

Catherine Fisher

'Those Who Make Paths'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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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
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Catherine Fisher's website:
<https://www.catherine-fisher.com/>



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