hill* with its background of his aunt's farm, the scene has the potential to be bucolic and idyllic; but whereas Thomas's speaker recalls his role as the feted child, 'honoured among wagons', Clarke's speaker is one of the workers here. There is, perhaps, a faint suggestion in line 5 in the way the women **'stoop'** down to serve the workers, of pietà paintings of Mary holding and praying over the broken body of Christ after his crucifixion, which would prefigure the rather more sombre undertones of the second stanza.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-11.

The engines of the machines are turned off, ushering in silence. A buzzard, a large bird of prey, **'watches / From the fence'** waiting for its opportunity to find frightened prey in the harvested field. The workers, including the speaker, are exhausted. The word **'wound'** is used to describe their cuts and scratches. It seems a dramatic word to use in the context, although by the end of the poem we realise this is a foreshadowing of a greater drama. The word **'bury'** hints sinisterly at what is to come, while **'bruised'** and **'blood beating'** emphasise the physicality of the work. The **'engines'** might make the work easier than when harvesting was done with only horse and humanpower, but another machine, the plane, is the catalyst for tragedy. The half-rhyme of **'wounds'** and **'bruised'** keeps our focus on the damage done through the work.

Lines 12-16.

In this stanza the speaker takes a step back to describe the work that has been taking place. The perspective offered is almost filmic, suggesting a camera lens panning in and out. The word **'hours'** in line 12 shows the tenacity of the workers and the effort they are putting into this ritual event of harvesting. The visual imagery includes the colour **'Golden'** from the straw, with the suggestion that this is what the heat of the sun has achieved. The sun provides the harvest; it is life-giving but also punishing. The physical impact on the workers is clear in the words **'slow'**, **'load'**, **'heaved'** and **'Hot burden'**. This is tough work, and progress is slow as the workers are showing fatigue. The rhyme of **'followed'** and **'slow'** adds to our understanding of the pace. The alliteration of **'spread'** and **'spewing'** and **'straw'** and **'stubble'** concentrates our gaze on the level of the ground.

Lines 17-21.

Our gaze is lifted from ground level in this stanza. This five-line stanza is divided into two parts of two-and-a-half lines each. In the first half we see how the workers in the field have to push the bales up to the man on the machine who is stacking them as well as he can, although the load is already **'toppling'**. The rhymes of **'taking'** and **'make'** and the sound echo (assonance) of **'weight'** in line 18 intensifies the sense of heaviness. By contrast, in the second half of the stanza, the arrival of the women seems light-hearted. They are **'friendly'** in manner and **'cool'**, as they have probably just left shaded farmhouse kitchens (flagged, perhaps, with quarry tiles) and probably carry milk taken from pantries with cold marble slabs. Their coolness implies a contrast with the field workers, who must be sweating. The women do not seem to be oppressed by their work, although we do not actually hear their point of view. In his poem 'The Wife's Tale', Seamus Heaney recounts a similar scene but one told (as we see from the title) from the point of view of a 'wife', not one of the (implicitly male) workers on the field. In Clarke's poem we could suppose a link between the speaker and the poet herself, but female or male, s(he) is certainly one of the team of workers. The simile used to describe the women, **'cool as patches of flowers'**, suggests their bright dresses and aprons, but also the way that their arrival lifts the energy of the workers as they bring food and drink.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22-26.

Again this five-line stanza is divided into two distinct halves. The workers soon recover as they drink tea to revive them and restore their energy. There is a sight rhyme with **'recovered'** and **'over'**, and this adds to a sense of the continued movement of workers, now in relaxed and playful mode. Their conversation drifts over past harvests where they have worked together; this harvest is evidently a good one. Then the mood of the poem changes abruptly in line 25 as the older men and women tell of another golden harvest time when **'a boy'** (yet old enough to be trained as a pilot, in the air force) flew over a field such as this one where his father was working bringing in the harvest. The narrators recall he was flying his plane **'low'**. The sudden presence, through memory, of the war machine changes the tone of the poem.

Lines 27-30.

The boy was flying **'so low'** that his father could identify him and stood up from his work **'to wave his hat'**, in a sign of exhilaration and exuberance. Then we learn of the tragedy: the boy **'died minutes later / on an English cliff'**. The tragedy, as in many Greek dramas, takes place offstage. In the story of Icarus the boy is warned by his father, Daedalus, not to fly too high nor too low. In Auden's poem in response to the Bruegel painting, the ploughman carries on with his work in the field, ignoring the suffering of the boy who is plunging into the sea. Indeed, the title of Bruegel's painting is 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', highlighting the fact that the land is unaltered by the tragedy. With this shortest stanza of the poem, Clarke draws our attention to the brevity of the boy's life which contrasts with the long history of the rhythms of the land.

Lines 31-35.

The poem and the stories end. The workers who **'are quiet again'** hold up cups which are **'tilting'** as the plane must have tilted – and the hay bales, which were nearly **'toppling'**. The poem ends by placing this boy's death in the context of **'all winged things that live / One moment'** like Icarus. There might be a suggestion that the boy had been blinded by the light of the sun somehow when he brought his plane too low over the fields. These are the same fields he might have helped harvest when he was younger. In this narrative it is not the boy who is seen to be **'boasting'**, but the sky itself. There is a downfall, but the hubris of Icarus is not attached to this unnamed boy. We are brought in a full circle to the first line of the poem opening with **'At last'** as we imagine the last moments of his life.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem is highly localised, centred on one field at harvest time. The speaker is working in the field and through a series of visual and tactile images shows us how challenging the work is during this harvest. At a moment of rest, talking of other similar harvests in this place, the conversation moves suddenly and shockingly to the memory of a young pilot who flew over a harvested field and died minutes later in a plane crash. There is a sense that his tragic death mirrors that of the Greek story of Icarus, the son of Daedalus: his father fashioned wings for him and he died when he flew too near the sun.

Most of the vocabulary of the poem is in the lexical field of rural life: '**clover**', '**buzzard watches**', '**deep grass**', straw '**bales**', '**stubble**', '**far / Field edge**', '**barns**', '**grain**', '**winged things**'. Machines are mentioned in stanza 2, and in stanza 5 the plane plays a central role. There are two points where we are aware of silence. One is observed by the speaker in stanza 2 when '**The engines stop.**' The second is implied after the plane has crashed. There is a hint of menace in the '**buzzard watch[ing]**' followed by the words '**buried**' and '**wounds**', almost as if were a battle-field not a harvest-field being described. But the mood and tone of the poem is largely calm, even bucolic, until the sudden death of the boy minutes after he was exulting in his flying skills.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Which stanza do you see most clearly and why?

Which one word surprises you most in the poem and why?

Do you know of farms in other places where you could imagine this scene taking place? Where are they? In what ways are they similar and different?

How would the narrative change if it was told from another person's point of view, perhaps by someone who knew the boy? Retell the story from that viewpoint.

PHOTOGRAPHS

A photograph of Gillian Clarke can be found at

<https://www.literaturewales.org/lw-news/7038/>

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' (c. 1555) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder:

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/landscape-with-the-fall-of-icarus>

'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1939) by W.H. Auden:

<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>

A short critical account of Auden's poem:

<https://www.bl.uk/works/musee-des-beaux-arts>

Letter from a Far Country (2006, title poem orig. published 1982) by Gillian Clarke:

<https://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=1857549619>

'A Wife's Tale' by Seamus Heaney, from *A Door into the Dark* (1969):

<https://www.faber.co.uk/9780571101269-door-into-the-dark.html>

'Digging' by Seamus Heaney, from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

A youtube recording of the poet reading his poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNRkPUILSUg>



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Idris Davies

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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Idris Davies was born in 1905, in Rhymney, Monmouthshire. In addition to his relatively short career as a writer, he was a miner, and also a primary school teacher. Although he was raised in a Welsh-speaking household, his schooling (which began in Wales) was through the medium of English. He has become a significant figure in the development of Welsh writing in English (what used to be more commonly referred to as Anglo-Welsh writing) in the twentieth century.

Davies’s poetry is characterised by a relatively, but deceptively, simple phrasing. While working in the mines in his younger days, Davies attended lectures in Rhymney’s Working Men’s Hall, which ‘sharpened [his] political awareness’.¹ It was also while working as a miner that Davies attended English literature evening classes. Having been introduced to the work of Shelley through conversations with fellow miners, Davies ‘found [in Shelley] clear examples of the way in which literature could relate to politics’.² As such, his poetry (especially his first two volumes, *Gwalia Deserta* and *The Angry Summer*) doesn’t attempt to hide its political leanings.

In 1943 Faber and Faber published Davies’s second collection, *The Angry Summer* (subtitled ‘A Poem of 1926’), from which ‘Lets go to Barry Island, Maggie Fach’, is taken. Its central theme is the effect of industrialisation on south Wales, and specifically the General Strike that took place in 1926. It chronicles the strike from its beginning, evoking the initial camaraderie of the miners, to their eventual return to work. It was written while Davies was living away from Wales (like his previous collection, *Gwalia Deserta*, in 1938). However, despite its serious subject matter, *The Angry Summer* ‘is not by any means all bitterness and savage indignation’.³ The collection was in relative obscurity by the mid-point of the twentieth century, and it wasn’t until the 1970s and 80s, with the work of poet and critic Tony Conran (amongst others), that it gained a new audience and cultural cachet.

Davies died in 1953, just fifteen years after the publication of his first collection.

(1) Alan Vaughan Jones, ‘Idris Davies: The Angry Summer: a poem of 1926’, *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 1:2:2 (2011) <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=32344>

(2) *ibid.*

(3) Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing*, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 155.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem is numbered, not titled; it is the 31st section of Davies's collection *The Angry Summer*. It is now widely known by its opening line 'Let's Go to Barry Island'. Untitled poems are not uncommon in poetry. The poem said to have made Welsh poet Dylan Thomas famous, 'The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower', is also, technically, untitled. Like Davies's poem, it is commonly referred to by its opening line. The title, or lack thereof, is significant because it firmly establishes the poem as a part of something larger. As readers, it is worth reminding ourselves that even though we are reading this poem in an anthology and not in its original published format, that it is part of a larger work and should be read as such.

A Note on the Location.

Barry Island was a hugely popular tourist destination throughout the twentieth century (and still is today). It is no longer technically an island, but a peninsula, after being connected to the mainland by the docks in the 1880s. In recent years, it became synonymous with the BBC sitcom, *Gavin and Stacey* (which was partly set there). The Barry Docks would have been used to transport coal from the south Wales coalfield.

Form.

The poem is comprised of 22 lines, which can be split into the following order: two quatrains (or four-line sections), beginning with '**Let's go**' and '**We'll have tea**'; two tercets (three-line sections), beginning with '**Come on**' and '**Leave the washing**'; and a final two quatrains, beginning with '**We'll carry the sandwiches**' and '**Come, Maggie fach**'. It has an irregular rhyme scheme, with some perfect ('**tips**' / '**lips**') and imperfect ('**fach**' / '**hats**', '**sea**' / '**donkeys**') rhymes.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The poem opens with almost unbridled optimism, its speaker imploring **'Maggie fach'** ('fach' being a mutated form of the Welsh word 'bach', meaning small or little and used as a term of endearment), to accompany him to Barry Island. Barry was a popular destination for day-trippers from the south Wales valleys, as well as the English midlands (hence the speaker's pointed reference to just **'one day by the sea'**). The line **'And sherbert and buns and paper hats'** has a notable nursery rhyme quality to it (try reading it aloud to hear its rhythm), which is not surprising given Davies's use of nursery rhyme rhythms in his other work, such as his popular poem 'The Bells of Rhymney' from his previous collection *Gwalia Deserta*. Line 4 contains the alliterative **'rattling ride on the Figure Eight'**, further emphasising the sprightly, rhythmic quality of the opening. Incidentally, the Figure Eight rollercoaster closed in 1939, the year in which the Second World War broke out across Europe, and four years prior to the publication of *The Angry Summer* in 1943.

Lines 5-8.

Davies deploys the complex internal rhyme **'sands'** and **'islands'** which lend the quatrain a lively, if uneven rhythm. The use of **'islands'** here also echoes the poem's opening line **'Let's go to Barry Island'**. Lines 6 and 7 use a kind of musical pun, as the speaker invites Maggie to sit with **'the folk of Cwm Rhondda'** and sing **'the sweet old hymns of Pantycelyn'**. William Williams Pantycelyn was a famous Welsh hymn writer, whose hymn 'Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch' (in English, 'Lord, lead thou through the wilderness', but more commonly referred to by the title 'Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer'), is often sung to the tune 'Cwm Rhondda' by the Welsh composer John Hughes. The term 'folk' has added significance, given Davies's interest in folk-song and folklore. These lines instigate a more nostalgic, mournful tone that continues in the tercets that follow it.

Lines 9-11.

'Come on, Maggie fach' parallels the poem's opening line, but in its alteration it takes on a more insistent, and intemperate quality, as the speaker's anxiety appears to be increasing. As his apparent anxiousness to catch the train increases, the speaker becomes more focused on the consequences of missing the opportunity. It appears that he is not only motivated by *going* to Barry Island for the day (for all the fun that it offers), but in *leaving* his and Maggie's home. If they don't catch the train before it is too late, the **'kids will be howling'**, and **'Sticky with dirt'**, a thought that clearly worries the speaker. Here the children appear as more burdensome than their previous mention in line 2.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-14.

The first allusion to the work of the household (a subject that comes up in a number of Davies's poems), '**Leave the washing alone**', grants some insight into the relationship dynamic between the speaker and Maggie, while also giving the reader a glimpse of the home life that they share together. The speaker implores Maggie to '**put on [her] best**', suggesting that her current appearance is not fit for a day trip, but also that the importance of the trip itself is on a par with a Sunday trip to church or chapel (it echoes the phrase 'put on your Sunday best'). The '**holiday sea**' is, at first reading, an odd description, but one that increases in significance when compared with Davies's reference to the sea in section 43 of the same sequence: '**Carry the rubbish to the seas and the oceans, / Wash away the slag-heaps of our troubles and sorrows**'. The sea is a complex metaphor, one that not only signifies an opportunity for enjoyment, but also one that provides a chance to cleanse oneself of troubles.

Lines 15-18.

In the phrase '**big brown bag**', Davies employs more alliteration. Perhaps the speaker is trying to reinforce the positive reasons for going, rather than the negative consequences of not going. Once again, the day trip is seen as an opportunity to '**leave [their] troubles behind**', and again the fleetingness of the opportunity is emphasised by the phrase '**for a day**'. The following two lines are perhaps the most directly political as the poem gets. First, there is a reference to the '**big black tips**' (also known as spoil tips, which could be hugely contaminated mounds of waste material created in mining). Next, the speaker alludes to the conflicts and mounting tension between striking miners in the phrase '**rival soup-kitchens**'. The idyllic imagery of the opening of the poem is completely destroyed with the description '**quarrelling like hell**', which signifies the emotional distance that we as readers have travelled. We're now a long way from '**sherbert and buns and paper hats**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19-22.

The final quatrain sees the speaker attempt to gather himself for a final plea to Maggie, and it is the poem's most richly suggestive section. As in the second quatrain, the importance of music is once again at the forefront of the poem, and it is woven in with a final compliment: **'an old Welsh tune on your little red lips'**. The **'Welsh tune'** may well be a reference to the hymn sung above ('Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch' / 'Lord, lead thou through the wilderness'), the theme of which is the escape from bondage. It contains the line: 'Pan yn troedio glan lорddonen / Par i'm hofnau suddo i gyd' // 'When I walk the bank of the Jordan, / Cause all my fears to sink', the sentiment of which clearly corresponds with the speaker's desire to go to the **'sea'**. The reference to the **'rose'** is also rich with symbolism, especially if we are to understand that it is red (like Maggie's lips). Red roses may traditionally symbolise romance, and in a Christian context may even be considered a symbol of the Virgin Mary. However, could Davies also be subversively referring to the red rose as a symbol of socialism? Arthur Cook, General Secretary of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (and a key figure in the 1926 strike), is referred to elsewhere in *The Angry Summer* as **'wearing a red rose in his lapel'**. **'Down to the holiday sea'**, the poem's final line, is an almost perfect repetition of line 14 (which itself echoes line 2). The movement of the speaker and Maggie mirrors the movement of the coal from the south Wales coalfield to Barry Docks, from where it would have been shipped around the world. The poem could be read as an extended metaphor for such a movement, and once again the sea provides both a literal and metaphorical opportunity for an escape from everyday life.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Let's Go to Barry Island' is a deceptively complex poem. It is both playful and serious, optimistic and mournful, and consequently it is difficult to settle on a fixed meaning. Read in isolation (without the context of the collection as a whole), its references to life in the Valleys are small, but not insignificant facets of the overall poem. Read in the context of *The Angry Summer*, however, and these small mentions of valleys life become much more significant. The reasons to escape the valley become the primary source of the poem's tension (and the speaker's anxiety). The reasons to go to Barry Island, at least those given in the first quatrain, almost appear trivial in comparison to the reasons for leaving.

The poem is, both by design and circumstance, nostalgic: 'Conceived and written more than a decade after the event it recreates, this "Poem of 1926" was always already belated'.⁴ Positive, or optimistic, readings of the poem are certainly plausible. Even if the pleasures of Barry Island are deferred for another day (we don't know if they do actually get on the train and go), the speaker's enthusiasm in attempting to persuade Maggie to '**put on [her] best**' is contagious. To read the poem as optimistic does not necessarily mean, however, that one need ignore the speaker's ulterior motivations for going to Barry (to get away from the stresses of the ongoing strike).

The poetic techniques used by Davies in the poem are also worthy of attention. While it doesn't conform to a regular rhyme scheme, it is tightly structured around its quatrains and tercets. The sections are divided, with the exception of the semicolon separating the first two quatrains, into full sentences. These sentences are syntactically straightforward, lending the poem a frank, almost candid quality. Davies's use of repetition and half-rhymes adds a musicality that reflects the centrality of songs (in this case, hymns that would have been sung in church), to the poem. While the poem doesn't mention church specifically, the speakers talk about a trip to Barry Island almost like a pilgrimage of sorts (as implied by the singing of hymns by '**Pantycelyn**', and wearing their '**best**' dress).

(4) 'Idris Davies: The Angry Summer: a poem of 1926', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 1:2:2 (2011) <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=32344>

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What can you infer about the relationship between the speaker and Maggie?

How does the poem shift between positive and negative emotions, and what impression are you left with at the end?

What can you learn about what life was like in the Valleys from the poem?

What do you think is the effect of the repetition of certain lines or phrases?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

People's Collection Wales has a huge number of excellent photographs of Barry Island in its heyday. A particular highlight is this postcard depicting the Fairground, including the **'Figure Eight'** rollercoaster mentioned in line 4 of 'Let's Go to Barry Island':

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/838301>

This is a picture of Idris Davies:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idris_Davies#/media/File:IdrisDaviesImage.jpg

Here is a famous poster of the poem 'Let's Go to Barry Island, Maggie Fach':

<https://www.graffeg.com/05/>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

People's Collection Wales has several documentaries on Barry Island. Of particular interest to readers of Davies's poem are the two following excerpts, covering the effect of the 1926 General Strike (<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/392952>) and the experience of visiting Barry Island around the period depicted by Davies (<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/392953>).

The link below is to a video of a version of 'Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah', sung to the tune of Cwm Rhondda. The song is often referred to as 'Bread of Heaven':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4n1hGjDDg>



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



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We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

W.H. Davies

'Leisure'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 9 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 10 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 10 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 11 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

W.H. Davies (1871–1940) was born in Newport. In his twenties, he spent several years moving around America as a beggar, leaping on and off moving trains to get around, ultimately leading to the loss of his right leg in a train accident. *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, which chronicles these experiences, was published in 1908. *The Soul’s Destroyer and Other Poems*, his first collection of verse, draws on his experiences of a down-and-out existence in London lodging houses, and was published in 1905. ‘**Leisure**’ appeared in his collection *Songs of Joy*, published in 1911. Supported and celebrated by literary figures such as Edward Thomas and George Bernard Shaw, as well as the Georgian Poetry anthology series, Davies published more than twenty volumes of poetry, as well as works of fiction and non-fiction. *Young Emma*, an autobiographical account of his courtship of his wife Helen Payne, was published posthumously in 1980. ‘**Leisure**’ is the poem for which he is most famous and which is most anthologised, but given how prolific Davies was as a poet, the body of his work inevitably moves in a wide range of directions. Beyond the celebration of a rural idyll in ‘**Leisure**’, for example, there are other poems which deal with the gritty urban reality of destitution and squalor he was familiar with, including, in *Poetry 1900–2000*, ‘The Inquest’.

The celebration of the simple life in ‘**Leisure**’, of taking time to understand nature, can be understood in a range of contexts. One of these is that Davies wrote a great deal of poetry about the natural world and was keen to celebrate it: ‘The Kingfisher’ from the Library of Wales anthology is among poems in this style and, in ‘Days That Have Been’, a celebration of nature is explicitly linked to parts of Wales. Davies’s 1927 book *A Poet’s Pilgrimage* documents a walk east through Wales from Carmarthen, while his early poem ‘The Soul’s Destroyer’ includes a long walk home from London to Newport. Davies’s poverty and the fact that he travelled so much on foot put him in a unique position to celebrate and value the natural world. This desire to celebrate nature was also deepened by his friendship with poet Edward Thomas.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Another useful aspect of context is that Davies's early urban life of poverty and destitution in London, living among down-and-out characters in lodging houses, is a subject he writes about in a range of poems. It doesn't seem too much of a stretch to think that Davies's love for nature in '**Leisure**' is part of a desire to escape the grim reality he often saw around him. As a result, it is possible to read '**Leisure**', with its celebration of the simple life, as a poem with a working-class, left-wing political stance, which celebrates nature precisely because of Davies's awareness of what the economic situation of his time and an urban existence did to people. In these lines from 'The Soul's Destroyer', for example, he explicitly links the urban world with a grimness – in this case connected with alcohol – which causes him to desire an escape to nature:

One morning I awoke with lips gone dry,
The tongue an obstacle to choke the throat,
And aching body weighted with more heads
Than Pluto's dog; the features hard and set,
As though encased in a plaster cast;
With limbs all sore through falling here and there
To drink the various ales the Borough kept
From London Bridge to Newington, and streets
Adjoining, alleys, lanes obscure from them,
Then thought of home and of the purer life,
Of Nature's air, and having room to breathe,
A sunny sky, green field, and water's sound;
Of peaceful rivers not yet fretful grown
As when their mouths have tasted Ocean's salt;
And where the rabbits sit amid their ferns,
Or leap, to flash the white of their brown tails.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title can be said to straightforwardly set out the subject of the poem. The poem is a celebration of taking time out to look around at the natural world, and from this point of view it is important that a positive word like '**Leisure**' is chosen as opposed to something like 'idleness'. '**Leisure**' is also quite a big word in terms of economic, sociological and political thinking. How is '**Leisure**' defined by a society and what is its exact relationship to economic productivity? The very fact that Davies, with a background of poverty, dares to write about '**Leisure**', often seen as the preserve of a moneyed class, could be seen as a political statement.

