

Gillian Clarke

'Harvest at Mynachlog'

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.)

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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