Form.

The simplicity and directness of the poem's message – that we need to take time off work and appreciate nature – is mirrored in several formal devices the poem employs. One of these is the repetitive structure of each stanza, as stanzas 2–6 all begin with the phrase '**No time**'. Davies is essentially building a rhetorical argument, imploring us to take time out, and repetition like this is effective, as it would be in any political speech. Another important feature is the use of full-rhymed couplets, and a third is the very regular rhythmic form, as the poem falls into iambic tetrameter: 'What **is** this **life** if, **full** of **care**, / We **have** no **time** to **stand** and **stare**.' Finally there is a simplicity at the level of vocabulary, for very few words in the poem are more than one syllable, and none are more than two. This simplicity and directness at the level of form and vocabulary may enact the poem's message of embracing a simple life, but can also be read as having some political importance. If it is accepted that the poem's desire to claim leisure and the beauty of nature for all, as opposed simply to a moneyed class, has a political dimension, then this political motivation may be mirrored at the level of language and form – which, in its simplicity and directness, can be read as an attempt to claim poetry for all of us.

The poem has some relationship to a sonnet, in the sense that it is fourteen lines long. A sonnet has a volta, though, a point at which the poem turns in a different direction, whereas Davies's speaker appears to say the same thing continually throughout the poem. Again, this may be seen to enact the poem's message, since the simplicity of the way of life it is expounding is made clear in the simplicity of the writing. If there is a turn, then it comes about in the final couplet, where the speaker returns to the poem's opening and answers his own question. This circularity adds to the poem's rhetorical impact.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-6.

'Leisure' is in many ways a straightforward poem. In order to forward its argument that we need to take more time to look around us, it begins by asking '**What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare.**' Opening with a question in this way is an effective way of drawing the reader in, implying that the speaker (or writer) knows more than we do, that the poem has something to teach us. The forceful alliteration of '**stand and stare**', in its unchanging sound, conveys the moment of stillness Davies's speaker is arguing for, and gives force to his idea that this really matters. The rhyme here sets up the simple binary opposition that Davies structures his poem around: a life '**full of care**' versus having the leisure to '**stand and stare**'. It is interesting that Davies describes a life '**full of care**' as opposed to a life full of work or labour. This means that, while the poem can be read, in the context of Davies's writing, as about a working-class desire for leisure, the phrase 'full of care' is open ended enough to suggest all sorts of concern, which widens the poem's scope and appeal.

In stanzas 2-3, the speaker begins to offer concrete examples of the sorts of things we miss in a life which is 'full of care'. A series of concrete examples such as this is rhetorically persuasive, and the listing of negatives – things that we are not getting – makes the poem seem something of a cautionary tale. Without time '**to stand beneath the boughs / And stare as long as sheep or cows**', we miss '**Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.**' This second detail creates a sense of mystery – we want to know where those nuts are hidden! – which deepens the desirability of Davies's simple life. Under the current system, it seems, human beings are treated worse than animals, and are not even allowed to '**stare as long as sheep or cows.**' The way in which political systems and work can reduce us to a position lower than animals is of course subsequently powerfully explored by George Orwell in *1984*. The argument of this poem also seems to bear some relationship to the thinking of Robert Tressell's 1914 working-class masterpiece *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. It is perhaps important that Davies begins his examples in the poem with animals (cows and squirrels), living beings whom we can relate to and connect with, before turning to '**Streams**', '**stars**' and the personification of '**Beauty**' later in the poem.

Lines 7-12.

These lines sustain the list of examples of things we miss by being so busy, deepening the rhetorical impact of the poem's argument. What we are essentially missing, the poem argues, is a connection with nature, in which we might see, for example, how streams reflect the stars, as described in this beautiful simile: '**Streams full of stars like skies at night.**' The simile seems to imply that we lack the time not only to look at the stream in the first place, but also to perceive its beauty, to appreciate the way it is '**like skies at night.**'

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

In stanzas 5–6, beauty is personified and feminised: **‘No time to turn at Beauty’s glance, / And watch her feet, how they can dance.’** Unlike the other examples – the sheep and cows, the squirrels, the stream – which are described in one short stanza before the speaker moves on, here we see two stanzas dedicated to **‘Beauty’**: **‘No time to wait till her mouth can / Enrich that smile her eyes began.’** The poem has moved from small examples to a big idea here, and this may explain the extra time given to an abstract **‘Beauty’**. It is also important in terms of the poem’s structure that this focus on a personified idea comes after the more immediately graspable examples of the animals and the stream, so that readers are guided into the poem before being hit with something a little more complex and summative. The fact that **‘Beauty’** is feminised can be read in the context of Davies’s presentation of and attitude towards women more widely in his writing. ‘Catharine’ and ‘Jenny’ are among poems which idealise his childhood friends, while ‘Nell Barnes’ and ‘The Bird of Paradise’ explore the lives of prostitutes whom he knew later in his life. ‘The Collier’s Wife’, ‘The Inquest’ and ‘A Woman’s History’, all anthologised in *Poetry 1900–2000*, offer a way of understanding Davies’s feminising of **‘Beauty’** in **‘Leisure’**.

The other thing to observe about the presentation of **‘Beauty’** here is that she is depicted as looking. The poem has begun with the idea that we should have more **‘time to stand and stare’** and this act of looking is echoed by **‘Beauty’** looking back at us in these lines. Tellingly though, **‘Beauty’** doesn’t **‘stare’** – she offers us a **‘glance’**, which we can miss, and the second reference to her looking – the **‘smile her eyes began’** – is again something subtle that, supposedly, we have **‘No time’** to see.

Lines 13–14.

In these lines, the speaker clearly answers the question with which he started the poem, stating, **‘A poor life this if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare.’** That the poem returns to its opening with exactly the same rhymes gives the ending a rhetorical effectiveness. Having taught us its lesson through a range of examples, the poem hammers home its message in this concluding couplet.

Just as the act of describing this life as **‘full of care’** in the opening, as opposed to full of work or labour, is an interesting choice, so too the choice of **‘poor’** as opposed to say, ‘bad’ or ‘strange’ is an interesting choice here. If one accepts that the poem can be read as claiming leisure for an underclass when it has traditionally been seen as the preserve of an elite, the other resonance of poor – not ‘bad’ but ‘connected with poverty’ – must be in play. The poem, starting as it does with an engaging question, moving through examples and coming to a clear conclusion, seems to want to persuade us of something: that we should take time out. But the lesson seems so self-evident, the advantages of a life of **‘Leisure’** so great within the poem, that one wonders why anyone would need persuading. The only thing in the poem preventing us from pursuing a life of nature and beauty is the life which is **‘full of care,’** and it’s therefore worth interrogating what this might be.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

If the **'poor'** life is a life of poverty, then the **'care'** may be about work and money worries, and read in this light the poem can therefore be seen not as a piece persuading us to embrace a simpler life, but rather a piece protesting the fact that the working classes are denied this life; a piece claiming that work, and the economic and political system of capitalism, distances the working classes from the beauty of nature.

While much about Davies's life and wider body of work – his experience of poverty, his exploration of the life of down-and-out characters, even the way in which money worries drove his enormously prolific literary output – would seem to justify a left-wing reading of this poem, it is interesting that politics is not front and centre in the piece. The word **'care'** is sufficiently open-ended that a reader is able to attach to it whatever their concerns might be, financial or otherwise, encouraged by the speaker's use of the plural first-person pronoun, **'We'**. It would be possible to read this pronoun as indicating a specific class, but the poem is open-ended enough for this to mean all humanity, and its immediate message, of taking time out to enjoy life and appreciate nature, is relevant to all. Importantly, that **'We'** makes the poem's speaker one of us, someone who knows he has to learn the very lesson he is leading us through; as a kind of teacher, the speaker of the poem is lent a humility as well as an authority, which increases the inclusiveness and charm of the poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Leisure' is easily W.H. Davies's most famous poem; it has been anthologised and re-anthologised, and has even been used in television adverts. This may be a result of the simplicity and directness of its language and form, and the universal appeal of its message – let's all be a bit less busy, let's look around at all this beauty while we can. It is known by readers who know nothing else of Davies or even of poetry, and has created an impression of Davies as a poet who prizes the simple life and the beauty of nature. While this is an important strain in his work, illustrated in poems like 'The Kingfisher', collected in *Poetry 1900-2000*, there is a wider body of work, much of which is far more in touch with the gritty reality of life in the twentieth century. In this context, it seems at least possible to see '**Leisure**' as a classic of working-class literature, and its author as someone who prizes leisure and nature precisely because of his understanding of how a capitalist system can separate the least fortunate in society from the aspects of life which this poem idealises.

There is a great deal going on within the poem to make its attractive message memorable. The rhymed couplets in iambic tetrameter and the repetitive phrase '**No time**' have a great impact. In addition, the poem opens with a question, moves from concrete examples, such as the more tangible animal examples in earlier stanzas, to the personification of '**Beauty**', and concludes with a statement that echoes the poem's opening. In addition, the language choices are simple and direct. While these techniques may explain the poem's success in persuading us of its argument, it could also be concluded that, just as '**Leisure**' suggests freedom should be there for all of us, so Davies's linguistic and formal choices suggest that poetry is for all of us.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the poem personify '**Beauty**' and what is the impact of this?

How does the speaker persuade us to accept that a slower life, in touch with nature, would be a good thing?

What relevance does this early twentieth-century poem have to a life of social media and smartphones in the early twenty-first century?

Is this just a poem that says a slow life, surrounded by nature, is great, or does it have any other dimensions?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

William Henry Davies. Photograph uploaded by Literature Wales:
<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/36364>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Poetry Foundation has a useful biography of Davies and suggestions for further reading:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-h-davies>

The Poetry Archive has an interesting recording of Simon Armitage reading 'The Inquest'.

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/w-h-davies>

The National Library for Wales details the Davies materials the library holds, and has a concise biography:

<https://www.library.wales/collections/learn-more/archives-of-welsh-writers-in-english/w-h-davies-manuscripts>

This BBC piece by Phil Carradice offers an overview of Davies's life:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/waleshistory/2011/05/wh_davies_welsh_super_tramp.html

A reading of Leisure by W.H. Davies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF0n7h-rpBo> While the animation is perhaps a bit daft, the introduction Davies provides is useful in opening up more complex readings of the poem.

Davies's interesting review of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

<https://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2013/01/confessions-down-and-out>

The BBC have useful overviews of Davies's life: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/wh-davies/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-15482428>



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Llywodraeth Cymru
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We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Christine Evans

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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
THREE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Christine Evans writes out of the small rural community of Aberdaron, situated on the tip of the largely Welsh-speaking Pen Llŷn (the Llŷn Peninsula), which bends westwards into the Irish Sea from the north-western coastline of Gwynedd. Yorkshire-born, Evans moved to the area in 1967 as a newly-qualified English teacher when she was appointed to a post in a school in Pwllheli (her father’s birthplace). She went on to marry into a local family. Now retired, she habitually spends six months of each year on Bardsey Island (in Welsh, *Ynys Enlli*), which lies in the Irish sea, just off the peninsula’s southwestern coastline. The livelihood of her husband and son – fishermen and farmers, like so many of their local community – continues to depend on the coastal environment which has supported their family for generations.

A sensitive observer of the cultural (and economic) as well as environmental ‘ecology’ of her surroundings, and the daily give-and-take which living in this remote locality demands of its inhabitants, Evans’s poems frequently return to the delicate balance between the human and the natural – viewed through scientific, historical, cultural and psychological lenses – which the rhythms of her own family’s life and history, spanning coast and island, lay bare.

Though fluent in Welsh, Evans tends to write in English: the power of language both to erect and erode barriers between and among people of various backgrounds and experiences, whatever their situation or occupation, is one of the most insistent concerns of her oeuvre. Another lasting though more discreet preoccupation is the role of creativity and the arts, represented by writing and occasionally poetry, in a society which tends to value doing over thinking, the mechanical over the imaginative, the economically productive over the spiritually stimulating or psychologically soothing. In an interview, Evans has remarked: ‘I live and write in an environment that is uneasy with artistic expression. I’m part of a community of very practical people who don’t always see the need for it’.¹

(1) Christine Evans, in Alice Entwistle, *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 2014), p. 85.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Despite being advised against writing by R.S. Thomas, a neighbour and friend of her father-in-law, Christine Evans has been publishing poetry since the early eighties; her poems have appeared in a range of national and international magazines and journals, and have been anthologized in *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet, 1991), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren, 1997) and *Welsh Women's Poetry* (eds. Catherine Brennan and Katie Gramich, Honno, 2003) among other major Wales-centred anthologies. The seven poetry collections she has published to date (an eighth is in preparation) include a *Selected Poems* (2003); in addition, the lavishly illustrated study *Bardsey* appeared with Gwasg Gomer in 2008.

Interviews with Evans have appeared in a number of publications over the years; perhaps the most comprehensive is included in *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle (Seren 2014). Treatments of her poetry are found in, among other places, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women re-writing Contemporary Wales*, also by Alice Entwistle (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* by Matthew Jarvis (University of Wales Press, 2008).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-8.

The opening stanza of '**Callers**' strikes the half-amused, half-affectionate tone which prevails for much of the poem, and serves at different moments to lighten, and even complicate, the seriousness of its largest themes. In the normal run of affairs, the removal of a visitor's headwear on entering a building might be taken as a traditional gesture of respect or deference in a domestic setting, probably made to a woman or social superior.

There seems more than a hint of old-fashioned cap-doffing in the scene with which the poem opens. The deference seems quietly both to entertain and mildly alarm its apparently female speaker; on the other hand, '**shock**' seems perhaps an overreaction to a conventional gesture of respect (line 1). The remark playfully courts our attention, partly because the situation is evidently recurrent: '**Those neighbouring farmers**' (line 2) – the tone of this description seems both resigned and somehow affectionate – would seem to be in the habit of '**call[ing] at our house**' (line 2) on a reasonably regular basis, if perhaps not quite frequently enough to seem a nuisance. In fact the way the visitors are described is palpably sympathetic to their awkward self-consciousness; for all the amusement we might detect in the speaker's portrayal of the scene, she is plainly a perceptive hostess, more than capable of spotting in her callers a collective need to get through a social situation they have themselves engineered: '**of course, to have something to roll / Or to press or twist in their blunt, nervous hands**' (lines 3-4).

The speaker's compassion for her visitors notwithstanding, their deference catalyses the poem's deft and deliberate play on the culturally-freighted and often gendered relationship between clothing, nakedness, modesty and social convention. These are the time-honoured ingredients of farce, and there is a hint of mischief-making in the (almost salacious-seeming) suggestion that the exposure of these middle-aged farmers' heads, '**With their soft bald spots or thinning forelocks**' (line 6) seems –ironically – almost indecent (cap-doffing was always a gesture of respect, a marker of decent behaviour). Interestingly, if their transformation makes the eponymous '**callers**' seem '**vulnerable**' (line 5) and '**at once smaller**' (line 7), it is also credited with making them seem '**much more vivid**' (line 7). The adjective '**vivid**' carries with it a sense of the visual, in being associated with intensity and depth of colour; however the word's usage here subtly confers on the visitors a vitality it draws from the Latin root that it shares with words like 'revive' and 'revivify' (that is, the verb 'vivare', meaning 'to live'). That energy is confirmed in the image on which the stanza closes, which captures the callers '**Leaping out of type to personality**' (line 8).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-15.

Interestingly, we learn no more about the visitors as individuals, the speaker returning in the second, slightly shorter stanza to the generalized study which the poem's title prepares us for. Lines 9-15 both fill out and ground the teasing sketches of the opening stanza, by acknowledging the routines (and of course the economic necessities) of the callers' working lives. Here, now, they are defined by **'The smell of their beasts'** (line 9), which:

**...comes in with them,
Faint as the breath of growing things in summer,
Rich, as the days draw in, with cake and hay and dung.** (Lines 9-11.)

The lyricism of these lines, laced through with aural echoes (**'in ... / growing things in / Rich ... in'**; **'Faint ... days ... cake and hay'**) which twine in and out of each other, almost literally freshens the poem's atmosphere, lifting the callers out of the confines of the domestic world we've watched them enter, and away from the danger of ridicule, however gentle. In moving them (and us) outside, towards the world of beasts and **'growing things in summer'** which they inhabit and oversee, the farmers are accorded a kind of romantic, even exotic (if earthy), allure and power: the world we scent in the **'smell of their beasts'** (line 9) is their birthright as well as the seat of their knowledge, and exclusive in its privileges.

In the second half of this stanza, the poem returns us to the house, able now to image the visitors as a version of their **'beasts'** in their inclination, sensed by the speaker, **'to stamp and snort / Looking sideways'** (lines 13-14), with less risk of seeming to mock or trivialize their discomfort. Bestialized, it is true, these men are seeming now more wild than foolish, and thus the more worthy of our respect and admiration for their toleration of the routine niceties, like **'leaving mucky boots beside the door'** (line 15), which domestication demands of them.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16-20.

Only five lines long, the poem's final stanza is also the shortest; this tapering discreetly mirrors its sharpening focus on the visitors, depicted now as **'Only small, swarthy men with the friendly smell on them'** (line 16). Belatedly, here the speaker herself takes the centre-stage in a world which seems - contagiously - somehow reduced and constrictive in the presence of these only half-domesticated callers: **'walls press close and the room seems cluttered. / I am glad to go and make obligatory tea'** (line 17). In this context, the almost ritual gendering of the home offers everyone release from a tension arguably catalysed - all unknowingly - by her presence from the start. Making the tea affords her a distance from which to reflect on a conversation seemingly soothed, and that becomes soothing, as **'their voices sway, slow with the seasons'** (line 19), and no less interesting for the deliberate, unhurried way in which (**'ponderously'**, much like the poem's own last line) the callers reach their conclusion. In this context, **'ponderously'** retains the weight of thoughtfulness (to **'ponder'** something is of course reflect on it) as well as a deliberation we can now respect as well as enjoy.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Callers**' is a deceptively succinct study of colliding cultural practices, behaviours and languages, represented by both the visitors and the visited. It takes a particular, at times gently humorous, interest in the experiential gulf which opens as the poem's awkward subjects step over the threshold of the house on which they have chosen (regularly? sporadically? It is hard to be sure) to call. In this way we are introduced to the contrasts – polarities, even – which divide and yet also seem to cross over between the figures framed in the text: between male and female ways of talking and behaving; between the habits and expectations of older and younger generations; between local 'visitor' and the couple on whom they call. If the speaker's voice is female (she makes the tea, after all, in a plainly traditional society), her surprise, and amused observation of what seems to be something of a social ritual, hint at her difference; she seems more incomer than insider. In this way, the poem layers other kinds of contrast: between the known and accepted, and the strange and unfamiliar, which both parties in different ways represent to each other. But in some ways the poem is above all interested in the gulf it teases open between talking – language – and its (arguably, often silent) counterpart: *doing*.

Having exposed this rich and tension-filled social space between its different protagonists, the poem – or the voice of its implicitly young, implicitly female speaker – obliquely ponders the reasons for its existence and, to some extent, both calls it into question and seeks to excuse it, in a mood which seems to come much closer to sympathetic affection than judgement or reproach. In one early account of her work, the poet wonders whether her writing might be read as a response 'to the non-verbalized way I was living, at home on a small-holding with infant son and fisherman husband in a small community that is one of the last toeholds of a traditional culture'.

In this way, '**Callers**' perhaps confirms that it is the nature of life on Pen Llŷn, its arguably unique culture and very ancient history, that anchors this poet's work, rather than the larger and no less complex cultural geography of Wales per se. Pertinently for our understanding of '**Callers**', Evans has identified the poem as among 'the first poems I wrote within this context', and she explains of her unusual social situation: 'I was struck most by its patterns, the invisible web of relationships and deferential conventions that held the community together...'.¹

(1) Christine Evans, in *The Bright Field*, ed. Meic Stephens (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 86.

THREE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person seems to speak this poem? How do you imagine him or her? How has he or she come to be in the scene the poem depicts? How do they feel about the callers?

Note down some of the ways in which the callers seem to differ from the speaker. How far do they seem similar? How and why might these similarities and/or differences seem significant?

What impression does the poem leave of the rural community and its way of life? Does it make that world seem appealing to you or not? Where and how?

PHOTOGRAPHS

Author photograph:

<http://www.academi.org/list-of-writers/i/130004/>

Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli):

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bardsey-island.jpg>

Historical images of a farmer's market at Dolgellau:

<http://search.digido.org.uk/?id=llgc-id%3A1460495>

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Christine Evans's author page at Gomer Press:

<https://www.gomer.co.uk/authors/christineevans.html>

A description of Evans's *Selected Poems*:

<https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/selected-poems-3>

A travel article discussing the literary heritage and geography of Aberdaron:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/wales/articles/The-Llyn-Peninsula-A-poets-wild-corner-of-Wales/>



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**PROFESSOR
ALICE ENTWISTLE**

*University of South Wales
August, 2019*

*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University,
The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh
Writing in English.*

Christine Evans

'The Fisherman'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Christine Evans writes out of the small rural community of Aberdaron, situated on the tip of the largely Welsh-speaking Pen Llŷn (the Llŷn Peninsula), which bends westwards into the Irish Sea from the north-western coastline of Gwynedd. Yorkshire-born, Evans moved to the area in 1967 as a newly-qualified English teacher when she was appointed to a post in a school in Pwllheli (her father’s birthplace). She went on to marry into a local family. Now retired, she habitually spends six months of each year on Bardsey Island (in Welsh, *Ynys Enlli*), which lies in the Irish sea, just off the peninsula’s southwestern coastline. The livelihood of her husband and son – fishermen and farmers, like so many of their local community – continues to depend on the coastal environment which has supported their family for generations.

A sensitive observer of the cultural (and economic) as well as environmental ‘ecology’ of her surroundings, and the daily give-and-take which living in this remote locality demands of its inhabitants, Evans’s poems frequently return to the delicate balance between the human and the natural – viewed through scientific, historical, cultural and psychological lenses – which the rhythms of her own family’s life and history, spanning coast and island, lay bare.

Though fluent in Welsh, Evans tends to write in English: the power of language both to erect and erode barriers between and among people of various backgrounds and experiences, whatever their situation or occupation, is one of the most insistent concerns of her oeuvre. Another lasting though more discreet preoccupation is the role of creativity and the arts, represented by writing and occasionally poetry, in a society which tends to value doing over thinking, the mechanical over the imaginative, the economically productive over the spiritually stimulating or psychologically soothing. In an interview, Evans has remarked: ‘I live and write in an environment that is uneasy with artistic expression. I’m part of a community of very practical people who don’t always see the need for it’.¹

(1) Christine Evans, in Alice Entwistle, *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 2014), p. 85.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Despite being advised against writing by R.S. Thomas, a neighbour and friend of her father-in-law, Christine Evans has been publishing poetry since the early eighties; her poems have appeared in a range of national and international magazines and journals, and have been anthologized in *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet, 1991), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren, 1997) and *Welsh Women's Poetry* (eds. Catherine Brennan and Katie Gramich, Honno, 2003) among other major Wales-centred anthologies. The seven poetry collections she has published to date (an eighth is in preparation) include a *Selected Poems* (2003); in addition, the lavishly illustrated study *Bardsey* appeared with Gwasg Gomer in 2008.

Interviews with Evans have appeared in a number of publications over the years; perhaps the most comprehensive is included in *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle (Seren 2014). Treatments of her poetry are found in, among other places, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women re-writing Contemporary Wales*, also by Alice Entwistle (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* by Matthew Jarvis (University of Wales Press, 2008).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-3.

The three-line stanza which opens 'The Fisherman' begins with a forcefully self-contained assertion, '**Land speaks to him**' (line 1). As ever, a statement which goes unexplained can be read in more than one way; these bold words might seem as likely to disturb as console. After all the speaking voice of the personified proper-sounding noun '**Land**' (free of any confining definite article) is powerful enough to reach the eponymous fisherman across some distance '**Out beyond the islands**' (line 2). The words which conclude this first dramatic stanza are likewise confidently, even imperiously, possessive: '**You belong to me.**' (line 3). If we can imagine feeling the pull of the land, we might as easily sense something menacing in the sense of entitlement which seems to load it.

Lines 4-11.

The poem's richly ambivalent opening reverberates through the text's unpicking of a conflict which its eponymous subject seems unable to escape, poised as he is – professionally and emotionally, we learn – between the twin but opposing attractions of land and sea. The first of the two longer central stanzas which provide the formal backbone of the poem homes in on a tension apparently only complicated by aging: '**As he grows older, its beckoning / Becomes insistent**' (lines 4-5). As if in protective or defensive response to the land's '**beckoning**' demands, the speaker notes the lightness with which the fisherman inhabits his terrestrial context, his steps literally dissolving in an environment which therefore seems actually to swallow his presence: '**Walking the shore / For his nets ... / He leaves no prints.**' (Lines 5-8.) Something close to evanescence is echoed in the airiness with which the speaker – a distinctly reticent presence in this text – invests an interlude which celebrates the transient beauties of the shoreline: '**the wet sand blue / And scudding white with winter sky**' (lines 6-7).

Throughout the poem, the caesura (a hiatus or pause caused when a line or utterance is broken by punctuation, phrasing or white space) makes a significant impact on our sense of the fisherman's predicament, even though this solitary figure never speaks. Partly his silence is explained by the fact we never see him in company, but arguably it reflects a personality and habits shaped by a culture in which words have little currency. At just the moment when we are lifted into awareness of the many advantages afforded by living so close to nature, the poem makes the limits of human existence ironically stark: '**The gravestones at his back / Are the black wicks / Of his identity; the names on them / Outstare the tide.**' (Lines 9-12.) The imagery in these lines is suggestively compacted. The idea of a '**wick**' (the means by which fuel is drawn up towards the flame it feeds) which is '**black**' neatly darkens a conceit more traditionally used to conjure the cheer of light, warmth and/or energy. Thus the family graves which anchor the fisherman to this locality, and will presumably one day bear his name (etching his '**identity**' into the history they stand for), disturb rather than console. This equivocal moment deepens our sense of this silent, isolated figure's conflicted situation. The ancestry inscribed by the gravestones seems implacably opposed to the sea which, the arrangement of the words across a stanza break hints, they seem to expect to overmaster: '**Outstare the tide**' (line 12).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-20.

The poem's central stanza elaborates on the fisherman's ambivalent feelings about the sea, focussing on the element, wind, which seems its most remorseless and violent feature. With the help of the personification which the text puts to effective use throughout, the wind is depicted as a ravaging antagonist (**'howl[ing]'**): **'its open mouth / Pressed against the window where he sits / To weld his lobster pots / Or coiling ropes'** (lines 13-16). The relentlessness of the assault prompts our sympathy for the protagonist's inclination to refuse the aggressor, **'sure / His feet demand the firm horizons.'** (Lines 16-17.) There is a moment of swift and subtle pathetic fallacy in the **'certaint[y]'** with which the **'firm horizons'** of the land seem physically to repudiate the endless, wearisome, pulsing pressure of wind and tide. In a poem replete with caesurae, note how the same line (i.e. 17) is confined (firmly) within, and delivered without interruption across, its single cohering line.

Interestingly, the predictability with which the land (**'Warm with certainties'**) counters its quixotic-seeming opponent seems both to prompt and resonate in the certainty on which stanza and fisherman together come resolvingly to rest:

**One more season: then the farm
Can home and enfold him,
Warm with certainties.** (Lines 18-20.)

Lines 21-27.

Presented almost as an afterthought (**'Only ...'** line 21), the poem's closing stanza swiftly shifts to the man's relationship with the sea. As if deliberately to counter the consolations of domestic care and comfort which land offers (because it **'Can home him and enfold him'**, line 19), sea and fisher are constructed (mischievously?) as lovers. With a tidal and palpably erotic charge the sea turns temptress, her explicit desirousness less unsatisfied than insatiable: **'the sea longs / To lick / And lick him smooth.'** (Lines 21-23.) Even the mostly self-steadying free verse mode of the poem is thrown off-balance by these repeated, thus all the more urgent-seeming, sexualised imprecations: the two-word line **'To lick'** is the shortest of a poem which never wastes words.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Resuming the gravely sympathetic tone with which it began, the poem closes down these moments of undisciplined passion with the image of the fishing boat dutifully **'turned / For harbour,'** the final word enshrining all the stability of the context and circumstances that location represents. A reluctance discreetly signalled in the line break (which disrupts and delays the phrasing) is dramatized by the poem's last lines. With suggestive belatedness, the sea's extraordinary power over the fisherman (base, in both senses of the word) is here made clearer – partly thanks to the caesurae which underscore it – than anywhere else in an endlessly equivocal text: **'all day, inland, / He tastes the salt / That tightens on his mouth.'** If **'mouth'** fleetingly recovers the eroticism of the stanza, **'tightens'** perhaps also gestures at the man's constricted position, trapped between his twin, obliquely feminized, worlds. Where one is conjured as stern but caring mother/wife, the other seems irresistible seductress, only more desirable for the menace which **'Land'** (the black gravestones hint, not unjustifiably) suspects and fears of her.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**The Fisherman**' appeared in Christine Evans's first collection *Looking Inland*, published by Seren Books in 1983. The poem's loosely entwined stanzas meditate on the ambivalence which (they suggest) more or less by definition qualifies this ancient, equivocal but implicitly irresistible occupation. The study draws into a sympathetic portrait timeless issues of historical and cultural identity and affiliation, and the deeply-woven relationship between the central, definitively gendered, figure and his more surreptitiously gendered geo-cultural environs and practices, represented by land (and '**farm**') and sea (thus fishing) alike. The two domains are presented as contesting each other for the right to his life and future; both simultaneously enshrine but also arguably threaten his right to forge his own future as he might choose. Both land and sea are shown to exert a kind of implacable pull/push effect on a skilled and knowledgeable professional who depends on them equally. In this way, a fluid-seeming but self-disciplined text positions its eponymous ageless subject between the competing traditions and demands of his shared but opposing worlds. His isolated but not unhappy figure stands between the safe respectability of family/farm, and the thrilling unpredictable risks of sea, tide and winds.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person do you think the fisherman is? Why?

Do you think the fisherman seems most at home on land or at sea? Why?

Who seems to speak this poem? How far do you think they sympathize with either the land, or the sea, or the fisherman himself?

What impression does this poem give of the realities of living, and making a living, in a rural area, or one which is close to the coast? Which way of life do you think you might choose, were you the fisherman in the poem? For what reasons?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

Author photograph:

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Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli):

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Catherine Fisher

'Those Who Make Paths'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 9 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 10 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 10 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 11 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Catherine Fisher (b. 1957) is a poet and novelist from Newport. She has written three collections of poetry (*Immrama* (1988), *The Unexplored Ocean* (1994) and *Altered States* (1999), in addition to many popular works of fiction for children, such as *The Snow-Walker Trilogy* (1993–1996), the *Chronoptika Series* (2012–2016), and *Incarceron* (2007). She has worked as a school teacher and a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Glamorgan (now University of South Wales).

Fisher is of Irish Catholic background, having descended from refugees who arrived in south Wales during the Great Famine in the 1840s.¹ Much of her poetry deals with historical themes connected with local places and landscapes, often veering into fantasy and the mythologies connected to those places. However, Fisher rarely addresses these ideas from the perspective of grand or overarching histories and narratives. Rather, her poetry conveys a sense of places and their hidden histories through a sensitive attention to local detail. Fisher once told an interviewer that she views Wales as ‘a series of places. Specifically it’s the local landscape: the actual hills and forests. If I think of Wales that’s what I think of: I don’t think of a political entity or a cultural entity, really, or a linguistic one. I think of actual local places.’²

Through this close attention to detail, Fisher’s poetry teases out the subtleties of life and lived experience, and the intimate human connections between the present and the past. Her work invites us to stop, observe, and think more carefully about the world around us. For Fisher, poetry is a form of expression and exploration that at once opens up new pathways to understanding the world, and shows readers the way. As she has herself stated: ‘I think the poet’s duty is to pay attention to the things that interests him or her and to – well, stop everything and say look: look – at – that! That’s what a poem does, isn’t it? It’s very small. It puts things in front of you; it says, look at that time, or that place or that object.’³ This sense of poetry’s capacity to explore details and subtleties is expressed through images and themes of the fringes, edges and margins: the unheralded scenes and experiences that, Fisher’s work implies, reveal more about the human experience than a focus on what is straightforwardly observable.

(1) Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 129.

(2) Fisher, quoted in Alice Entwistle, *In Her Own Words: Women Talking Poetry and Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 1994), p. 89.

(3) *Ibid*, p. 94.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**Those Who Make Paths**' is a celebration of people who live on the margins: unheard, unseen and unsung, who are yet often those who set humanity out on new paths of activity and creativity. This is signalled in the poem's title: the use of the deictic pronoun '**those**' confirms the idea of the unheralded anonymity of the people at the heart of the poem; yet in placing them as the focus of the title, the poem signals its act of celebrating them. Moreover, the primary image of what '**those**' produce – '**paths**' – is doubly a literal and metaphorical image that conveys the broader philosophical scope of the poem: the profound philosophical significance of literal, physical everyday activities, and the ways these open new paths to understanding.

Form.

The poem describes itself as a '**song of praise**'; however, while it contains some features of a traditional lyric poem, much of the poem's meaning is conveyed through the ways it deviates from the conventions of the traditional lyric or song. For instance, while the poem consists of three octaves, or eight-line stanzas, and maintains a loosely iambic rhythm, the lines vary in length, and there is no regular rhyme scheme until the final stanza. In keeping with the poem's concern with ordinary, unpretentious, understated lives, only the first word of each stanza is capitalised, giving the poem an informal presence on the page.

'**Those Who Make Paths**' consists of a series of vignettes, or short, impressionistic scenes, in which a range of characters are described through the slightest of sketches and lyrical touches. The poem rests on an inspired grammatical conceit that embodies its central theme: the vignettes are set in motion by the predicate in the very first line: '**Here's a song of praise for all those people/ who [...]**'; from here, each of the character sketches are, in effect, relative clauses that provide further information about the initial noun phrase '**all those people**'. This conceit has a number of related effects: firstly, it encompasses all the activity that takes place in the poem under the term '**people**', which has a levelling, egalitarian, collectivising effect in keeping with the poem's celebration of ordinary life. Secondly, it means that each vignette is phrased in relation to the initial predicate ('here is'), so that, in effect, the poem could run on indefinitely. This is also related to the sense that the sketched scenes are expressed in the simple present tense, and therefore always ongoing and unfinished: these people are, after all, '**those who make paths**': they are, by definition, always at the unfinished edge of things. Thirdly, it enables the poem to employ a kind of anaphora, or poetic repetition: the word '**who**' must be repeated in order for the poem to make grammatical sense; the repetition has the effect of giving the poem a quiet insistence that subtly but firmly emphasises the profound significance of its characters, despite their ostensibly inconsequential activities.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-8.

The first stanza establishes the poem's form and theme. Note that line 1 describes the poem not as a 'song in praise of' but a **'song of praise for'**, which contributes to the sense that the poem is both a gift **'for'** – and therefore in connection with – those it celebrates, and itself an enactment of one of its central themes: the idea that poetry is not merely ineffectual, but part of the ongoing process through which lives are lived and made meaningful, and new **'paths'** through life are discovered. In contrast to the poem's mostly iambic rhythm, the first line begins with a trochee, in which the first word is emphasised: **'Here's'**. The poem thus begins with a confident assertion of its own presence in the world.

Although there are spiritual overtones in the idea of **'praise'**, the poem is distinctly humanistic in its celebration of people who **'live at the forgotten edge of things'** (line 2). Central to the poem is the idea that such people share much with poetry itself in their quiet resistance to normal routines and ways of thinking. Lines 3-4 contain the first vignette, which sets the tone: it describes those who **'come out at night and take long walks/ under the lamp-posts, remembering'**. Though only a finely sketched image, these few words give us a vivid impression of those who choose to live outside ordinary social routines. Enjambment is used to convey the length of the walks they take. There is a melancholic tone to the scene, conveyed in a single word: **'remembering'**; perhaps those who take long walks at night are nostalgic about older, better times, or perhaps are recalling the departed. Moreover, the idea of **'remembering'** also clearly contrasts with the idea of living at the **'forgotten edge'**, and gestures more broadly at the process of remembering history; the contrasted terms imply that, though society may forget its past, it is important that there are those who make the effort to remember.

The second vignette in lines 5-8 describes women who **'stay behind to clean old churches'**. This is another resonant image of social marginality. Fisher is of Irish Catholic descent, and the lines strongly suggest that these are Catholic churches. The women clean **'shining faces'** (line 6): most Protestant churches (and certainly, in Wales, Nonconformist chapels) do not worship statues or icons, and Catholics were historically marginalised in this largely Protestant country. However, this is, at the same time, a comment on women's marginality within the Catholic church and, by implication, society more generally. The Catholic church does not ordain women; yet the image is one of a subtle transgression of such a social order: by **'stay[ing] behind'** (line 5) after the congregation has left, these women can stand at the front of the church to **'[speak] their thoughts to angels and the dead'** (line 7) in quiet defiance of convention.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-16.

The first image in the second stanza is of men who **'gather sticks from urban river banks'** (line 10): the image of **'banks'** channels the poem's emphasis on those on the edges and margins of society, as does the fact that the men go out in **'the early morning'** (line 8), that is, the edge of the day, when most are still asleep. The idea of foraging resources from the urban environment also strongly suggests poverty and social marginalisation. This is further pursued in the image of women who **'carry/wood on prams'** (lines 13-4), as well as the **'old men with allotments'** (line 11) (allotments are often found at the edges of urban spaces), and those with bikes **'piled with panniers of spuds'** (line 12). Each of these images is connected to a sense of resourcefulness, of making do and getting by with meagre resources at the edge of society.

The stanza ends with the poem's only short, simple sentence, which is, importantly, a rhetorical question: **'Where are they/ in the world's eye?'** (lines 15-6). Situated roughly halfway through, it might be understood as the question at the physical and thematic centre of the poem. Given the prominence of ideas and images of margins, edges, and peripheries, this is highly significant positioning. Interestingly, Fisher employed the image of an eye in an intriguing interview about her work: 'I like to look for other things. Things that you just see out of the corner of your eye or you see going past in the train or you don't quite see.' The implication and answer to this rhetorical question is of course that **'the world's eye'** – or conventional view of things – is too narrow in focus, too limited to see the wider significance of those who live on the edges. This is compounded by the truncation of line 16 (**'in the world's eye?'**), the shortest in the poem. The poem's very structure and its layout on the page thus ingeniously enacts its theme of the importance of looking out from the centre to the margins.

Lines 17-24.

In contrast to the conspicuously short previous line, line 17 is the poem's longest, and contains the image that gives the poem its title: **'And those who make the paths that run through hedges'**. The image pursues the poem's concern with edges and boundaries, and is a wonderful metaphor for the importance of activities that, like poetry, transgress the limits and edges of social conventions: hedges, of course, mark the edges of fields and paths, yet the image is one of defiance of conventional routes and borders, and in celebration of the creation of new paths. The line is carried by a lilting iambic rhythm, which, in contrast with the previous line, evokes a sense of gleeful abandon.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

An emphasis on physical activity permeates this stanza, which echoes many of the images seen earlier. Indeed, the poem as a whole is filled with echoing and interlocking images and references, from the **'anglers'** (line 21) (who normally fish, like the men gathering sticks, from the banks of rivers), and the **'cyclists'** (line 21) who may not carry spuds in their panniers, but are **'happy to be alone'** (line 22), to those who make paths through the **'corners of fields'**, a pun on the 'field' of vision implied by the reference to the **'world's eye'** imaged in the previous stanza. Indeed, there are further repeated images of solitude, and the sense of being apart, on the periphery of society, is a central aspect of this poem: for instance the **'kids who dream in the corners of the yard'** (line 20), and the women who **'[speak] their thoughts to angels and the dead'** in empty churches in stanza one. These interconnected, echoing images offer a sense of the (perhaps paradoxically) collective importance of these moments of solitude: those who exist at the edges are often, by definition, alone, and yet it is their quiet acts of creativity that broaden the collective perspective and open up new creative paths for all of us. Note that each of the vignettes is expressed with plural or collective pronouns: **'women'**, **'men'**, **'kids'**, etc. The introduction of a regular rhyme scheme in this stanza perhaps emphasises this sense of collective momentum and the idea that **'those who make paths'**, though they do so in solitude, do so for the collective good.

Following the poem's use of short, symbolically charged and specific vignettes to convey its theme, the final two lines, 23-4, return to a more generalising tone to summarise its ideas: **'those who live beneath the world's dignity;/ those who've been poets, and have never known.'** The anaphora used to begin these last lines serves to emphasise the sense of connection between the quiet, unsung acts of creativity we have seen and that which society conventionally deems to be creative: poetry itself. Indeed, in this sense, the poem's final message is that there is a synergy between poetry and the everyday world: small, everyday acts can be poetic, while poetry itself pushes the boundaries of our understanding of everyday life.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Those Who Make Paths**' is a poetic celebration of eccentricity. The term 'eccentric', while in popular parlance meaning unconventional or strange, has its root the Greek term for being spatially 'out of' ('ek') the 'centre' ('kentron'). The poem builds its path around a series of vignettes or sketches of human activity that play on images and symbols of the spatial aspects of human eccentricity, originality, and transgression: from the men who wake up early gather sticks from riverbanks, to those who defy boundaries and '**make paths**' through hedges at the edges of fields. The poem accumulates these images in order to lead us to a sense of the narrowness of the '**world's eye**' – its normative field of vision – and the importance of reaching out beyond the centre of focus to the edges and margins of things.

The poem is a '**song of praise**' to those unsung, unheralded people who may not be 'creative' in the way we commonly understand that term, and who may not grab the world's attention, but through their small acts of transgression and creativity, contribute to and shape our ongoing collective sense of the world. The poem invites us to broaden our definitions of and perspectives on the world, and to widen the scope of our collective understanding. In doing so, it is a profound celebration of poetry itself.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What images of margins, edges and borders can you find?

What images of solitude can you find? How is solitude celebrated?

How many different 'vignettes', or character sketches, can you find?
What are the people in these sketches doing?

What does the poem mean by the phrase 'the world's eye'?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

River Usk, Newport:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Usk#/media/File:The_River_Usk,_looking_downstream_-_geograph.org.uk_-_398132.jpg

Bicycle with panniers:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pannier#/media/File:15-05-02-Reiserad-beladen-RalfR-dscf4852-33.jpg>

Copse:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/clearlydived/8201212858/in/photolist-duHmRG-nPkYqu-6p3jS7-e4Wgdq-23L1D4k-26VuKbx-bXnARW-5DRtZq-bkV1Bq-buzczN-6EaqZm-nnK5rV-GHy47a-adq34-aidhBR-oh4ZmL-Hif72-5x853U-6oct5p-fErVok-7ABRhZ-bHnVV-nnJHgE-99V71o-efipSQ-aGgsET-W3N4ko-5obYLD-HsP8jv-4nHdCT-aSEg4c-4rSRRV-9vkVD8-9Y7Q3o-bcUhuK-26GxoeW-Hicj4-28ZCAQw-HibVX-dAymTc-5GfoDL-4vXksX-TJwNPo-cnpPfA-DJA4t-nYNv8z-7KFG6S-ep2MK1-aBR76-av8Kw>

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph of the poet from <https://www.catherine-fisher.com/>



SECTION 6
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*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University,
The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh
Writing in English.*

Peter Gruffydd

'Some Fathers'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Peter Gruffydd was born in Liverpool in 1935. He first moved to Wales at the age of five, following his evacuation in early 1941 (due to the Second World War). Having already learned Welsh, he then began studying English at Bangor University. His time living in Wales was brief, and he has spent most of his life in England, living in Liverpool, the West Midlands, and Bristol. Gruffydd was a member of Plaid Cymru and a Welsh nationalist (his movement into Welsh politics mirrors that of the Welsh intellectual Saunders Lewis, an ardent nationalist who was born in Liverpool). Gruffydd’s nationalist politics is evident in some of his poetry, such as ‘The Small Nation’, which Matthew Jarvis suggests ‘is substantially a lament for a Wales that the poem’s speaker sees as having lost courage’, and which foresees ‘The slow funeral of a small nation’.¹

Before he became known by the surname with which he appears in the *Poetry 1900–2000* anthology, Gruffydd published under the name Peter M. Griffith (the English-spelling, but pronounced in a similar same way). In 1993, Gruffydd became a founder member of the Welsh Branch of PEN International (now Wales PEN Cymru), an organisation which advocates on behalf of writers across the world.

Although his poems have appeared in several poetry magazines, Gruffydd has one solitary collection to his name, 1972’s *The Shivering Seed*. His earliest significant poetry publication was in *Triad*, with two other notable Welsh ‘Second Flowering’ poets,² Harri Webb and Meic Stephens.

(1) Matthew Jarvis, ‘Poetry Wales in the 1960s and 1970s’, in *British Literature in Transition, 1960–1980: Flower Power*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 225–243, p. 233.

(2) A term often given to Anglophone Welsh poets from the 1960s, taken from Meic Stephen’s influential essay, ‘The Second Flowering’, *Poetry Wales* 3.3 (Winter 1967/8).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Some Fathers' is an ambiguous title, giving the reader a general impression of the subject of the poem, but not giving them a clue about whether this will be a kind of ode to 'some' good fathers, or a poem about the failings of others (or those somewhere in between). This lack of detail (and indeed the sparse language that frequently masks the speaker's opinion), is a theme that haunts the poem throughout.

Form.

The poem is comprised of four stanzas of between eight and ten lines (9, 10, 8, 10). It does not have a regular rhyme scheme, and is written in free verse. Consequently, it follows a natural speech pattern, and a reader will note how the syntax is colloquial, and not re-ordered to 'fit' with a particular pattern or poetic style. Nonetheless, the poem is not without some recognisable formal poetic characteristics. Its stanzas follow a similar, if not identical pattern, and the poem's first two stanzas are written in the past tense, while the following two are written in the present tense (giving the poem a kind of structural symmetry).

Lines 1-3.

Notice the immediate use of the preposition '**They**', which distances the speaker from the poem's subject(s). Already, there is a sense that the speaker does not identify with the men described – presumably fathers though not named as such. There is no sense here that the poem is easing the reader in, their initiation into the direct, colloquial mode of address is instant. This directness is, at first, fairly innocuous. These fathers, who '**sloped off / to the pub**' and '**grew potatoes**', don't seem particularly remarkable at first. Also, note how they need to borrow '**ten bob**': instantly the speaker undermines their authority insofar as this is often tied to economic independence. However, from the description of 'caulis' (cauliflowers) and '**leeks**' grown in '**dead-straight lines**', we can see some evidence of the fathers' fastidiousness. The vegetables, grown in formation, resemble soldiers (foreshadowing the upcoming military references in the following stanzas).

Lines 4-6.

Here there is a shift to a more serious, considered tone. The speaker makes a point of the fathers' military service, and their memory of the '**Second World War**' is one of active duty (not as children, or read about in history books). A reader might think about this poem in the context of Gruffydd's own experience of the war, as an English evacuee living in Wales. Consequently, these stories of '**crack[ing] jokes about Hitler**' take on a more personal, autobiographical character. Furthermore, the fact that these fathers served in the armed forces does not define their character (it's likely that some, if not all, were conscripted into the armed forces). As such, they retain their humour ('**even**' aiming cynical jibes at the then Prime Minister, '[Winston] **Churchill**'). The speaker, who is perhaps a son overhearing his father and friends talking, seems perturbed by their jokes at the (former) Prime Minister's expense).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-9.

After the dearth of description in the opening six lines, Gruffydd changes the pace of the poem, enlivening his verse with key adjectives. The fathers, we are told, did **'odd things'**, such as **'look[ing] after / old ladies in their rich incontinence'** (my emphasis). That these simple acts of kindness appear odd to the speaker in this verse is strange. The word **'odd'** invites the reader to speculate about an unstated or hidden reason for their actions. One way to understand it might be to consider the likelihood that the **'old ladies'** who are being looked after had lost their sons and/or daughters in the war, so the survivors have taken it upon themselves to look after them in their dotage (the fathers neglecting to tell their children the real reason for looking after the elderly, to shield the children from the reality of the war). Of course, there is also an implication of an ulterior motive behind this caring act, as the adjective **'rich'** implies that there may be some financial reward to be gained from doing caring for these women, though **'rich incontinence'** suggests physical frailty and lack of control (as well as generosity). A more obviously **'odd'** pursuit might be those fathers who **'drew cartoons'**, and again Gruffydd is emphasising their humour and also creativity. A reader might also want to compare the creative pursuit of **'sketch[ing]'** for **'small mags'** with the more rigid, **'dead-straight lines'** in which the vegetables are grown. Gruffydd here may also be suggesting that had they not served in the military and had their youth cut short, they may have pursued very different careers. **'Odd'** may also be a way of signalling the lack of comprehension or connection between a child and his father's generation.

Lines 10-12.

Recalling the opening of the first stanza, the second begins again with the pronoun **'They'**. However, where the first stanza began with a recollection of something concrete (borrowing money, going to the pub), the second stanza introduces an element of doubt about the true character of the fathers. That they **'Seemed to have lots of patience'**, is telling, and suggests that there is something unknowable about the father-figures being discussed. The pub, yet again, provides a form of escape for the fathers; a place in which their patience may not be tested as much as at home.

Lines 13-16.

Here is the first mention of the speaker's father (using the possessive pronoun **'mine'**), strengthening the confessional feel of the poem. The speaker remembers his father's **'second childhood'**, or what might be more commonly referred to as a mid-life crisis. His behaviour is reckless (again, contrast this with the earlier image of the neat vegetable patch), and he **'regularly'** crashes his scooter. Also in these lines is the poem's first and only mention of colour (**'red'**). Something darker appears to be lurking underneath the surface (remember that this stanza begins by pondering *what seemed to be*, rather than *what actually was*). The father, who **'regularly came off'** his scooter, is clearly eager to be away from the family. It's worth also pointing out the humour in the portrayal of the father (the supposed responsible adult), behaving more like a child than the speaker himself.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-19.

The father's drinking is clearly causing problems in the household, as well as outside of it. **'Mother'**, the poem's only reference to a wife (and one of two mentions of women), serves only to 'nag' the father. Neither father or mother are ever referred to as 'husband' and/or 'wife', indicating that, to the speaker at least, their primary obligation is to their children and not each other. **'Sketching'** derives from 'sketchy' (as in behaviour, rather than sketch as in drawing), so to say that the father went **'sketching no more'** seems to suggest that he ceased his dubious/suspicious behaviour (but also that, assuming he is connected to the cartoon artist mentioned previously, he no longer indulged his creative side). The final line of the stanza concludes the poem's focus on the speaker's father, suggesting that he eventually ceased his erratic, drunken behaviour (which had perhaps been a way in which he could attempt to process trauma).

Lines 20-24.

The third stanza instigates a definite shift in tone from the previous two. Having concluded the first half of the poem with the speaker's father's return home, the speaker once again uses the authorial 'I' (as in line 4), but the poem has moved away from being a series of recollections to the present day: **'I'm a father now'**. The speaker's role as a father seems less focused on trips to the pub and 'odd' behaviour, and instead on the speaker's hopes for his own children. He hopes that his **'sons'** may one day be able to **'make tea / like tar'**, or **'keep allotments'**, and one day **'worry about their kids'**, emphasising the cyclical nature of family life (and introducing another one of the poem's key themes: cyclicity). The love of strong tea and allotments are aligned with an older generation and it almost appears that the speaker wants his children to become like his own father, rather than himself.

Lines 25-27.

The pronouns **'them'** and **'they'** in this section are deployed differently to the opening two stanzas. While the repetitive use of **'they'** in the opening line of the first and second stanzas creates a distance between the speaker and his (and other) father(s), in the third stanza it appears to allude to the speaker himself, as if he's seeing, or trying to see, himself. While referring to a hypothetical scenario in which his sons have become fathers themselves, the speaker implies that the listed offences have been felt personally, so it is the speaker who has been called **'old fart, stupid sod or worse'**, and that it is he (the speaker) who wonders where he **'went wrong'**, hoping perhaps only when his sons have the same experience will they realise the injustice, or at least the hurt, of their own accusations.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 28-32.

The imperative '**Pray**' begins the final stanza, and it has a pleading ring to it. Returning to the theme of war from the opening stanza, the fourth completes the poem's broadly cyclical structure (echoing the cyclical nature of family in the previous stanza). Further emphasising the cyclicity of the family unit (and the poem itself), the speaker refers disconsolately to '**Nuclear families**' which '**stagger on**', suggesting either that the family unit has always struggled on out of necessity, or that it might be unsustainable in the modern world. These '**Nuclear**' families (meaning families that exist as a single core, derived from 'nucleus') are '**bowed with labels**'.

Lines 33-37.

Once again, the speaker '**remember[s] those fathers**', who are different to both how he perceives himself and how he imagines his sons to be (again, the distance is created by the pronoun '**those**'). The fathers are now old and '**leaning on / sticks**', and still with '**pint in hand**', witnessing the '**outrageous stupidity**' of their sons (the speaker included). It appears that the speaker, in tandem with his increasing empathy with his father, is beginning to see how '**stupid**' he was as a child. Additionally, the meaning of '**cod-code**' is, presumably, a parodic code that the fathers use with one another (following their war-time experiences in which using code would have been part of day-to-day life). There is also a Welsh/English pun here, as 'cod' is the Welsh spelling of/word for 'code', placing this poem in a larger Welsh/British context.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

While 'Some Fathers' is clearly a poem about fatherhood and familial, generational cycles, it is also a poem about war and its effects and consequences. The experience of the speaker's father (and fathers more generally) in the poem's opening stanza is clearly one impacted by war. These men didn't just remember the war, they **'were in'** it, and would **'crack[...]** jokes about the wartime leaders, both allies and enemies. The **'old ladies'** that they look after are also affected by the war, and require the kindness of strangers to look after them **'in their rich incontinence'**. Although the poem emphasises the cyclical nature of families, it seems that **'those'** fathers are, as a result of their war-time experiences, always different to the kind of father that the speaker and his sons are/will become.

The war metaphor might even be taken a step further. Look again at the final stanza, with its warning about the effects of war on people, and not just those on the front lines. The returning soldiers **'keep graveyard horrors at bay / with favourite ales'**, rationalising their reliance on alcohol as a necessity, rather than an indulgence. There are two crucial images in this final stanza that give the poem a more outwardly cautionary, political tone. The first is the image of **'Nuclear families'**, and the second is the **'sperm-count falling day-by-day'**. A far more complex picture emerges from the combination of these very loaded phrases. Given the poem's focus on focus on war and family, there is potential to understand this poem (which is looking to the future with uncertainty), as one of post-nuclear anxiety. The (Second World) war that is referred to in the opening stanza was ostensibly ended by the use of hugely destructive nuclear bombs (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and the proximity of the word 'nuclear', with the image of lowering sperm counts appears to be a *double entendre*, or play on words (given that radiation from nuclear weapons is known to have an debilitating effect on fertility).

In a formal sense, the poem's language is colloquial, but also very precise. Gruffydd's uses of the subject pronouns **'they'**, **'their'**, and **'them'** are worth close attention, as is his reticence to use overly descriptive, adjective-heavy language. The overarching structure of the poem makes use of these pronouns effectively, but a reader might also notice the poem's movement from the general ('they'), to the specific ('mine', 'he'), to the personal ('I'), and back to general ('they'), as well as the movement from past, to present, to future tense (and back again).

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Other than fatherhood, what do you think are the poem's most prominent recurring themes or images?

Is this poem funny in places? What role does humour play for the readers and/or for the characters?

Pay close attention to the speaker. Who are they? What can you tell about them from their descriptions of others?

Could you argue that this is a war poem?

Look at the poet's use of pronouns and adjectives. How they are used to different effects by the speaker?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

Here is a picture of Welsh soldiers, displaying the kind of sense of humour typical in 'Some Fathers':
<https://martinjohnes.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/rwf-1940.jpg>

As an evacuee from Liverpool in Wales, Gruffydd would have encountered a very different culture (one that resulted in him learning the language and becoming a Welsh nationalist). Posters such as the one below were commonly used to encourage parents to send their children away from urban targets and to the relative safety of rural areas, such as north Wales:

<http://liverpoolblitz70.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/evacuation-poster-wwll.jpg>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

For more information about conscription and the way that the 'fathers' in the poem may have found themselves fighting on the frontlines, or for a glimpse into the experiences of Welsh soldiers, take a look at the following links:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscriptionww2/>

<https://martinjohnes.com/2012/07/04/welshness-welsh-soldiers-and-the-second-world-war/>

For some information about the branch of PEN International (Wales PEN Cymru that Gruffydd helped to establish, visit the following page:

<https://pen-international.org/centres/wales-pen-cymru>



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Dr Jamie Harris

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'Daedalus'

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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Stephen Knight was born in Swansea in 1960. His collections of poetry include *Flowering Limbs* (1993), *Dream City Cinema* (1996, both Bloodaxe) and *The Prince of Wails* (CB Editions, 2012). A novel, *Mr Schnitzel*, appeared from Penguin in 2000 which, in its exploration of the relationship between a son and his parents, provides useful context for reading ‘Daedalus.’ Alongside his more mainstream poetry, an interesting vein in Knight’s work is his vernacular poetry – a type of poetry which is surprisingly rare in the canon of English-language poetry from Wales, and is represented in *Poetry 1900–2000* by ‘The Heart of Saturday Night’. These idiomatic poems are collected in *The Sandfields Baudelaire* (1996) and *A Swansea Love Song* (2017, both Smith Doorstop). *Sardines and Other Poems*, a collection for children, appeared from Picador in 2004.

Knight’s work has been distinguished from the outset by the extent of its formal refinement; its formal sophistication and ambition seems to work with the inheritance of Dylan Thomas, yet his language is accessible, natural, his poems are pop-culture literate and often funny. The largely syllabic forms of his first collection, *Flowering Limbs*, gave way to the more rhythmic forms of *Dream City Cinema*, in which highly complex stanza forms are used, best exemplified by ‘The Mermaid Tank’, winner of the National Poetry Competition in 1992. ‘**Daedalus**’, with its complex and controlled rhythmic form, its sequence of three matching terza rima sonnets, should be understood within this context of Knight’s formal ambition and achievement.

Another important part of Knight’s writing is his use of the surreal. This has been there since his first poems of growing up in *Flowering Limbs*, including ‘The Gift’, in which a four-sleeved pullover is sent to a son away at college who, wearing it, finds that two extra arms begin to push their way out of his body to fill the sleeves. ‘The Big Parade’, included in *Poetry 1900–2000*, imagines a carnival-style parade through Swansea of ‘everyone I’ve ever known / and some I’ve only seen on television’.

Knight has also, from the outset, written about his father in a range of styles, and ‘Daedalus’ should be understood in the context of this group of poems. ‘The Cinemas My Father Knew’, from *Dream City Cinema*, re-visits his father courting in cinemas as a young man and explores the changes in his father and the city over time. *The Prince of Wails* includes a number of poems, including ‘99 Poems’ and ‘Butterfly’, which memorialise or imagine the re-appearance of the author’s father.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Another context which it is important to be aware of in terms of this poem is the Classical Icarus and Daedalus myth. Daedalus was a skilled craftsman and artist who invented the labyrinth for King Minos of Crete, only to be imprisoned in the labyrinth himself. He and Icarus escape on wings Daedalus has invented, made of wax. As he doesn't heed his father's warnings not to fly too close to the sun, Icarus falls into the sea and dies. Knight's '**Daedalus**' draws on this myth as a way of praising a creative, hard-working father, lost in his work to the extent that the domestic environment around him is chaotic. The poem's closing image of '**Feathers falling**' may remind us of the ultimate fate of Icarus.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem's title, '**Daedalus**', and its dedication, '**for my father**', indicate the poet's intention to use the Daedalus myth as a way of celebrating and elevating his father. It is the creativity and inventiveness of Daedalus that Knight is most interested in, describing a father who ignores the way '**The sink is choked with dirty plates**', so lost is he in his vision, his work, in '**build[ing] his dream.**' Most re-tellings of the Icarus and Daedalus myth tend to focus on Icarus, seeing the story as a cautionary tale about human over-reaching, but here the references to Icarus – the way '**the watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' and the concluding '**Feathers falling**' – are subtle. The focus, instead, is on celebrating a creative father, lost in his work.

Form.

As is so often the case with Knight's poems, this poem has a complex form. It is constructed as a sequence of three matching terza rima sonnets (a form consisting of tercets with interwoven rhymes): the rhyme scheme of each is ababc bcdcd edee. In addition, Knight alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter: 'The **watery autumnal sun / Is cold** and **yet he sings...**' The penultimate line of each stanza has two stresses, and the final line four stresses: 'He **sings along** – / **Every other word is wrong!**' The complexity and music of this form, the desire of the poet to make something ornate and beautiful, together with the use of mythological reference, can be considered part of the poet's desire to elevate and celebrate his father, beyond his immediate world of bits of '**string / & strips of Sellotape**'.

Lines 1-14.

The poem presents the father as happily lost in his work in the face of chaos. '**The sink is choked with dirty plates, / Dead leaves, twigs – the tree / Outside the house disintegrates**'. The combination of domestic and natural images here gives us the sense of chaos as does that verb '**disintegrates**'. But Daedalus's work, his pursuit of his vision, makes him happy: '**Daedalus could be / No happier now he's begun / To build his dream.**' He is lost in his work so much that he loses connection with the reality of what's around him: '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold and yet he sings / Out loud he's having so much fun.**' The impression is of an eccentric father lost in his work who cannot see the domestic chaos: '**Obscured by coffee rings / & marmalade, his drawings flap / Among the breakfast things**'. The phrase '**breezes lap**' seems to combine wind and water (we tend to think of waves lapping), and this combination, together with the combination of domestic and natural imagery elsewhere, deepens the sense of chaos accumulating around the father. The fact that the '**breezes lap**' may be a subtle nod to Icarus's fate in the original myth. The '**dripping tap**' here – the image of something falling – may be echoed in the '**clouds of sawdust**' which '**fall like gold**' in section two of the poem, and the '**Feathers falling everywhere**' which conclude section three of the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The fact that **'To me / The watery autumnal sun / Is cold'** may be seen as another subtle reference to the role of Icarus in the original myth. If the father is a version of Daedalus, the son becomes a version of Icarus, but the dark ending of Icarus is not really drawn attention to in a poem which has celebration as its primary focus. The fact that **'to me'** is used as a rhyme may cause us to reflect on the nature of the speaker's identity; if we do read him as a version of Icarus, it is ironic, given the story of the original myth, that he views the sun as **'watery'** and **'cold'**.

Lines 15-28.

This section sustains the poem's celebration of a father lost in his work in the midst of chaos. The focus here is on the tools the father uses, their connection with tradition and their poor quality: they are **'antiques'**, tools **'His father owned'**. The saw, in a wonderful image for rust, is **'Flaked with liver spots'**. Knight uses a number of sonic devices to place emphasis on the word **'squeaks'**, to make us hear it: it is a rhyme, and there is also the alliteration of **'spots, stalls & squeaks'**. The nails, meanwhile, in a memorable image, **'snap or fold'** like paper or cardboard.

Even with tools like this, the father creates beauty – **'clouds of sawdust fall like gold'** – in a way which increases the domestic chaos: **'drifts grow / In saucepans.'** The line break is effective here, as the poem moves across it from the enormous **'drifts'**, making us think of drifts of snow, to the bathetic **'saucepans.'** There's an overall sense here of the father being slightly out of time: the tools he uses are **'antiques'**, while **'that old / Paint-speckled radio'** (note how rhyme is used to emphasise the key word, **'old'**) **'plays a song / He used to know'** and when **'He sings along - / Every other word is wrong!'** The father's joy is represented throughout the poem by the noises he makes: he **'sings / Out loud'** in section one, **'sings along'** in section two and, in section three, is **'whistling / Without a care.'** He is happy, creative, and out of touch with the world around him, and the exclamation mark at the end of section two deepens that celebratory tone.

Lines 29-42.

The celebration of a father lost in his work and keeping going in the face of chaos is sustained here: **'He works all day, intent, absurd, / Narrowing his eyes / Because his pencil marks have blurred / And nothing's cut to size.'** One thing to be aware of in terms of this poem is that, when it was initially published in Knight's collection *Dream City Cinema*, the **'And'** in the phrase **'And nothing's cut to size'** was printed with a line slashed through it, as though the word were crossed out. While this feature is not replicated in the *Poetry 1900-2000* anthology, it is a nice touch: it seems to enact the father's pencil marks, his cutting, and perhaps even suggests that the son's drafting and re-drafting of poems mimics his father's way of working. It is also typical of Knight's textual experiments; one poem in *The Prince of Wales*, 'A Tick-Box Life', is formed as a series of tick-box questions.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

As **'Daedalus'** nears its ending, there is a sense of the father facing a greater and greater sense of chaos, forcing him to take more and more drastic measures: **'At sunset, when a sudden wind pours / Through every room then dies / Away, he's there still, on all fours / To improvise with string / & strips of Sellotape.'** In the face of this gathering chaos, the father retains the disconnection with his environment that he's had throughout the poem: **'he's whistling / Without a care.'** One important thing to say about the poem is that, although the domestic scene is one of substantial chaos, this is never really seen as threatening: 'The sink is choked with dirty plates' and the world of nature breezes through: **'breezes lap / Doors and walls'** and **'doors / Slam shut'**. Each section is bound together by the way that Knight sets big, elemental forces – the wind, drifts of snow – against the detritus of everyday life. If there is a sense of threat in the poem, it seems to come from these big forces, but Daedalus is happily ignorant of them. There is no real sense of anything substantially dangerous or neglectful on the father's part; rather, the ignorance of what's around him seems primarily a way of celebrating the extent to which he is lost in his work.

The connection between the father described in the poem and the mythological Daedalus is most explicit at the end of this section, as the imagery of the feathers begins to emerge. The mythological father's craft and guile in creating the wings for him and his son seems to be the aspect of the myth that Knight wants to draw on in order to present his father. By comparing him to a mythological figure, there is a sense of Knight elevating his father, but also a sense that Knight has his tongue in his cheek when doing so, aware that his father's world is less mythological than it is one of **'Sellotape'**, a saw **'Flaked with liver spots'**, **'dirty plates'** and **'dead leaves'**. The fact that the poem ends with **'Feathers falling everywhere'** can be read in several ways. This is principally an image of beauty in chaos, linking with the image of **'clouds of sawdust'** which **'fall like gold'** in section two of the poem. It can also be read as a subtle allusion to Icarus's fall, suggesting that the father lost in his work as the plates accumulate in the sink may not be without his tragic as well as his beautiful dimension.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Daedalus**' is recognisably a Stephen Knight poem in its complex form and sense of music, an interest which permeates his work in *Dream City Cinema*. In this case, the complexities of the form can be seen as part of a desire to celebrate and elevate the father, which may also explain the fact that Knight chooses to draw on myth.

The darker aspects of the Icarus and Daedalus myth are only very subtly referred to in the poem, through the way that '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' for the speaker and through the poem's concluding image of feathers falling. The poem remains primarily a celebration of a father lost in his creativity, who '**could be / No happier now he's begun / To build his dream.**' As a result, the poem can be read as a celebration not just of a creative father but of creativity itself.

The fact that this poem gives us a Daedalus adrift in a world of '**dirty plates**', '**coffee rings**', a '**dripping tap**', is typical of Knight's work in *Dream City Cinema*, which often seeks to elevate the everyday. 'The Music of the Spheres', for example, asks readers to 'Sing a song of crow's feet, / of spectacles and Steradent / of blistered paint, of brittle leaves / while rattling a light bulb...'

Because of its highly ornate form and its use of mythical allusion, this is inevitably a poem which is aware of itself as literary performance: consider, for example, the opening sentence of section two, in which a very complex sentence is strung very naturally across a complex musical form. Yet there is also a childish joy in the presentation of the father which really makes us feel quite affectionate towards him. In section one, '**he's having so much fun**', in section two, when '**He sings along - / Every other word is wrong!**' (note again that exclamation mark). By the end of section three, the image '**Feathers falling everywhere**' follows hard on the heels of the fact that '**he's whistling / Without a care**', meaning that that final line conveys the sense of celebrating a beautiful father surrounded by chaos. In its sense of celebrating a semi-mythic father in a mundane setting, this poem echoes another poem in *Dream City Cinema*, 'The Cinemas My Father Knew', which ends with an image of the father watching a screen and seeing 'Moses / stepping down to share / his pectorals! / his brilliant skin!'

This celebration of the father is balanced by a certain distance, an inability on the son-speaker's part to share his father's feelings. '**To me,**' we are told, '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold and yet he sings / Out loud he's having so much fun.**' This distance is present in the overall tone of the poem, which remains observational and descriptive, and this tone implies something about the relationship between this father and son, as well as pointing beyond itself to father-son relationships and male gender identity more generally. It is also interesting that the poem is written in the present tense, as details like '**our dripping tap**' suggest that the content of the poem is a recollection of childhood. The poem moves in time - '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' in section one, the father works through '**the afternoon**' in section two and we reach '**sunset**' in section three. Yet its present tense creates the sense of this day being forever ongoing, and the poem can therefore be linked to the attempts to recollect parents in Knight's novel, *Mr Schnitzel*.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What role does the myth of Daedalus play in the poem and how would the poem be different if this frame of reference wasn't there?

How does the speaker feel about his father in this poem?

How does the form and music of the poem contribute to its meaning?

Why is the poem set amidst a scene of domestic chaos and how does this contribute to the presentation of the father?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Stephen Knight, photograph (1997) © Niall McDiarmid:



There is also a photo of Knight on the Smith Doorstop website:

<http://www.poetrybusiness.co.uk/stephen-knight>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Knight's British Council author page includes a useful critical perspective by Dr Jules Smith, offering an overview of Knight's career to 2005 including brief reference to 'Daedalus', which she reads as exploring the 'mutual incomprehension between fathers and sons', as well as 'The Cinemas My Father Knew'.

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/stephen-knight>

Kate Clanchy's review of *Dream City Cinema* is available here:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/shouting-out-boldly-from-the-back-of-the-bus-1357922.html>

Reviews of some of Knight's other books, *The Prince of Wails*, *A Swansea Love Song* and *Mr Schnitzel*, are available at the following links:

<https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=333>

<https://poetryschool.com/reviews/review-swansealove-song-stephen-knight/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/aug/05/biography>



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



JONATHAN EDWARDS

Author of *My Family and Other Superheroes* and *Gen*, published by Seren

August, 2019



We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Brian Morris

'In Cardigan Market'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Brian Morris, also known by his later title Baron Morris of Castle Morris, was born in Cardiff in 1930. His varied career included being a teacher of English Literature (at the universities of Reading and Sheffield), before moving to Wales and becoming a crucial proponent of the University of Wales, as Principal of St David’s University College, Lampeter. Although he took the post as Principal as a way to reconnect with his Welsh roots, Morris retained his home in Derbyshire and split his time between England and Wales. Not a fluent speaker of Welsh, Morris nevertheless campaigned for its legal status, such as simultaneous translation in court cases.¹ He was a friend of R. S. Thomas, who encouraged him in his poetic pursuits. He was also, like Thomas, a keen Welsh nationalist.² In 1993, he published a book on the Welsh poet and nationalist, Harri Webb.

Morris was a poet, writer, and broadcaster, and a life of public service resulted in his appointment to the House of Lords in 1990. Possessing a keen interest in theatre, he was also an occasional actor, and appeared in BBC Children’s Hour plays (recorded in Cardiff) early in his career. As a poet, he produced several collections of poetry, including *Tide Race* (1976), *Stones of the Brook* (1978), *Dear Tokens* (1987) and *The Waters of Comfort* (1998). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 2001, just days before his death. He was a Shakespearian scholar (his first major academic appointment was to the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1956), and also general editor of the Arden Shakespeare. In addition he was said to have an ‘extensive knowledge’ of the Bible and Classical Literature, themes that feature prominently in his poetry.³

(A biography is also available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

(1) Andrew Roth, ‘Obituaries: Lord Morris of Castle Morris’, *The Guardian* (3 May 2001)

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/may/03/guardianobituaries.Whitehall>

(2) ‘Obituaries: Lord Morris of Castle Morris’, *The Telegraph* (2 May 2001)

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1328746/Lord-Morris-of-Castle-Morris.html>

(3) ‘Morris Papers’, Brian Robert Morris, Lord Morris of Castle Morris (1912–2002)

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.555768!/file/Morris.pdf

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

Note that the title *places* the poem (gives it a location). There is a documentarian aspect to its titling, simply stating that the speaker – about whom readers will infer much more in the graphic opening lines – is *in* Cardigan Market. The use of a simple preposition: ‘*in*’, is crucial to our immediate expectations of the poem. If it were removed, it would give a reader the impression that the poem were *about* Cardigan Market, which it is not.

A Note on the Location.

Cardigan Market is a large, mostly enclosed modern Gothic-style market (one of the first of its kind in the UK), and it also has some prominent Arabic influences. While the location of the poem isn’t mentioned in much detail by Morris’ speaker beyond its title, its setting will certainly conjure images in the minds of those readers familiar with the building’s idiosyncrasies. The market’s fortunes have waxed and waned and this poem appears to recall a period of bustling activity in the hall which is rather different to its modern day atmosphere.

Form.

‘In Cardigan Market’ is written in Shakespearian (or English) sonnet form, with three quatrains and a final couplet (rhyme scheme: ABBA, CDDC, EFFE, GG). The rhyme scheme, while consistent in its way, uses different rhymes for each quatrain. In this version of the sonnet, the final couplet usually performs a *volte*, indicating a turn (but not an outright departure) from the substance of the lines that precede it. Each line consists of ten syllables, also known as a pentameter. Shakespeare’s variation on the sonnet form brings along with it certain expectations in a reader, expectations that a Shakespeare scholar such as Morris would have understood.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The opening quatrain introduces the subject of the poem, 'Auntie Jane fish'. Note that the nickname gives Jane both a familiar (even familial) identity ('**Auntie**'), and also a place within the market ('**fish**', as in fishmonger). It might even suggest an overarching familial relationship between the market sellers and also the wider community. Also, note how the use of '**they**' places the speaker outside of the group (it is a nickname used by others, but not the speaker). The language is colloquial, and has an *in media res* quality, suggestive of familiarity or an imagined or conversation that has already begun between the speaker and the reader. This kind of opening creates a sense of intimacy between speaker and reader, which is quickly shattered by the graphic and seemingly offensive language used to describe the poem's subject: '**rough**', '**fat**', and '**toothless**'. Contemporary readers might recoil from such objectifying language, although the speaker may simply be listing and repeating overheard terms '**they**' have used to describe Auntie Jane.

In the context of the words that surround it, '**Rawboned**' doesn't appear to fit, given that it usually means skinny or gaunt. However, it can also be used to mean 'big-boned', and 'physically powerful' (*OED*), but whether this is meant in a complimentary way is unclear. There is one other word here that doesn't quite fit with the others: '**grin**'. It serves as a counterpoint to the mostly negative introduction to Jane, even if the verb, 'to grin' can seem lacking in sophistication. Enjambed (running over the line break) onto the next line, this single positive quality is instantly undercut by the description of Auntie Jane's '**grumble**'. Following this, the reader is presented with a striking simile, likening Jane's voice to the sound of '**a saw on a nail**'. While the simile appears intended as a veiled compliment about Jane's ability to make herself heard across the din of the market – her voice 'cuts' '**Like a saw**', but adding '**on a nail**' transforms the power into a painful shriek. Readers might be reminded of the phrase 'to shriek like a fishwife', or the use of fishwife to denote a shrewish woman. It is the first of several echoes of the irony found in Shakespeare's ground-breaking satirical Sonnet 130, in which the speaker writes of his mistress' voice: 'I love to hear her speak, yet well I know / That music hath a far more pleasing sound'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-8.

The second quatrain (the beginning of the CDDC rhyme section), builds upon the first (indeed, the beginning of this section straddles the end of the opening quatrain's **'She stinks enough'**). The sensory experience of the poem, up to this point both auditory and visual, now extends to the smells of the market, and Jane in particular. Her **'stink'** is so strong that it has an effect on Jane's appearance, creating a **'phosphorescent [...] glow'** that surrounds her (a description that could equally apply to one of the fish that she is selling). In addition to the smells described so luridly in this quatrain, the **'drips [of] female sweat'** create an almost tactile quality (one that can be felt or touched). You could also read this **'female sweat'** as Jane's femininity as some how out of control, incontinently transgressing the body's boundaries. Not even halfway through the poem, the reader has arguably encountered four of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, and touch. In a similar way to the description of Jane's **'grin'** in the second line, the reference to **'friendship'** (though tacked-on to the description of her **'sweat'**) adds another positive quality to the litany of supposedly negative ones already attributed to Jane. This **'friendship'** also imbues Jane, and the market, with a strong sense of community.

Lines 9-12.

The third and final quatrain (with an EFFE rhyme scheme) demonstrates a significant shift in the speaker's focus, from Jane to the produce she sells (varieties of fish), and it also alludes to the catching of the produce (work that takes place away from the market in the nearby river Teifi and Cardigan Bay). This shift has the effect of placing Jane into a wider context (one in which she is not the only focus of attention). The negative physical description of Jane that emerges in the first and second quatrains is superseded by much more attention to the supposed negative qualities of the fish that she sells: for example the **'vulgar herring and the vicious eel'**. This amplifies the *resilience* of Jane only briefly alluded to previously. Her ability to smile (or **'grin'**) and form friendships in the presence of such a grotesque gathering of sea creatures (and the death that they also represent) seems both commendable and unlikely in the circumstances.

Lines 13-14.

The final two lines form a couplet that, as expected in a Shakespearian sonnet, perform a *volte* a turn), and turns the poem from a portrait of Jane that emphasises grotesqueness to one that appears to admire its subject. Jane, we are now told, is **'Richly alive'**, despite working **'All day'** (**'till night'** as well, as we learnt in line 8). While the formal characteristic of the final couplet's *volte* is to be expected, it does arguably – and for the first time in this poem – break with the pentameter of the previous thirteen lines. The crux of this rests on the pronunciation of the word **'silvery'**, which would need to be two syllables (silv-ree), and not the more potentially more naturally rhythmic sil-ver-ree. Are we, as readers, meant to understand this as a deliberate challenge to the constrictions of the sonnet form, or even a way for Morris to draw emphasis to the last line (which is obviously crucial to the overall meaning of the poem)? The word itself is very evocative, and recalls the saw and nail metaphor from the opening quatrain, as well as the colour of both the money and the fish it is traded for.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Morris's sonnet has many strengths, such as its ability to weave complex vocabulary into a simple style, its sympathetic portrait of a person who may seem an unlikely subject of a sonnet, and its raucous evocation of sensory experience. The trick of this poem, it appears, is the skill with which Morris builds, and *maintains*, tension. Crucially, this is not achieved through action (Jane, and the market, remain notably still throughout: '**All day she squats here**'), but rather the nuanced observation of its subject. The tension arises from the conflicting ways in which Jane is described, and the way in which the language veers between vulgar and sentimental. This might be accounted for if we are to understand the vulgar sections at the beginning as the descriptions of other market traders (or shoppers) who have neither the time nor inclination to make an effort to understand Auntie Jane fish's qualities.

It is revealing to note the adjectives used to describe the secondary subjects in this scene (the fish), in order to decipher what, to the speaker, Jane is not. She is not '**vulgar**', like the herring, and nor is she '**princely**' like the salmon. She is certainly not '**vicious**' like the eel. Most importantly, as is revealed in the final line, Jane is '**Richly alive**', and not, as are the fish, '**dead**'. While the speaker of 'In Cardigan Market' doesn't make direct comparisons between Auntie Jane and the fish, they are arguably implied by Morris. In evoking the grotesque imagery of the fish that adorn Jane's stall, the poem sets up its denouement: its final couplet. Jane is, crucially, '**alive**', even when surrounded by all of these dead fish.

The process of comparing the subject of a sonnet with a series of inanimate objects has precedence (think of the famous opening to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day'). But Auntie Jane doesn't appear to be the object of romantic affection of the speaker (at least, not from what we can discern in this poem). A more apt Shakespearian poem to look at would be Shakespeare's satirical Sonnet 130, in which the subject of the poem is compared unfavourably with several objects (and begins with the line 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'). Morris begins his sonnet by wrongfooting his reader, allowing the final couplet to fully subvert the poem's opening.

In a twenty-first-century context, there are certainly some potential issues with Morris's (or, more appropriately, the speaker's) objectification of Auntie Jane, who is judged predominantly on her physical appearance rather than her less visible qualities. There are some misogynistic tropes, such as the loud and painful voice, and a blunt appraisal of her physical appearance which is arguably threatening in its watery potential to overflow its boundaries. While it is always important to judge a poem in its original context and not subject it to a kind of moral relativity (judging it by the standards of the modern day), it is also worth noting that by the end of the poem the speaker, it seems, has overcome their initial revulsion to Jane and arrived at a point of admiration or awe (she has become a kind of totemic queen, brooding over the primeval creatures '**caught before the stars went out**').

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The identity of the speaker is also one worth returning to. While the voice does not appear to be that of a regular to the market, one of the **'Men [who] come from miles'** about, would we be correct as readers to assume that it is indeed Morris who is standing in the market and observing Jane? The voice adopted by the speaker of the poem is markedly different to the speaker of the other Morris poems anthologised on the previous pages of *Poetry 1900-2000*, both in tone and style. Perhaps, then, we might think of this as an overheard remark, later elaborated upon by Morris in the form of a poem. Whichever of these is the case (and it could of course be neither), as readers we might question what is the effect of taking a mundane, seemingly unremarkable scene and weaving it into not only into a poem, but into the form of a sonnet (a very particular *kind* of poem, with a very particular set of expectations).

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Do you think that the poem's speaker is repulsed by 'Auntie Jane fish', or that they admire her? How do you respond to her? How do you respond to the speaker?

What do you think about Morris's use of description, especially his use of adjectives?

What is the effect of Morris's use of sensory language, particularly sights, smells, and sounds?

How does the poem use the sonnet form? Is it respectful of its boundaries, or does try to break through them?

PHOTOGRAPHS

A photographic portrait of Morris is available here:

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw09491/Brian-Morris-Baron-Morris-of-Castle-Morris?LinkID=mp06502&role=sit&rNo=0>

An early sketch of what Cardigan Market would have looked like before it was surrounded by other buildings is available here:

<http://www.guildhall-cardigan.co.uk/history/>

SECTION 5 (links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales has website with some good information, and images, of Cardigan Market Hall:

<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/23291/details/market-hall-cardigan#online>

The University of Sheffield, where Morris spent over a decade working in the English Department, has a very useful, detailed biography (covering his early military career and his later political achievements):

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/special/morris>



DR JAMIE HARRIS

Aberystwyth University

August, 2019

We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

John Ormond

'Cathedral Builders'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 10 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 11 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

John Ormond was born in Dunvant, near Swansea, in 1923. The son of the village shoemaker, Ormond did not come from an affluent background, but the nature of his father’s trade gave him a lifelong appreciation of the value of skilled labour and artistic craftsmanship. These egalitarian convictions were further informed by his religious upbringing, attending the village’s Independent, Nonconformist chapel, Ebenezer, where church affairs were organised and governed non-hierarchically by the local congregation rather than an ordained clergy. However, Ormond began to question his faith when he went on to study Philosophy and English at University College, Swansea. Here he was exposed to modern philosophical ideas, and also began to develop serious ambitions as a poet. His talents were soon proved: he began publishing in poetry magazines in 1941, and by 1943 had published his work in an anthology alongside two other young poets.

In 1945, Ormond left Swansea to pursue a career as a journalist in London. Within a matter of months he had been made staff writer for the prestigious photojournalist magazine *Picture Post*. His work at this magazine, which combined his talent for language with his passion for the visual, would prove invaluable when, in the mid-1950s, he secured a job at the BBC in Cardiff. Starting as a television news assistant, he was soon promoted to the role of documentary film producer. This was to be a new beginning of a uniquely dualistic creative career as a poet and filmmaker. By the time of his death in 1990, he had produced some 40 films and published over 200 poems.

Ormond’s passion for music, the arts, and politics, alongside his appreciation of artistic craftsmanship, permeates all his work in verse and on screen. His poems are often characterised by a subtle, ironic humour, and, although composed in a deceptively plain-speaking language – perhaps aimed, like television, at large, popular audiences – they are always meticulously crafted. The major theme of his work is the profound value and universal importance of human creativity, which, perhaps in place of the formal Christian faith he had earlier questioned, he afforded an almost religious significance.

Ormond wrote ‘**Cathedral Builders**’ having taken a break from writing poetry for some years. In 1963, he visited the region of Arezzo in Italy to produce his film, *From a Town in Tuscany*. The sight of builders singing and working on scaffolding high above him one day inspired him to write a poem, and famously ‘broke the blockage that had kept me virtually silent for too many years’.¹

(1) John Ormond, ‘Letter from Tuscany’, *Poetry Wales*, 24/1 (1988), 21.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title '**Cathedral Builders**' is characteristic of Ormond's unshowy, ironic style, and sets the tone and theme of the poem. The plainness of the phrase is set in contrast with the grandiosity of the subject matter: cathedrals are some of the most magnificent, ornate buildings on earth, designed to inspire awe and religious devotion. Yet the poem is, crucially, not an exaltation of these grand, consecrated structures, nor of the church elites who occupy them. Rather, it is a celebration of the ordinary lives of the uncelebrated workers who actually build cathedrals. Note that the title does not name the cathedral – in fact, the poem was inspired by a church with a wonderfully sonorous name: the Santa Maria della Pieve. (Although, as Rian Evans notes, it was also partly inspired by the restoration of Llandaff Cathedral after damage during the war.²) Neither does the poem name a single builder. Instead, the title hints at the universality of the poem's theme: a celebration of the unsung lives of all builders of all cathedrals – perhaps all labourers – anywhere and everywhere.

Form.

At first glance, the poem appears to be a standard ballad, given its four-line stanzas of roughly equal length. The ballad is a form that evolved from the oral tradition; it traditionally combines regular rhythm and a strict rhyme scheme with accessible, everyday language to convey stories or messages of communal interest and relevance to popular audiences. Ormond's use of this form is significant: it is highly unorthodox to use the ballad form to write about something as grandiose as a cathedral. In using this form, Ormond ironically hints that this is a poem about ordinary people.

Moreover, Ormond adapts the ballad form to this theme in interesting ways. Note that stanzas 1-4 alternate between perspectives on the builders at work (1 and 3) and perspectives on their personal lives (2 and 4). This enables him to emphasise the ways in which work and life intersect, but also gives the poem a sense of narrative development: in stanza 3 progress has been made on the structure, and in stanza 4 the builders are getting older. However, the poem also subtly deviates from the ballad form. '**Cathedral Builders**' has no rhyme scheme, and although it contains lines of similar length, it deviates from the usual iambic tetrameter and trimeter. Also notable is the fact that, despite its length, the poem consists of one single sentence.

(2) Rian Evans, in *John Ormond, Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 275.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The first stanza establishes the scene of the builders at work. In keeping with the theme, the first word is not a singular but a plural pronoun; this is, after all, a poem about all workers and their combined efforts, not about one single person. Line 1 is a classic example of Ormond's playfully ironic, down-to-earth humour. The first image of these builders – at work on a grandiose cathedral, dedicated to and in honour of God – is far from one of spiritual devotion. Instead, and in keeping with the comical image of **'sketchy'** ascent, the iambic pentameter of line 1 immediately stumbles clumsily into a rhythm in line 2 that, like the scaffolding the builders climb, remains wobbly and irregular throughout the poem. Note also the use of aspirate consonance in lines 2-3: the "h" sound (**hoisted hewn rock into heaven, / Inhabited sky with hammers'**) mimics the breathlessness of the builders' work.

Lines 3-4 contain an excellent example of Ormond's ironic wordplay: **'defied gravity, / Deified stone'**: the phrase contrasts two similar-sounding yet profoundly oppositional words, and in doing so signals the apparent contradiction that constitutes the act of building such a structure. In **'def[ying] gravity'**, the builders employ building techniques made possible by human scientific discoveries (e.g. gravity) that call into question the existence of God. Yet they do so in the service of the spiritual mission of **'Deif[ying] stone'** – creating a building in which to celebrate Him. This hints at an intriguing philosophical question that underpins this poem: does the very act of collaborative human scientific endeavour in fact **'def[y]**, or even disprove, God?

Lines 5-8.

We don't have time to ponder this question for too long, as the poem continues breathlessly, without an end-stop, into the next stanza. In line 5 we see the workers **'[come] down'** – and here the spatial logic of the poem is established, which follows the alternating movement of the builders ascending and descending, at work on the scaffolding and at home in their houses, across the five stanzas. This spatial movement further enforces the thematic tension between religious elevation and the significance of the lives of ordinary people on the ground.

Line 5 employs a pun that further plays on this contrast, and highlights the significance of the builders' lives: they come down to their **'suppers and small beer'**. **'[S]mall beer'** is both an old name for a weak alcoholic drink commonly brewed and drunk in medieval times (perhaps connecting the workers to an older Christian society) and an idiomatic phrase meaning inconsequential, unimportant, or irrelevant. But seeing as the speaker uses it ironically in this context to depict the cathedral builders drinking alcohol, we are given a sense not of the 'smallness' of their lives, but of the profound significance of ordinary working life: drinking beer may be **'small beer'**, but it is still an important part of everyday life, and therefore worth celebrating.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7–8 pursue images of the workers' home lives, and again adopt a down-to-earth language in comic contrast with the seriousness of spiritual devotion that the cathedral itself represents. '**Quarrel[ling]**', '**cuff[ing]**', '**l[ying]**' and '**sp[itting]**' are far from pious Christian activities, yet they are a part of life for these workers.

Line 8 ends with a seemingly paradoxical phrase: '**were happy or unhappy**'. Recalling that the subject of the poem is a plural one (i.e. all cathedral builders – perhaps even all workers), the phrase conveys a sense of the different lives lived, some of which are happy, some unhappy. There is also the broader implication that this is what being human is really like; over the course of a single life, we are alternately happy and unhappy. It also signals the broader temporal scope of the poem: since a cathedral is a collaborative effort that takes generations to build, whole lifespans are lived in the meantime.

Lines 9–12.

This stanza returns to the everyday job of building: the builders are back up on their ladders, and time is passing by quickly, as conveyed in the evocative phrase that runs over lines 10–11: '**Impeded the rights of way of another summer's / Swallows**'. This is another classic example of Ormond's ironic use of a workaday idiom: here he comically repurposes the phrase '**rights of way**' – a term more associated with the highway code than with Romantic naturalistic writing – by juxtaposing it with the lyrical assonance/consonance of '**another summer's / Swallows**'. Notably, the phrase is itself '**[i]mpeded**' by the line break, thereby echoing the birds' disrupted flight.

Lines 11–12 further emphasise the sense of time passing, this time with respect to the builders' bodies: they '**grew greyer, shakier**'. Again, Ormond uses punning wordplay to humorously convey a humanistic sense of the workers' lives: they become '**less inclined**' – '**inclined**' of course being something they would have been used to as perennial ladder climbers. Moreover, the idea that old age has made them less able to '**fix a neighbour's roof**' shows that, despite the '**cuff[ing]**' and '**l[ying]**' described in stanza 2, they would nevertheless have lived by neighbourly Christian values.

Lines 13–16.

Here, in keeping with the poem's structuring around the alternating movement up and down the ladders, the builders are back on the ground. Older now, they watch as a younger generation continues their work. Indeed line 13, in which '**naves sprout arches, clerestories soar**', is the only concession Ormond makes to a more fanciful lyricism in this poem – perhaps in order to convey the magnificent sight of a cathedral taking shape. Nevertheless, this grandeur is contrasted with the rather unchristian response of the builders: they enviously '**Curse**' the glaziers, whose artistry enjoys more praise than their own work.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-20.

The poem's emphasis on collaboration and continuity of effort – its suggestion that even something as holy as a cathedral is always the product of the combined labour of working people – is conveyed in the first phrase, which continues the last stanza, where the builders '**Decided... / To leave the spire to others**'. Notice the builders do not take centre stage in the celebrations, but rather stand back '**in the crowd**'. This signals that they are not with the elites of the church, who are conveyed by their '**vestments**'. The use of metonymy here associating the church elites with their clothing is significant, for it implies the builders' point of view on the proceedings. Even in old age the builders are not immune to unchristian '**Env[y]**', although this is perhaps justified, considering that the '**fat bishop**' who will now sit in the cathedral has done none of the real work of building it. Yet even with cold feet, the builders are able to stand back and proudly admire their work. '**Cocked up a squint eye**' is packed with more wordplay: '**Cocked**' echoing the idea of being 'proud as a peacock', and '**squint eye**' implying that the builders are likely to be both squinting due to old age, and also with pride (we might see a squinted eye as a gesture of knowingness and shared knowledge). Indeed, it is, of course, the builders who have the last word in this poem: at the end of one single sentence, which has conveyed work, life, love, illness, children, marriage, happiness, unhappiness – the whole story of collective life – it is the builders who have the right to stand back and stake their claim to the completed building, in the superbly bathetic, idiomatic phrase, '**I bloody did that.**'

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Cathedral Builders' is by far Ormond's best-known poem. It is widely collected in anthologies of British poetry, and often read on radio. It received a renewal of attention in April 2019 after the fire at Notre-Dame. And although, as Rian Evans notes, it sometimes 'vexed' Ormond that it was his most famous – at the expense of his many other excellent poems – it is undoubtedly one of his most accomplished.³ It is also a succinct encapsulation of his artistic philosophy. Ormond possessed a love of the arts, and in his career as a poet and documentary filmmaker, he created many films and poems celebrating artists and their craft. His view of art was one informed by his working-class background; the son of a skilled shoemaker, Ormond valued the work not only of the exalted artist, but also the skilled labourer – the craftsman or artisan – and maintained a commitment to egalitarian principles his whole life. He had also, growing up, attended a non-hierarchical Nonconformist congregation – a very different denomination to those that build cathedrals. 'Cathedral Builders' is an expression of this egalitarian philosophy: rather than exalting the grand façade of the finished cathedral – indeed, there are, significantly, no descriptions of the finished cathedral at all – the poem uses a range of poetic techniques to convey the perspective of the uncelebrated labourers who commit their lives to the actual work of building such structures. The lives of these workers may not be showy or refined, but in presenting their down-to-earth authenticity, Ormond emphasises the fact that great accomplishments are often the result of the collaborative effort of ordinary people. Ultimately, whatever the pomposity of those '**fat bishop[s]**' in their '**vestments**' who will take credit for the building, it is the workers who have the last, knowing word: a pithy phrase that perfectly encapsulates the builders' pride: '**I bloody did that.**'

(2) Rian Evans, in *John Ormond, Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 275.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

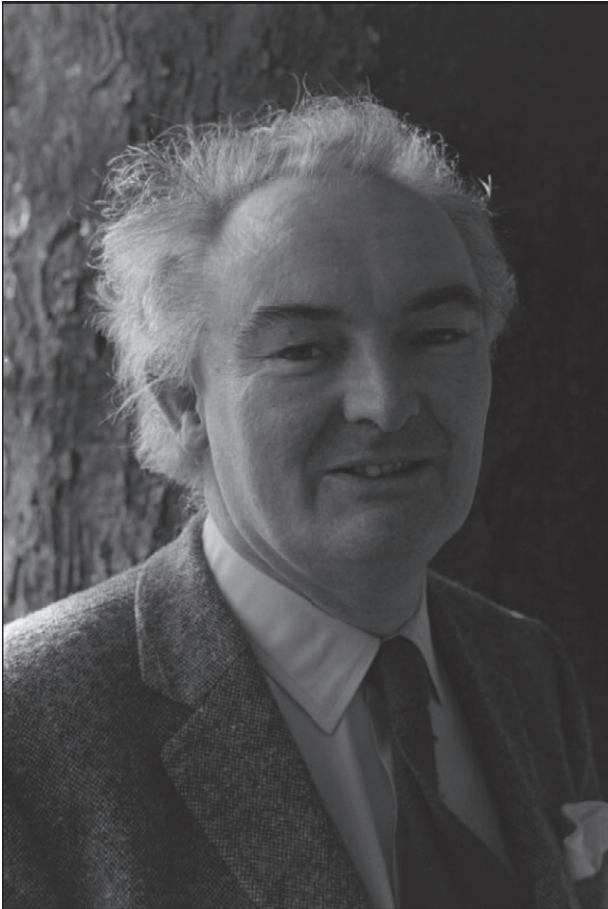
Why does the poem focus on the builders, rather than the cathedral itself?

What activities do the builders get up to when they are not at work?

What kind of language is used to describe the builders and their lives?

Is the builders' final comment on the cathedral an appropriate response to the finished building?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph by Julian Sheppard

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Santa Maria della Pieve: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_della_Pieve#/media/File:Igreja_Santa_Maria_della_Pieve_Arezzo.jpg

Notre-Dame: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notre-Dame_de_Paris#/media/File:Notre_Dame_de_Paris_2013-07-24.jpg

Llandaff Cathedral: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llandaff_Cathedral#/media/File:Eglwys_Gadeiriol_Llandaf_01.JPG

Crystal Cathedral, California: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Cathedral_\(Garden_Grove,_California\)#/media/File:Crys-ext.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Cathedral_(Garden_Grove,_California)#/media/File:Crys-ext.jpg)

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

British actor Samuel West tweeted the poem on the day of the Notre-Dame fire. It received 1.8k retweets and 4.7k likes. The outpouring of emotion in the tweeted replies demonstrates the effectiveness of poetry's ability to channel popular sentiment and feeling: <https://twitter.com/exitthelemming/status/1117867531870453760?lang=en-gb>



DR KIERON SMITH

CREW, Swansea University

August, 2019

We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

R.S. Thomas

'A Peasant'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

One of the best-known poets to emerge from Wales, Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913 and educated at Bangor University, before publishing his first collection of poems, *The Stones of the Field*, in 1946. By the time this collection was published, Thomas had been ordained as an Anglican priest and installed at a parish in Manafon, Montgomeryshire. It was within this rural location that Thomas began to pen the pastoral-themed poetry which marked the early part of his writing, including ‘A Peasant’. As his career in the church continued, Thomas developed a keen interest in science and a more questioning nature, reflected in his poetry which had taken on a metaphysical tone by the early 1970s. Thomas also became a fluent Welsh speaker at the age of 30. While he expressed regret at his inability to write poetry in Welsh, Thomas explored issues of language and identity in his work and opted to use the Welsh language for much of his prose writing. The complex relationship between spirituality, science, the landscape and nationality continued to manifest itself in Thomas’ writing until his death in 2000, becoming a prominent feature of collections such as *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) and *No Truce with the Furies* (1995). He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.

In his personal life, Thomas was married to artist Mildred ‘Elsi’ Eldridge for fifty one years, until her death in 1991. The loss of his beloved wife hit Thomas hard and it was a blow from which he never fully recovered, in spite of marrying second wife Elizabeth Vernon in 1996. In addition to his poetry, Thomas published a range of other writing, including his seminal lecture ‘Abercuawg’ (1976) and his autobiography *Neb* (1985).

Almost two decades after his death, Thomas remains a towering figure of Anglophone Welsh writing, leaving behind a rich and varied body of work which reflects the changing landscape of Wales throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales anthology Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title is as provocative as it is simple. The poem both draws on this rural archetype and asks the reader to question what they understand it to mean. Despite introducing us to the emblematic figure of Iago Prytherch, who would become a recurring figure used by Thomas as a symbol of the Welsh farmer and his struggle with the land, the poem's title is carefully anonymous and does not identify the 'peasant' by name. The simplicity of the title foreshadows the poet's focus on Prytherch, placing him, and not the natural world, as foremost in the poem. The fact that there is nothing personal or specific about the term 'a peasant' supports the idea that the figure created by the poet is generic figure who may be used to represent all those who work on the land in this kind of environment.

Form.

The poem is constructed using one single stanza, with an irregular form and a varied rhythmic pattern. The poem's fluid form invokes a sense of instability and hints at the volatile nature of the landscape on which the central character works, while line breaks challenge the reader's evolving perceptions of Prytherch himself. The poem ends with a rhyming couplet lending a sense of order and completion to the poem, affording the closing lines a soothing tone as they reassure the reader that Prytherch will not be forgotten and presenting him as a warrior, emerging from a chaotic struggle. Thomas uses this form frequently in his poetry.

Lines 1-7.

In contrast to the anonymity of the poem's title, the opening lines of the poem start by identifying the character of Iago Prytherch. The name itself is hybrid. Iago is a common Welsh name, (a version of Jacob) though one which may be more familiar to English readers from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Prytherch anglicises the Welsh sound 'dd' in Prydderch to 'th'. The poet is at pains to stress that Prytherch is just '**an ordinary man**' (line 2), suggesting that there is nothing special about this man. The poet goes on to firmly locate Prytherch within a harsh Welsh landscape, describing him as a figure of the '**bald Welsh hills**' (line 2). While the initial image of a man who '**pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud**' (line 3) may seem gentle and appealing, there is nothing romanticised about rest of this scene. Indeed the paucity of the living suggested by this line should not be overlooked. The description of the hills as '**bald**' lends them a cold and unfriendly nature. There is a gothic or monstrous slant to the descriptions of the '**yellow bones**' (line 5) and '**green skin**' (line 4) of the mangels (a root vegetable similar to a swede and grown as animal fodder). The corporeal imagery connects the man to the land, inviting one to reread the assertion that he is a '**man of the bald Welsh hills**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The language also reminds the reader that this is not an idyllic, pastoral landscape, but one which is challenging to Prytherch. Likewise, the verbs used by the poet in this section of the poem reinforce these challenges and reveal how hard Prytherch is working on the land, **'docking mangles'** (line 4), **'chipping'** (line 5) and **'churning the crude earth'** (line 6) as he labours.

However difficult his toil may be, Prytherch appears to take some satisfaction in his work and permits himself a **'half-witted grin Of satisfaction'** (lines 5–6) while he struggles with the land. Like the use of **'peasant'** to describe the farmer, **'half-witted'** is troublingly dismissive. The reader may feel a sense of unease in the way the poet describes Prytherch. Similarly, there is a hint of menace in the landscape itself: the clouds **'glint in the wind'** (line 7) foreshadowing the struggle between man and nature which unfolds throughout the rest of the poem.

Lines 8–12.

In these lines the poetic voice reaffirms the image of Prytherch as an uncultured figure, preoccupied with his struggle with the land. Prytherch spends every day labouring in this way, moments of happiness being **'rarer than the sun'** (line 9) across the **'gaunt sky'** (line 10). His bleak emotional life is a mirror of the bleak upland landscape. Even when Prytherch does have cause to smile it is with **'spittled mirth'** (line 8), a description which suggests an uncouth, possibly mentally or physically impaired man. This is developed by the crude language used as he **'leans to gob in the fire'** (line 12) and his lack of mental animation as he remains **'motionless'** (line 12) and **'fixed in his chair'** (line 11). Perhaps he is exhausted by his ongoing struggle to work this unforgiving landscape, but the poem is deliberately building the reader's sense of distance and perhaps distaste from and for this man.

Lines 13–16.

The earlier sense of disquiet and even danger returns again in this middle section of the poem as the reader is told that there is **'something frightening'** (line 13) about Prytherch. Yet, according to the poet, what makes Prytherch frightening is not his actions or his continual struggle with the natural world, but **'the vacancy of his mind'** (line 13). Once again Prytherch is presented as being simplistic and is reduced to an earthy, almost animalistic character whose clothes are **'sour with years of sweat'** (line 14) and **'animal contact'** (line 15). The rawness of the landscape on which he has toiled for so long has transferred to Prytherch, becoming part of his identity and the language used here presents these aspects of Prytherch's character and appearance in derogatory terms.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

But here the poem begins to turn on the reader. Having carefully constructed a crude and disquieting figure, the poetic voice is arguably ironic in its declaration that these features would **'shock the refined, / But affected sense'** (lines 15–16). The enjambment emphasises the critique of the reader's senses as 'affected', here meaning 'artificial' or even false. The contrast within the description of **'stark naturalness'** (line 16) could also suggest that Prytherch's rugged appearance and habits are both natural and shocking at the same time, much like the landscape in which he works. At this point in the poem, Prytherch and the natural world are most closely in sync, connected by a sense of earthiness and inherent danger; both landscape and man are creations to be observed and feared.

Lines 17–22.

The final five lines of the poem mark a change in tone and rhythm as the poetic voice turns away from the earlier description of Prytherch as a disturbing figure with the blunt announcement **'Yet this is your prototype'** (line 17). At this point the description of Prytherch becomes a tribute to the man as an emblematic hero. He is a timeless warrior a **'winner of wars'** (line 21), who has stood firm against the **'seige of rain and the wind's attrition'** (line 18) – the weather here presented in military terms of siege and attrition, while the span of his endurance is measured in the cyclical time – the 'seasons' of the natural world and agricultural calendar. His survival is linked with that of the nation, or rather in terms of race: **'preserve his stock'** (line 19), and the image of him as a successful shepherd evokes a quasi-Christ-like figure. The language used in this section of the poem continues to build, presenting Prytherch in heroic and military terms as **'an impregnable fortress / Not to be stormed'** (lines 19 and 20), an image which is in sharp contrast to the careworn figure we see working the land earlier in the poem. At this point even **'death's confusion'** (line 20) is not able to destabilise Prytherch and there are religious overtones to the way in which this one man has become symbolic of the many and stands strong in his aim to protect his flock – Christ is often pictured as a shepherd.

As the poem reaches its conclusion, Prytherch's transition from **'ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills'** (line 2) to **'a winner of wars'** (line 21) is completed. In one sense, the man who started the poem scraping a meagre living from the hills has become a champion over the same landscape by the poem's close. In the poem's last rhyming couplet Prytherch is further elevated. The poem is a memorial and an enjoinder to **'Remember him'** (line 21). His endurance is a tribute to agricultural struggles, but also, arguably, to a wider sense of national endurance. The poem closes with the sudden move away from the Welsh landscape on which the rest of the poem, and Prytherch's life, has centred, with the reference to **'curious stars'** reminding readers that this space which Prytherch occupies is just one part of a much larger universe.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Prytherch became a figure through which R S Thomas was able to address some of the internal contradictions he experienced in encountering the hill farmers in his parish of Manafon. He had expected to find in rural mid-Wales the 'real Wales of my imagination' (itself a sentence full of contradiction), but was often disappointed.¹ In 'A Peasant' Prytherch is set up as a figure from which the poetic persona recoils and then reclaims. At no point is he really a fully thinking human and in that sense, this voiceless figure can be compared with the distantly viewed peasants of romantic poetry. Indeed, the '**curious stars**' of the final line have been interpreted by some critics as referring to the poet-creator's own god-like gaze.

The poem is rich in its use of striking imagery and multivalent adjectives which repay careful analysis. Meanings are unstable – what does it mean to describe a fortress as '**impregnable**'? It means it cannot be penetrated – but 'impregnable' is also an allusion to fertility or lack thereof. In the context of a poem about nation and survival – what is the significance of this choice of adjective?

This poem is also powerfully connected with the natural world. As is often the case in the Thomas's poetry, the landscape is presented as unforgiving and the natural world does not appear to provide for, or nurture, Prytherch in any way. Instead, it is presented as a sparse, brutal space which Prytherch must cultivate and work in order to control. The physical demands of this struggle are evident in the way Prytherch appears worn out by his toil and is left soured with sweat from his years of work on the land. There is something faintly repulsive in the description of this man who spends his life locked in a solitary battle with the natural world and by presenting Prytherch in this way, the poet is able to highlight how his engagement with the landscape has isolated him from others.

(1) R. S. Thomas, 'Y Llwybrau Gynt 2', *Selected Prose* ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1993) p. 138.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As much as Prytherch may be depicted as rugged and worn from his experiences, so too is the natural world presented as being unappealing. The landscape the poet evokes is far from idyllic and contributes to what may be read as an anti-pastoral poem which shows the natural world to be a dangerous and unreliable environment. The volatile nature of both the landscape and Prytherch is yet another feature which connects the man and the land on which he works in this poem, with both being shown as strong and somewhat menacing forces. In spite of these images, Matthew Jarvis has suggested that a sense of fertility and hope can still be found in the poem's description of the natural world. Jarvis notes that the description of Prytherch 'docking mangles' (a root crop which can be used to feed animals), is 'an indicator of a greater fertility in the environment imagined by the poem than its opening rhetoric of "bald Welsh hills" would imply'.² However brutal the environment depicted in the poem may be, the land still contains the potential for fertility and growth within this harsh environment, although this potential can only be uncovered through the physical toil of Iago Prytherch.

Taking a step back from the bleakness of the landscape in 'A peasant', it is possible to read the poem as a wider evocation of the struggles faced by those working on the land in Wales in the mid twentieth century. Nature is present throughout the poem, but its presence is stale and '**gaunt**', perhaps hinting at a need for change and revitalisation. Such themes are explored more overtly in Thomas's later Prytherch poems, but can be seen in early form here in the way in which the struggle between Prytherch and the environment becomes a fight for survival, amid a changing and challenging climate. As a result, we may read 'A Peasant' as being a comment on the complexity and volatility of the environment in Wales and the vulnerability of the lives which are dependent on it.

(2) Matthew Jarvis, 'Iago Prytherch's Mangles: Agricultural Contexts for R. S. Thomas's "A Peasant"', *Almanac: Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*, 15 (2010-2011), 70-83.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Does Prytherch's life working on the land seem lonely? If so, why?

What impression do the adjectives used in the poem create?

How do you feel about Prytherch at the start of the poem? Do these feelings change as you read the rest of the poem?

Why do you think Thomas chose to depict the landscape as being raw and unwelcoming to Prytherch?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

This photo is an image of Thomas as a younger man, wearing his clergyman's dog-collar and looking pensive as he gazes past the camera.

- <https://images.app.goo.gl/UmpxriPQj5oaaN5T6>

This picture depicts Thomas, some years later, in a more relaxed pose. Thomas is often associated with a stern appearance and this image offers a glimpse into a side of the poet which was not always reflected in photos, in part due to his intense dislike of media attention.

- https://www.newwelshreview.com/lluniau/rs_gerallt_llewelyn_credit_bach.jpg

This image pictures Thomas in focus, again looking beyond the camera, with the worn Welsh landscape behind him, bearing the scars of agriculture and the steep hills on which Thomas may have envisaged Prytherch working.

- https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/media/5613993/p28_r-s-thomas.jpg?anchor=center&mode=crop&width=818&height=500&rnd=131387215690000000

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Details of Thomas's life and career as a writer, priest and poet are available at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/r-s-thomas>

An obituary published in *The Guardian*, following Thomas's death in 2000, offers further analysis of the significance of his career and his legacy:

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/sep/27/guardianobituaries.books>

A short portrait documentary of R S Thomas, produced following his nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature, can be found on YouTube and provides some helpful context about Thomas and his writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g>



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



DR EMMA
SCHOFIELD

Cardiff University
August, 2019

We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

R.S. Thomas

'Cynddylan on a Tractor'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 8 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 8 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 9 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in March 1913. The family were in Liverpool for much of World War I, but in 1918 they moved to Holyhead, Anglesey, where the young Thomas was primarily brought up. At university in Bangor, Thomas studied Classics. Then he went to St Michael’s College, Llandaff (Llandaf), in Cardiff, to be trained as an Anglican priest. Thomas was rector in Manafon, Montgomeryshire (1942–54), Eglwys-Fach, near Aberystwyth (1954–67), and finally Aberdaron, on the Llŷn Peninsula, from 1967. He retired from Aberdaron in 1978, but stayed in the area, living in the austere early seventeenth-century cottage Sarn Rhiw (or Sarn Y Plas). Late in his life, Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature but did not win. He died in September 2000. Byron Rogers’s book, *The Man Who Went into the West* (2006) offers a wonderfully insightful and entertaining account of the poet’s life.

‘Cynddylan on a Tractor’ was first published in Thomas’s 1952 collection *An Acre of Land*, and can best be understood alongside his other character portraits of people in rural Wales whom he encountered in his ecclesiastical work. These include ‘A Peasant’, ‘Iago Prytherch’, ‘Evans’, ‘Farm Wife’ and ‘The Hill Farmer Speaks’. These poems offer a celebration of a way of life and the people who live it which also understands its unpleasant aspects. ‘Cynddylan on a Tractor’ shows a concern over technological progress, which may be partly about an awareness of how the rise of machinery would threaten the routines of farmers, and their connections to each other.

This issue of concern over technological progress is the other key contextual factor to consider with regard to ‘Cynddylan on a Tractor.’ As Grahame Davies puts it, ‘It is hard to comprehend how far-reaching, and how swift, were the changes experienced by the Western nations in the twentieth century in the wake of mechanization, industrialization, urbanization and the massification of society. It appeared as if centuries of tradition, of patterns of living, and of intellectual and religious frameworks had been swept away by a wave of technological materialism.’¹ This is a poem which focuses complicated anxieties about such sweeping changes onto the simple sight of a farmer on a tractor. Anxiety about progress was something Thomas engaged with all his life, in poems such as ‘Fuel’, ‘No Through Road’, ‘Other’ and ‘Fair Day’. As poems like ‘Welsh History’ (collected in *Poetry 1900–2000*) show, anxiety over the future did not, of course, stop him being disappointed about the past.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 135–37.)

(1) Grahame Davies, ‘Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement’, in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 7 (2001–02): 50–77.
Available here: <http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php/en>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem stages a conflict between tradition and progress, which is clear from the way in which a man on a tractor is described as a **'knight at arms'**, and these forces of tradition and progress are arguably both present in the poem's title. The title's meaning is apparently direct and accessible, giving us the immediate subject of the poem, but it clearly also points towards the bigger themes of progress and the relationship between man and machine. It is significant that Cynddylan is named, and named distinctively, increasing our ability to connect and share the poem with him. It may be that the choice of name here connects the poem's subject to the seventh-century Prince of Powys, Cynddylan ap Cyndrwyn and, if it is accepted that the name chosen for the poem therefore draws on history, the title's placing of Cynddylan 'on a tractor' gives us, in a few words, the central conflict between tradition and modernity that the poem is based around.

Form.

At the end of the poem, Cynddylan, on his tractor, is literally moving forward – he 'passes proudly up the lane' – in a way which might figure the relentless forward movement of technology, advancing ahead after the end of the poem. This sense of continual forward movement is also enacted on the level of the form of the poem, which is constructed as a single stanza with no breaks. In length, the poem is close to being a sonnet; it contains a number of full rhymes, and appears, from its opening line, to be following roughly the rhythms of iambic pentameter: 'Ah, **you** should **see** Cynddylan **on** a **tractor**.' Yet, unlike the 14-line sonnet, the poem turns out to be 16 lines long, its rhyme scheme is irregular, and we soon discover lines whose metre is interestingly and markedly irregular: 'The **clutch** **curse**s, but the **gears** **obey**.' One way of looking at this is that the poem's form stages a conflict between poetic tradition – the sonnet, full rhyme, iambic pentameter – and a more innovative free verse. The relationship between these formal choices and the poem's subject – the battleground of nature and tradition versus technology and innovation – is easy to see.

Lines 1-4.

The poem's very first word, '**Ah**', is significant because it roots the poem in the realm of human speech. This small word, and perhaps too the word '**lo**' in line 6, gives the poem a sense of being something said by one farmer to another over a farm gate. As a result, there is a much stronger sense of material reality in the text, and we have the impression that what is being described is happening *now*. Similarly, phrases like '**He's a new man**' establish the sense that the speaker is celebrating the technological progress embodied by Cynddylan's tractor. As the poem develops, however, it is clear that the text subtly questions this celebration, while maintaining a superficially celebratory tone.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The choice of **'yoked'** in line 2 is significant. The yoke was originally the piece of wood fastened over the neck of two animals, connecting them to the plough they were pulling. Cynddylan has been freed, the line suggests, by the innovations of the tractor from a somewhat animalistic life of drudgery. But if he is no longer **'yoked'** to the old ways of working, he is also distanced from tradition – and from the animals he works with. This explains the tense relationship between technology and animals which is expressed in lines 7, 11 and 15 of the poem.

In lines 3–4, we again find a tone which is superficially celebratory of technology and Cynddylan's relationship to it, but actually expresses a more critical view. The idea that **'He's a new man now'** and the strength suggested by **'His nerves of metal'** offer stock images of a confident modern man. But the suggestion that Cynddylan is **'part of the machine'** and the conflation of bodily and technological images in **'his blood oil'** is a little troubling. This brilliantly-managed awkwardness is enhanced by the use of rhyme. **'Soil'** in the phrase **'yoked him to the soil'**, which might represent the old ways, in the sense that the tractor literally creates a new distance between farmer and soil, is given a full rhyme with **'oil'**, representing the newer ways, the sonic harmony reinforcing by contrast the tonal unease.

Lines 5–11.

The combination of different tones – one superficially celebrating Cynddylan's harnessing of technology, the other seeking to problematize this celebration – is here sustained. Cynddylan is **'Riding to work as a great man should,'** we are told, and is so powerful that he can command technology: **'the gears obey / His least bidding'**. The powerful sounds of technology are conveyed to us in the alliteration of **'The clutch curses'**. Yet the gears don't really **'obey / His least bidding'** – they don't do what they do as a result of listening to him. An animal maybe *would*, and the suggestion therefore is that Cynddylan is carrying forward his old ways of working, his old understandings, into this brave new world.

That Cynddylan is presented as moving **'away / Out of the farmyard'** sustains this idea. Because of the power of technology, the speaker suggests, Cynddylan can click his fingers and be gone, but the lines also imply that the minute one mounts a tractor one is moving away from the farm and rural traditions. The **'scattering hens'** and the accompanying image of the tractor **'emptying the wood / Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays'** also simultaneously celebrate the power of technology and make it seem sinister. **'Scattering'** and **'emptying'** both suggest technology's power, and the cumulative feel conveyed by the repetition of **'and'** in line 11 gives the sense that technology will scare away *everything*. The idea that all these animals are scared away – even the beautiful **'bright jays'** – makes technology seem destructive, intimidating, opposed to the world of nature.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

If technology is powerful, these lines suggest, men can be considered powerful who use it – and it is specifically *men*, as the vocabulary and images here are gendered. Cynddylan is **‘Riding to work as a great man should,’** we are told, and the next line connects him with a masculine tradition: **‘He is the knight at arms’**. Again, it is possible to read this apparent celebration of technology ironically. Technology is about advancement, a break from tradition, so to celebrate it by comparing it to an image from history could be read as mocking. The image of the **‘Mirror of silence’** is lyrical, synaesthetic and beautiful; it is drawn attention to by the awkward line break which precedes it (**‘fields’ / Mirror’**), coming as it does in the middle of a phrase. In what way the fields are a **‘Mirror of silence’** is not entirely clear (and this is part of the metaphor’s suggestive power), but the image gives the clear idea that the sound of the tractor is destroying something beautiful.

Lines 12-16.

The image of the morning – **‘The sun comes over the tall trees / Kindling all the hedges’** is beautiful. The metaphor is located in the verb with powerful economy, as that word **‘kindling’** allows the poet to avoid more laboured formulations such as ‘the sun is like kindling.’ The notion that such beauty of the morning is **‘not for him / Who runs his engine on a different fuel’** perhaps suggests that the embracing of technology distracts us from the beauty of nature.

There is much in the final couplet which is interesting. The concluding rhyme of **‘vain’** and **‘lane’** and the forceful alliteration of **‘passes proudly’** (echoing **‘clutch curses’** earlier) gives the poem’s ending a harmonic and musical flourish which enhances the sense of conclusion. Beginning this sentence with **‘And’** adds to the effect: it’s a small point, but how much less effective would this ending be if the sentence started with ‘All’? The noisiness of this last sentence matches its content – the birds singing. Cynddylan is named, as he was in the poem’s first line, accentuating that sense of conclusion.

The birds **‘singing’** as Cynddylan completes his one-man-on-a-tractor procession seem celebratory; **‘bills wide’** suggests their great effort, that they are singing their hearts out. They cannot be heard over the tractor though; their singing is presumably **‘in vain’** because Cynddylan cannot hear it, will not hear, now, nature calling to him. Given the image of Cynddylan **‘proud’** on his tractor, the other meaning of **‘vain’** has to be in play here – that Cynddylan’s pride in technology is essentially a vanity, all show, a mistake. Perhaps that initial, spoken **‘Ah’**, then, is about giving that vanity an audience? Ironically, at the point at which Thomas writes that the bills are wide **‘in vain,’** because the birds cannot be heard, he uses the sonic device of full rhyme, which certainly can be heard within the poem. The poem ends with Cynddylan moving forward – he **‘passes proudly up the lane’** – in a way which might represent the relentless forward movement of technological ‘progress’ and which, given the content of the poem, is more troubling than it is celebratory.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Cynddylan on a Tractor' concentrates the author's thinking about technological progress and its impact on the connections that people have to the land and to each other within a description of a single farmer riding a tractor. There is a celebratory aspect to certain lines of the poem: Cynddylan is **'a new man now,' 'the gears obey / His least bidding,'** he is **'Riding to work as a great man should.'** There is enough anxiety over technological progress in the poem though for us to infer irony in the more celebratory lines. Cynddylan is **'part of the machine,' 'his blood oil.'** Tellingly for Thomas, who was a committed environmental campaigner, the tractor is seen as having a negative impact on nature, the tractor **'scattering hens'** and **'emptying the wood / of foxes and squirrels and bright jays.'** It may even be possible to read this **'scattering'** and **'emptying'** as pointing towards the wider impact of technology on rural communities and on their sense of culture.

Among a number of interesting things about this poem is the richness and lyricism with which Thomas treats the subject of the advance of technology and of a man riding on a tractor. The poem is intensely aware of all of the ramifications and subtleties of language: when Cynddylan is described as freed by technology, it is said that he is no longer **'yoked...to the soil'** and the history of **'yoked'** gives the suggestion that technological advancement distances farmers from animals. When the birds at the end of the poem have their **'bills wide in vain,'** that other meaning of vain comes into play to give us Cynddylan's vanity in the illusory power technology gives him. The subtlety in Thomas's language accounts for the poem's richness and ambiguity in tone. We do not trust the celebratory statements that the poem makes about technology, but nor is this a one-dimensional satire or protest on the rise of technology. The poem draws us to look very carefully at each resonance of the speaker's language to try and see where his true position is. For Thomas to employ such rich language, in a poem which is so aware of the subtleties of meaning raised by each choice the poem makes, is very interesting given the subject matter of the poem. The language is working clearly in the tradition of the lyric poem, drawing on the resources of rhyme and rhythm in the way, say, Wordsworth and Keats did to meet the demands of the subjects of their day. Smashing this rich language, and the richness of the lyric tradition, up against the new subject of a man on a tractor, makes for an interesting contrast.

Like all truly great poems, 'Cynddylan on a Tractor' continues to resonate after the last line has finished. Cynddylan drives off into his future, and technology and progress keep on going beyond the ending of the poem - whether the poem is being read from the page on its first publication in the 1950s, or from a smartphone screen in the early twenty-first century.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How do you think the poem's speaker wants the reader to feel about the tractor in the poem?

What do you think will happen after the end of the poem?

What is the relationship between nature and technology in the poem?

Given the content of this poem, if you could speak to Cynddylan, what would you say? How do you think he would react?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913–2000)

by John Hedgecoe, 1966 (at Eglwys-fach)

© John Hedgecoe; collection National Portrait Gallery, London

• <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-74584>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An essay on Thomas's life and work is provided by an American organisation called the Poetry Foundation, and is a very useful complement to this help-sheet. At the end of the essay you will find links to a selection of R. S. Thomas poems that are available online and a substantial bibliography.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/r-s-thomas>

A simple summary of Thomas's life and career is provided on the BBC website.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/rs-thomas/>

A short extract from the television programme *Bookmark*, broadcast in 1995, is available on YouTube, filmed in the aftermath of Thomas's nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature (which he did not win).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g>

A 45-minute BBC radio programme on Thomas by Welsh author Jon Gower is available, which focuses on Thomas's lifelong engagement with birdwatching and the impact this had on his poetry.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r5n6g>

Scholarly essays on Thomas are available via the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University. Grahame Davies's article, 'Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement' is a particularly useful resource from this site in terms of the attitude to progress, technology and machines that we see at work in 'Cynddylan on a Tractor'. <http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en>

A discussion of Thomas's religious poetry between The Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan, Lord Rowan Williams and Prof

M. Wynn Thomas: <https://www.learnedsociety.wales/laboratories-of-the-spirit-rs-thomass-religious-poetry/>



JONATHAN EDWARDS

Author of *My Family and Other Superheroes and Gen*, published by Seren

August, 2019



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John Tripp

'Walnut Tree Forge'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 8 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

John Tripp was born in Bargoed in 1927. His father was a farrier from Cornwall who moved to south Wales to find work after the First World War. In 1933, Paul and his wife Muriel moved the family down to the new housing estate in Whitchurch, Cardiff. Paul supported the family with his business, Oak Tree Forge in Taff's Well, which he ran until it was demolished to make way for the A470 bypass in 1969.

Although Oak Tree Forge bore the sign 'H.P. Tripp and Son: Smiths', John never worked at the family business. In stark contrast to his father's work as a skilled physical labourer, John spent most of his career working, in one way or another, with words. Leaving school aged 16 in 1943, he found work as a clerk with the BBC in Cardiff, and later, after three years of National Service, he moved to London. After another period at the BBC, he went on to work as a press assistant for the Indonesian Embassy, where he stayed for eleven years, before moving back to Cardiff to become a full-time freelance writer in 1969.

In the early 1960s, Tripp had met a group of Welsh writers living in London, later to become the 'Guild of Welsh Writers', and it was around this time that he became more aware of his roots in Wales and of Welsh politics. His first collection of poetry, *Diesel to Yesterday* (1966), was a biting critical view of contemporary Welsh society: in particular, its consumerist excesses, its pretensions, and what he viewed as the problem of Wales' relationship with England. He would pursue these themes over the course of several more books of poetry and prose essays until his early death, at home in his father's house in Whitchurch, in 1986.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

In the 1966 poem 'Diesel to Yesterday', Tripp memorably described himself as a 'modern who reeks of the museum'. Often in his writing, he contrasted the superficialities of the present day with images of an idealised past. In his later poetry, he became increasingly nostalgic, and looked back to his childhood as a source of solace, a time unspoiled by what he saw as the empty materialist excesses of modern life. 'Walnut Tree Forge' is one such poem from his last collection, *Passing Through* (1984). It recalls his experiences as a young boy at his father's smithy, watching his father at work.

The title is, on one level, an obvious reference to 'Oak Tree Forge', Tripp's father's smithy. However, its signifiers of natural imagery ('**Walnut Tree**') and a bygone working environment ('**Forge**') also signal the broader symbolism of the poem as a whole. Although written in the 1980s, the poem paints a vivid, pastoral picture of an older era, now largely lost, in which people were closer to the natural environment, and work, more often than not, involved physical labour.

Form.

The poem consists of four septets. These relatively long stanzas give the poem a bulky physical appearance on the page, each perhaps resembling the anvil on which his father would have worked his horseshoes, or the four hooves of the horses themselves. There is no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, but the poem uses a range of prosodic devices throughout to convey its theme. It is phrased in an understated, everyday idiom, with only subtle lyrical embellishments. The poem also refrains from capitalising new lines: this is a technique Tripp uses in many of his poems to convey a sense of unpretentious informality.

Stanza 1, lines 1-7.

Although the poem takes the form of a memory of a day that passed many decades earlier, the use of the simple past tense in the first stanza creates a vivid sense of immediacy, as though the events occurred very recently.

Tripp was famously dismissive of what he viewed as the frivolous excesses of modern life, and this poem, with its emphasis on the physical nature of his father's work, presents a vision of authenticity and vitality in stark contrast with this. Lines 1 and 2 immediately set up an important distinction between the vitality of his father's occupation ('**My father shod horses**') and the perceived frivolity of the speaker's own life (though the poem is clearly autobiographical, the speaker is not necessarily Tripp himself). The speaker recalls his father hard at work at a traditional, physical trade, one strongly redolent of an older way of life, while he plays at a childish game.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The stanza also establishes the poem's symbolic connection between the physicality of the father's work and the dynamism of the natural environment. This is achieved through the image of the kingfisher. This is a striking image of physical vitality: the kingfisher, **'like a blue-green streak'** (line 4), bursts in and out of the water in its hunt for food. It is an image of graceful power, and Tripp uses enjambment, the sentence running across the lines, to convey the fluent physical movement of the bird as it darts **'clean[ly]'** in and out of the water. Like his father, the kingfisher sees the immediate fruits of its labour: it catches a fish and takes it back to its hole in the bank. The phrase **'fish-boned'** conveys a sense of the ongoing life-cycle of this natural environment.

Stanza 1, lines 8-14.

Like the first, this stanza begins with the words **'My father'**. Indeed, in the first lines of all four stanzas, the poet's father is focalised, serving to present him as the symbolic centre of the poem: filling the frame, so to speak. The repetition perhaps also emphasises the repetitive, physical nature of his work.

Lines 10-12 pursue the sense of the physicality of his father's labour, and the sheer strength and power necessary to do it. Again, enjambment is used to convey a sense of physical movement, with the sentence exceeding the confines of the ends of the lines, while line breaks emphasise words associated with labour: **'work', 'rest', 'back', 'heat', 'skill'** and **'rag'**. The stanza as a whole focuses on the image of his father's body in motion: he **'leans against the door', 'bend[s]', 'wipe[s] his brow'**. Again, his father is connected with the natural environment: through the **'big and restless'** horse he supports with his back, and in connection with the elegant kingfisher; he asks knowingly **'Did you see a kingfisher, then?'** Perhaps overcome by a sense of awe, the young Tripp cannot speak in reply, only nod.

Lines 15-21.

Here Tripp further hammers home the thematic contrast between authenticity and superficiality, figuring this through a distinction between two types of horse. As a farrier, Tripp's father would have spent much of his time making and repairing the shoes of 'draft' or working horses, those working on local farms, or in the coalmines of the south Wales valleys. This stanza makes clear that his father didn't enjoy working on horses bred for show or racing, rather than work. The images of strength and graceful power seen in stanzas 1 and 2 are contrasted with images of unwieldy heaviness (**'all rump'** and **'heavy'** only with the weight of the **'spoilt pride of their runners'**) and showy superficiality (**'cockade gloss'**). In contrast to working horses, the show horses are temperamental, **'spoilt'** and **'pampered'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Stanza 4, lines 22-28

Unlike the preceding stanzas, which foreground a sense of the physicality of the father's trade and the natural environment of which he is aware, the first four lines of the final stanza are slightly more detached and analytical. Tripp makes observations about what he has recalled, and draws conclusions about the difference between his fathers' experience of the day and his own, which hint at broader differences between their life experiences, and also, perhaps, political differences. If the driving force of the poem is Tripp's value judgement of the distance between the older era he recalls and the modern-day society he occupies, then lines 22-23 suggest his father would not have made such a distinction: **'It was labour to him, one more task / for a pound'**.

The speaker of the poem goes on to explain that for him, the days spent with his father were worth much more than money could buy: it was a **'golden time'**. The ironic connection between time and monetary value shows up the perceived worthlessness of money itself. The idea of the time spent with his father being **'freedom / from arithmetic'** has a similar double meaning, implying both time spent away from school, but also freedom from the money-driven adult society of which activities like arithmetic are a part. There is a note of melancholy in his realisation that this is time used up **'so easily'** (line 26), which further reinforces the sense that time has an unquantifiable emotional value.

The final three lines close the poem with a resounding nostalgic image that returns us to the uncorrupted idyll of the afternoon the poem is recalling. Whatever the differences between the speaker and his father, they are here pictured together, **'just the two of us'**. The penultimate line – **'the ring of the shoes hitting the pin'** – is a masterful phrase: the assonance of the repeated 'i' sound (ring, hitting, pin) resonates from the past into the present: like the memory itself. This runs on into the final line which is the poem's longest, suggesting the speaker does not want the memory to end, or that the memory lingers. The poem closes with the warmly nostalgic yet, again, melancholic image of **'the long-ago sun'**, sadly emphasising the distance between the speaker's present and this idyllic past.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

John Tripp was a poet with strong social and national convictions. Much of his poetry decries what he viewed as the excesses and superficialities of modern society. 'Walnut Tree Forge' explores these themes by recalling a memory of an idealised past: a day spent as a child at his father's forge.

The poem is set resolutely in the past. Though expressed as a memory of a day that passed many decades ago, it paints a vivid picture. The speaker's father is the symbolic focus of the poem: he is foregrounded in every stanza, and is constructed as the embodiment of an older era of authentic, skilled, physical labour. This work is, moreover, associated – almost conflated – with images of the natural environment: the father's physical skill and strength are connected to images of the vitality of that environment: the '**blue-green streak**' of a kingfisher; the '**big and restless**' shire horse. The effect is to conjure a sense of a social order more closely connected to the rhythms of the natural world. Such a sense is constructed in stark contrast to the world Tripp felt himself to inhabit, writing the poem in 1980s Wales. Indeed, in the complete absence of commentary on it, the present day is a palpable presence that haunts this poem.

Underlying the images of physical labour and the natural environment is a sense of melancholic nostalgia. In reality, Tripp's father's forge had been demolished to make way for a new road years before the poem was written. The new A470 bypass connected the city of Cardiff with the rest of Wales, heralding a new Welsh society and economy: one no longer built on physical labour or the natural environment. For Tripp, this represented a violent historical lurch forward, perhaps in the wrong direction. The poem, in its vivid, nostalgic depiction of a bygone era, embodies this sense of irrecoverable loss, as summed up in the lyrical final lines, which paint a memorable image of an idyllic childhood spent in '**the long-ago sun.**'

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What words and images does the speaker use to describe his father?
What is the emotional affect of these words?

What images of the natural environment can you find? How are these described?

How does the speaker describe the 'big horses/made for show'?
What values are being represented and critiqued here?

How important is nostalgia in this poem? What words are associated with nostalgia (a longing for the past)?

PHOTOGRAPHS



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<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/36361>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Poet Peter Finch recalls John Tripp:

<https://www.iwa.wales/click/2010/10/the-bare-essential-john-tripp/>

Draft/working horse:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draft_horse#/media/File:Aa_shirehorse.jpg

Footage of a farrier at work:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZQ81i_HJ5o

Footage of horseshoe game:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHD_nG8uY1Y

Show horse:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/genewolf/5150843877>



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August, 2019

*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University,
The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh
Writing in English.*

Pennyanne Windsor

'Dancing Woman 1'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Pennyanne Windsor moved to Swansea as an adult, having spent her childhood growing up in the west of England. Having worked as a teacher and a youth worker Windsor became a full-time poet and short story writer, with her first poetry collection, *Heroines*, published in 1984. In addition to a further five poetry collections, Windsor has also published *Out of Sight*, a study of the lives of young women in Swansea. She is a performance poet and jazz musician.

Much of Windsor’s writing focuses on exploring how women are represented and how their own identity is shaped by the world around them.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

There is a sense of ambiguity about the title of the poem, created by the term 'Dancing Woman 1' which carefully conceals the identity of the woman. The generic nature of the title may be read as being symbolic of any woman who dances in the way described by the poem and is at odds with the many interpretations of female identity which are explored in the body of the poem. The title also has faint echoes of the form of title often used for paintings and artwork, indicating that the lines which follow create a series of images of female identity which the reader is invited to visualise and study, as they might a work of art.

Form.

In spite of its varied and irregular structure, there is a sporadic rhythm to the poem which reflects the liberal nature of the dance it describes. There is very little punctuation in the poem and the lines run freely, with phrasing left to the interpretation of the reader. Consequently, the structure and form used by the speaker create a tone of freedom and fluidity within the poem. The poem benefits from being spoken aloud, reflecting Windsor's work as a performance poet. The statements gradually get longer and longer. Some of the longer lines become quite comic in their mundane detail, but the building rhythm of the lines also have a momentum that suggests flight or dance. There are a number of rhyming couplets in the poem, used at various intervals by the speaker, the function of which is discussed in more detail in the line by line analysis below.

Lines 1-7.

The poem begins with an un-capitalized word, creating the impression that the reader is being drawn into the middle of a story. The distinction made in these opening lines also immediately establishes the difference between the life of the woman '**by day**', as opposed to her life at night. This first stanza reads much like a list, the poet states that '**I go to work / and cook and shop and sew and mop**', listing the chores the speaker completes each day. Unlike the first two lines which do not rhyme and so seem to stand alone in their statements of fact, the lines which list the activities undertaken by the woman in the poem either have internal rhymes ('**shop**' and '**mop**' in line 3) or are written in rhyming couplets ('**place**' and '**face**', '**spouse**' and '**house**'). These couplets emphasise the repetitive and frustrating nature of the tasks the woman performs each day, leaving readers with a sense that these labours are neither enjoyable, nor particularly significant, to the woman who carries them out. Moreover, the couplets seem to prevent the poem from moving forward, with each line ending with an echo of the previous one.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

This opening stanza also sets up the idea that the woman's life in the daytime is a façade as she undertakes her daily life **'with a pretty smiling face'** to maintain an outward appearance of perfection and happiness. The speaker also lists her possession of **'two library tickets and a mortgage'** as if these items are an important part of her identity and perhaps afford her a certain societal status or veneer of respectability. It is interesting to note that the speaker seems to regard maintaining the **'pretty smiling face'** and attending **'a keep fit class'** as further duties which she has to perform, listing them as a part of her daily routine. Similarly, the speaker states that she has **'three children and a spouse'**, suggesting that she believes this information to be important to her identity (though they lack any individuality in this list-like format). As a result, the stanza creates an image of a female life which is carefully ordered, defined primarily by the woman's role as a mother, wife and homemaker. The significance of outward appearance and fitness are placed in a central position by the speaker, suggesting that she also regards these as being an essential part of her daily duties as a woman.

Lines 8-11.

The second stanza is much shorter than the first and reverses the rhythmic pattern of the first stanza by opening with rhyming couplets. Now focusing on what happens **'late at night'** and **'out of sight'**, the first two lines of this second stanza present an insight into a different side of the speaker and her identity. The fact that the speaker now turns her attention to what happens in secret, in the dark of night, is in sharp contrast to the public-facing version of the woman with which we were presented in the first stanza. Instead of the list of daily tasks which appear to define the woman's life in the daytime, the speaker declares that at night **'I throw my clothes away'**, simultaneously shedding the concerns with appearance which surfaced in the first stanza. The night time seems to embolden the woman and she is no longer preoccupied with how she looks, making the moment where the clothes are thrown aside one of liberation. This sense of liberation is further cemented by the announcement that this action takes place so that the woman is able to **'dance'** naked.

At this point in the poem with the words **'and dance'** (line 11) the pattern of rhyming couplets halts, inviting a pause and drawing attention to the statement being made in these two lines – that is throwing her clothes away and emphasising the action of dancing. Unlike the tightly-packed list of multiple jobs and daily tasks, which fills a single line in the first stanza of the poem, the action of dancing is given an entire line, suggesting it is the only action which is important to the woman in the night.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-20.

We remain with the speaker's description of what happens at night in the third stanza of the poem, but return once again to the list structure and rhyming couplets as the speaker describes the different identities she feels she takes on as she dances naked at night. It is significant that all of the women described by the speaker in this section are clever or rebellious in some way. The list starts with **'a clever witch'** and a **'scheming bitch'**, personas that reflect a calculating nature and a potential dark side, the mirror image of the carefully presented image of 'proper' or respectable femininity which is constructed in the first stanza. The list continues to dismantle stereotypes of female innocence and perfection, playing with feminine archetypes: dancing, the speaker is **'a madonna sick of sainthood'** and **'a mother tired of being so good'**.

Building on this theme for the remainder of the stanza, the speaker rejects images of womanhood which require the female to behave according to specific rules. Significantly the poem does this without invoking the traditional binary of Madonna/Whore, finding other ways to reject the rules of femininity. She is a **'princess who will not go to sleep'** suggesting female agency rather than the docile captive who needs to be rescued. She is a widow who **'will not weep'**, again rejecting dependency but also the susceptibility to emotion associated with femininity. She is a school girl who decides that **'she will not be a wife'**. Dancing naked at night acts to free the speaker from the stereotypes (all associated with heterosexual union) which define her life in the daytime, leaving her **'an Independent woman'**. Significantly, the 'I' in the word 'Independent' is capitalised, emphasising the importance of the self in this act of dancing and reinforcing the idea that the dance is about the woman's identity and is not dependent upon anyone else.

Lines 21-28.

Building on the sense of independence and freedom presented in the previous two stanzas, the speaker now reiterates the idea that at night **'I might be anyone'**. There is a sense of optimism and possibility within this statement as the speaker no longer appears to feel tethered to a single form of identity.

The repetition of **'at night'** (lines 21 and 23) serves as a reminder that it is in the night, when her actions are **'out of sight'**, that the woman truly comes alive and finds her own sense of identity. We are invited to consider the nature of the constraining gaze she is avoiding. These lines echo those in the poem's opening stanza, but now the attributes which previously defined the speaker's life are cast aside like the clothes she throws away. The confession that the speaker **'discard(s) my children and my spouse'**, along with the keep fit class (is her body freer for this?), library tickets (with their polite but limited sense of cultivation) and mortgage (and the security and entrapment it represents) demonstrates the way in which the speaker's entire sense of identity is altered by her actual or imagined experience of dancing naked.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Once again, the action of dancing is placed on a line on its own, making it the focus of the speaker's admission. The act of dancing as both metaphor and actual activity requires no other justification and in the moment of dancing the speaker relies on no one else in order to define her identity as a woman.

Lines 29-40.

In the poem's closing stanza the speaker returns to the fact that her night time dancing has remained a **'secret'** which **'no one has guessed'**. The reassertion that this dancing is a secret and not something which others know about furthers the concept of the woman's dancing as being an act which is illicit and something which the speaker has **'confess(ed)'** to the complicit reader. The confession works to make the reader complicit in the woman's secret and also implies that this hidden act of dancing is a secret which could be uncovered at any time by a careful observer. The confession also arguably constructs the *implied* audience as female – another woman who will recognise the dance, the wild inner life under a curated and demure exterior. What is it like to read this confession delivered to a male audience?

In the final few lines the speaker returns to the difference which exists between her identity and persona in the day and in the night. The speaker describes how **'walking down the street'** with **'hair neat, make up discreet'** she maintains an outward appearance from which the only clue of her night time dancing is the occasional **'tap'** on a paving stone or a **'skip between the cracks'**, which perhaps recalls a child's game as much as a dance. Such actions are described as having the ability to **'unwittingly betray'** the woman's secret, suggesting that the side of her character which dances naked at night cannot be entirely concealed and has infiltrated her daily life, however subtly. The speaker returns to rhyming couplets again in this section as elements of her daily life are described, yet as with previous stanzas, this pattern is abandoned in the lines which repeat the speaker's action to 'throw [her] clothes away' and 'dance'. The poem ends with this act of liberation, leaving us with the image of the woman dancing free and uninhibited.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

This is a feminist celebration of an untamed inner self. The woman's nakedness suggests something primal, while the sense of liberation from heteronormative marital structures and feminine roles directly address the stifling nature of conventional, gendered behaviour. The dancer doesn't mention music, suggesting that the beats or tunes come from within.

At first glance, the structure and lack of punctuation in this poem can appear quite challenging to the reader. Yet the way in which the lines run together, freely, without punctuation at the end of each line, helps to create a breathless tone to the poem and supports the feeling that the reader is being let in on a secret. Read aloud the rhythm of the poem is prominent and familiar from the sometimes breathless beat of performance poetry. It is interesting that the only punctuation in the poem comes in the form of commas used mid-line in the opening and closing stanzas when the speaker lists the tasks and activities associated with her daily life. Consequently, the use of commas in this section can be read as a reminder of a more formal part of the woman's life and reflect the day time in which she believes she presents herself according to expectations of how a woman might be expected to behave. In the sections of the poem where the woman describes her dancing at night, punctuation is abandoned like the clothes the woman sheds and the poem is allowed to flow freely.

In addition to creating a sense of confession, the structure of the poem and the repeated admission that 'I throw my clothes away/and dance' suggests that the speaker is taking delight in admitting her secret to the reader. This is a declaration of liberation. The majority of the poem centres on the night and the woman's dancing, confining her daily life, along with the persona she maintains in the day time, to a smaller section of the poem and presenting it as the least-significant aspect of the woman's identity. It is not the woman's children, spouse or home life which defines the woman, but her act of dancing. The act of listing the rebellious female characters with whom the speaker feels connected through her dancing also reveals a desire to be more than a wife, mother and home-maker. The woman in the poem is searching for a way in which to express an energy she clearly feels, but is unable to express in her daily life. In addition, the liberation she feels as she dances naked allows her to imagine and explore alternative identities, beyond her own. The presentation of a multifaceted identity is not a new concept in women's writing, but is one which the speaker uses here to suggest that female identity is complex. Writing in her landmark study of women's writing in Wales, Katie Gramich has described the latter decades of the twentieth century in particular as being a time of 'awakening' for women writers in Wales.¹ In 'Dancing Woman I' we see this concept of awakening not just in the poem itself, but in a personal sense as the woman appears to experience a sense of awakening of her own identity when she dances naked. It is ironic that this awakening and the discovery of a true sense of identity occurs in secret, at night.

(1) Katie Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 106.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

The distinction between day and night is important in the poem, why is this?

Why might the woman feel so concerned with keeping this act of dancing a secret? Does the poem feel confessional or celebratory?

In the poem, the woman addresses her reader directly to share her secret, how does this make you feel as a reader?

The speaker seems particularly concerned with the notion of female identity and the many forms this can take, what does this say about the pressures faced by women in contemporary life?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Windsor tends to avoid overt media work and media resources relating to her writing are quite sparse. The image above is of Windsor delivering a poetry reading in 2015:

https://www.thewi.org.uk/__data/assets/image/0018/125352/2015-04-08-Penny-Anne-Windsor-Poet.jpg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An interview with Windsor, discussing her poetry and the inspiration for her writing, recorded in 1982: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUUpqfxzHVw>

**DR EMMA
SCHOFIELD**

*Cardiff University,
August, 2019*



We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Pennyanne Windsor

'Heroines'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Pennyanne Windsor moved to Swansea as an adult, having spent her childhood growing up in the west of England. Having worked as a teacher and a youth worker Windsor became a full-time poet and short story writer, with her first poetry collection, *Heroines*, published in 1984. In addition to a further five poetry collections, Windsor has also published *Out of Sight*, a study of the lives of young women in Swansea. She is a performance poet and jazz musician.

Much of Windsor’s writing focuses on exploring how women are represented and how their own identity is shaped by the world around them.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title for this poem is provocative as it claims the women in the poem as heroines, an idea which may at first seem at odds with the scenes of struggle and frustration depicted in the first three stanzas. The title places women firmly at the centre of the poem, with the word 'heroine' being specific to women and setting up the premise that the women in this poem are extraordinary in their own way. Writing in 1986, historian Deidre Beddoe argue that, historically, Wales had been 'a patriarchal society, in which the activities and views of men are held in far higher esteem than those of women'; in Windsor's poem the women and their work take centre stage, with their daily struggle affording them the status of 'heroines'.¹

Form.

The poem is constructed in stanzas of varying length and rhythmic pattern, from single lines, to sprawling six-line free verse stanzas which do not sit neatly within the confines of the page. Each stanza serves to depict a different moment in the daily lives of the women on which the poem centres. Although there is variation within the stanzas, there is some regularity of line length (alternating short and long lines) which contributes to the creation of a sense of routine, perhaps reflecting the repetitiveness of the women's lives. Punctuation in the poem is relatively sparse, with lines flowing continuously in a number of places and perhaps representing the seemingly endless nature of the women's work and their lack of rest.

Lines 1-9.

The women in the poem are introduced by the speaker as '**the terraced women**', who identifies herself as one of them. The first words '**We are**' is an assertive declaration of presence. The women are identified and linked to houses (the terraces) in which they live. The speaker goes on to describe how the women are '**piled row upon row on the sagging, slipping hillsides of our lives**' (lives 2), further extending the metaphor of the houses as a representation of the women's lives, but also suggesting piles of laundry or other domestic matter -plates, washing up, perhaps? There is a sense of sadness in the tone of these opening lines, with the words '**sagging**' and '**slipping**' indicating that the women may feel weary and as if they have very little control over their lives, and suggest the passage of time, even sagging bodies. The fact that the women are '**piled row upon row**' also suggests that they are being forced to live their lives closely together, almost as if they are one entity.

(1) Deidre Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women' in *Wales: the Imagined Nation, Studies in Cultural and National Identity*. Ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), p. 228.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The image of the women acting as a single unit is reinforced throughout this first stanza, and the remainder of the poem, by the use of the collective pronouns **'we'** and **'our'** which are used by the speaker to describe the women's actions. As the stanza continues the reader learns how **'we tug reluctant children up slanting streets'**, depicting the collective effort experienced by the women. The challenges they face in the form of having to marshal **'reluctant children'** and navigate **'pushchair wheels wedging in the ruts'** emphasises the physical effort required by the women as they go about their daily lives. The use of words such as 'tug' and 'rut' suggesting that these daily tasks are both laborious and repetitive for the women.

In the midst of this effort, in which the speaker confesses to finding herself **'breathless and bad-tempered'** in the process of shifting **'the Tesco carrier bags'**, there is a moment of fluidity. The bags are passed 'hand to hand' (line 7) and the structure of the lines which describes this movement reflects the action of passing something along, with no punctuation breaking up the lines in which the bags are moved. The movement is clearly practiced, a technique used by the woman to alleviate the discomfort of carrying heavy shopping bags. Again, there is a sense of unity here and the feeling that the efforts of the women, and their children, are well-honed in order to complete these daily tasks. Interestingly, amongst this effort the women **'stop to watch the town'**, looking down from their street and taking a moment to survey their surroundings. The line which follows this pause is set apart from the other stanzas in the poem and consists of the statement that **'The hilltops creep away like children playing games'** (line 9). This moment of appreciation for the landscape which surrounds the town, and the simile likening the hills to playing children, offer a moment of calm and is in contrast to the noise and work of the rest of the poem, though it also suggests that the women's role as mothers colours their perspective even of the landscape in which they live.

Lines 10-15.

Breaking the moment of tranquillity in the previous line, the second stanza of the poem starts with the image of how **'our other children'** - that is the ones in the playground not the ones who are the hills playing games - **'shriek against the schoolyard rails'**. Unlike the hills who can creep off, the school children are trapped in the socialising institutions of the valley. The women are identified noisily by the calls and bustle of the children. Again the women seem both unified and interchangeable as 'Mandy's mum, John's mum' though the late variation in the use of the words 'mum', 'mother' and 'mummy' in these lines reveals a subtle sense of class or cultural difference between these otherwise tightly knitted lives.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

In spite of their work, the women take a moment to **'wave'** back at the children as they pass the school, although even this act reveals **'hands carried by groceries and too much washing-up'**. The daily labour the women face in their roles as mothers at the heart of their families has left a physical mark on them. Here again there is a faint air of sadness as the women catch **'echoes as we pass of old wild games'**, recalling their own childhoods and a time when they were not burdened with the tasks they face each day in their adult lives, though also perhaps suggesting that their daughters too are moving in line towards a future very similar to their own.

Lines 16-23.

Stanza three marks the start of the next phase of the day, moving into the afternoon and a lunch of **'more bread and butter, tea'** the women don overalls and begin their next set of jobs. This change is described by the speaker as an act which initially sounds appealing, **'we dress in blue and white and pink and white checked overalls'**, the overalls sounding pretty and the act of dressing in them belying the hard work to come. Once in their nylon overalls – a form of protection that is almost ubiquitous enough to be recognised as a kind of uniform – the women clean their houses and **'scrub the porch'**, before returning to the collective effort of **'sweep[ing] the street'** and **'clean[ing] all the little terraces'** on the hill. There is a sense of unity in the way the women work and a clear structure to their day which they all appear to follow. These acts connect the valleys women to working-class rituals across Britain, but to the image of the Welsh Mam in particular. The effort to keep the houses and the street looking tidy is one which consumes all of the women and for which they appear to take a collective responsibility. In south Wales, to be 'tidy' was a sign of respectability and character as well as domestic order and cleanliness.

Lines 24-35.

In the final, and longest, stanza of the poem the women share a moment of rest **'before the end-of-school bell rings'**. In this window of opportunity while **'the babies are asleep'**, the women come together to running across the street **'to avoid the rain'** and **'stop by for tea'** at one of the houses. Significantly, the women are again defined by their children and are referred to as **'Mandy's mum', 'Ceri's mum', 'Dave's mum and John's mum'**, rather than by their own names. This act of identifying the women by their children suggests that their identities are now dependent on that of their offspring and that they regard each other in this light. By implication, the women are also all of the same generation, suggesting again a generational path or pattern to life in this community. The mothers who are not explicitly named by the speaker are referred to simply as 'the others', reinforcing the sense that the women do not have distinct identities of their own.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Yet at this meeting of the women, the poem takes on a lighter tone. The speaker describes how **'briefly we are the wild women'**, presenting an image of the women which suggests that their decision to come together for a cup of tea and a chat is in a rebellious action which flies in the face of their domesticity. It also ties them back to the 'old **wild** games' recalled when they see their children in school – perhaps suggesting that they are remembering the conception of the children rather than their own games as youngsters. As they sit together the women transition to **'girls with secrets, travellers, engineer, courtesans, and stars of fiction, films'**. Temporarily freed from their identities as mothers and housewives, the women are free to regress to 'girls' sharing secrets and dreaming of the lives and careers they might have had. As with the other such moments of happiness or reflection in the poem, this scene too is tinged with sadness as the speaker describes how the women are **'plotting our escape like jail-birds'**, providing an insight into how trapped they may feel in their current domestic lives. It is also worth noting that the careers the women envisage are ambitious, revealing a very different side to the women we first saw trudging up the hillside in the opening stanza of the poem, and perhaps signalling what ambitions they might conceive of for their daughters.

In the closing lines of the poem the metaphor of the women as the terraced houses in which they live resurfaces. The women are once again **'terraced'**, adding to the growing sense of entrapment. There is, however, a sense of determination among the bleakness of the speaker's final description of the women as **'Tescoed prisoners rising from the household dust like heroines'**. The women may well feel that they are imprisoned by the chores they have to do, by their responsibilities and even by their tie to the supermarket in which they all shop, but they are also able to see themselves as 'heroines'. The image of the women rising from their housework and emerging as heroines is indicative of their strength and their ability to look beyond the confines of their daily routine. This final image of determined women conquering the challenges of their daily lives and emerging victorious paints a very different image to the struggle presented in the first stanza of the poem and reveals much about the women's ability to persevere.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem works to create an image of the women's lives as dominated by their location and the daily toil and the hard work involved in the routine of domestic duties and childcare. The clearly-defined schedules in the day are marked by each of the stanzas, including brief pauses for rest, rebellion and creative fantasy. In this it resembles a working-class version of Gillian Clarke's famous feminist poem 'Letter from a Far Country' which charts the day of a mother during which her children are at school.

In this poem, the women's children seem rather more present – waving from school and embodied in the hills. The women's bodies too bear the physical scars of their domestic labour, being left 'breathless' and 'scarred' by the tasks they undertake. The moments of reflection and nostalgia which occasionally creep into the speaker's narrative as the women take a moment to look down at the town and reflect on the landscape in line 9, before '**catching echoes**' of their childhood in line 15, are quickly pushed aside so that daily work can continue. There is a sense of purpose about the women's toil, but their frustration is all too clear in the speaker's description of the women as '**prisoners**' and '**jail-birds**'. For these Welsh Mams, to go on is to be heroic.

The women are treated as a collective, even in their rare moments of leisure, suggesting the way in which they have grown together over generations in the environment in which they live. The steep terraced streets and shared experiences of the women have bound them together to the extent that their daily lives and routines have fallen into sync. The only variation from this pattern appears to come in the list of alternative lives that the women might have had, with the diverse list of more conventional 'heroines' – '**travellers, engineers, courtesans and stars of fiction, films**' – finally revealing something more of the women's own identities or the media and literature they consume. In these dreams of what they might have been, the women dream not of continued collectiveness, but of individual success and their own sense of identity, away from the way in which their lives are defined by their household and family roles and responsibilities.

The contrast between the struggle to climb the steep hill, weighed down with shopping and children, in the first stanza and the image of the women rising as heroines in the final stanza is also worth noting. While the ascent they have to undertake to carry their shopping back to their homes every day is hard work, the image of the heroine rising from the household dust is both triumphant and graceful. The women's strength of mind reveals their ability to envisage themselves as heroines, soaring up from their labour and elevating them to a position where their efforts can be recognised and celebrated. This final image provides a glimmer of optimism in the poem and cements the image of the women as being tenacious and committed in their roles, however frustrating they may find their daily grind.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What role do the children play in this poem?

Why do you think the speaker describes the women as 'wild' when they take their break in the final stanza of the poem?

What can you tell about the women's lives from the way the speaker reveals that lunch consists of 'more bread and butter' (line 16)?

What other ways is socio-economic class represented?

Do you think the women are the heroines of the title?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Windsor tends to avoid overt media work and media resources relating to her writing are quite sparse. The image above is of Windsor delivering a poetry reading in 2015:

https://www.thewi.org.uk/__data/assets/image/0018/125352/2015-04-08-Penny-Anne-Windsor-Poet.jpg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An interview with Windsor, discussing her poetry and the inspiration for her writing, recorded in 1982: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUUpqfxzHVw>

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