

Catrin by Gillian Clarke

What is the poem about?

The poet is addressing her daughter. She is remembering giving birth, the atmosphere and environment of the delivery room. She describes the "first fierce confrontation" of labour and the process coming apart from her daughter. This then brings us into the present day, the conflicts of growing up and letting go - the example used in the poem is Catrin wanting to "skate/In the dark, for one more hour".

The parent

The parent is a mother, still feeling the tug of the umbilical cord ("that old rope") years after the actual event of giving birth. She is describing the depth of the emotional bond created by birth which still exists years later. She sees love and conflict as inextricably linked in the parent/child bond.

The child

Catrin is admired by her mother for her "straight, strong, long/Brown hair" and her "rosy/Defiant glare" even while they are in conflict with one another. The natural pride of the mother glows through the moment and wells up from the depth of emotion created by her daughter which she calls "the heart's pool".

The tone of the poem

The poem is personal, detailed, tender and loving. The poet is describing an important incident involving Catrin which, of course, Catrin would not be able to remember. The language is fairly formal but clever - Gillian Clarke describes her cries while in labour as "I wrote/All over the walls with my/Words" - this image of verbal graffiti easily conveys the fact that her language might not have been particularly nice - as, of course, is much graffiti. She makes the poem intimate by using "I" and "you" which brings the reader directly into a family situation, an on-looker in other people's tightly involved lives.

The shape of the poem

A long, thin poem on the page - rhythmically constructed but with no straightforward pattern of rhyme. It can seem quite jerky - perhaps echoing the agitated mother in confrontation with her daughter? It is divided into two stanzas - the first describing the past and the second linking this in with the present time when the two are still in conflict with each other.

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

alliteration - used to link words together for emphasis and to make them memorable - "the red rope of love", "I wrote all over the walls with my words"

alliteration - used for sound - the force of the "f" sound in "our first fierce confrontation"

assonance - long vowel sounds used to slightly slow down the poem when, as they argue, the poet is admiring her daughter's looks - "straight, strong, long, brown hair" (linking with the internal rhyme of "glare" to create this capsule snapshot of Catrin).

metaphor - "the red rope of love" which becomes "that old rope" - describing the umbilical cord as a rope which is both associated with tying together, joining and bonding and also in pulling and heaving apart (as in the use by sailors or tug o'war. Using the one word rope allows the poet the double meaning within the word.

enjambement - this is when the poet breaks a line with an almost artificial sense in order to place a specific word at the beginning of the next line to give it focus, importance and emphasis.

"our first/Fierce confrontation" "your rosy/Defiant glare"

What now?

- You have to make up your own mind about this poem.
- How do you see the relationship being described here?
- What do you like about the poem and why?
- Think about descriptions and uses of language.
- Which poems would you compare it with? (Look at *Nettles* and *Upon My Son Samuel...*)

These teaching notes for the NEAB Literature Poetry Anthology 'That Old Rope' were found free at www.englishresources.co.uk

A Parental Ode to My Son, Aged Three Years and Five Months by Thomas Hood

What is the poem about?

The poet is trying to write a poem extolling the beauties and virtues of his beloved young son. However, the little scamp keeps distracting him by getting up to all the usual tricks of his age group and so the poet has to ask the mother to take him away.

The parent

The parent is a father, loving, tender and besotted with the child. When he is trying to be a poet he uses lots of really flowery language and constructions to describe his love for the child - this compares really delightfully with the practical and realistic exclamations with which the poem is punctuated as the child interrupts/distracts his father.

The child

The child is a young son, aged as we know from the title, exactly three years and five months. His name is John and he appears timeless - a twentieth century toddler gets up to exactly the same antics as did this young scamp a hundred and fifty years ago. We do not really see the child at all through the flowery, poetical side of the poem (just his father's infinite and beautifully expressed love for him) but we get a vivid, moving picture of him in his father's asides. A much-loved child.

The tone of the poem

The poem is detailed, tender and loving. It is a super juxtaposition (putting next to each other) of the deliberate flowery style of poetry which is so representative of Victorian verse and a very human voice describing a very real child that is as relevant today as it was all those years ago. The poem is very humorous - the humour is created by the father's fussing and tone of voice, the fact he can't get on when the toddler is present and also some of the comparisons.

The shape of the poem

The poem is in six stanzas and has a very strong sense of rhythm and a rigid rhyme scheme within each stanza though each stanza is not the same. (Probably because the writer was being so distracted by his son!)

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

metaphor - the poet uses a string of metaphors to describe his son: many of them are not human: "elf", "sprite" "Puck" "imp" which refer both to his size but also the detachment from human cares with which the boy lives his little life. This is picked up on again later in the poem when the poet addresses his son: "Thou enviable being!/No storms, no clouds, in thy blue sky foreseeing" when he extols the life of the carefree child. He is also referred to as a "humming-bee" a "dove" and "an opening rose" - none of which are human but which convey the senses of noise and innocence intended

simile - the child is compared to "a singing bird" a "lamb" "thistledown" "the morn" and "its star" - these stress his innocence, freshness and the new ways of looking at life which a child brings into a family.

alliteration - used to link words together for emphasis and to make them memorable - "domestic dove", "human humming-bee"

It is the use of loving language, the endearments carefully written to display love for this child - "darling of thy sire", "idol of thy parents", "father's pride and hope" which show us how much this child is loved by his parents - and yet it is still the practical asides which really speak across the years to the heart.

What now?

- You have to make up your own mind about this poem.
- How do you see the relationship being described here?
- What do you like about the poem and why?
- Think about descriptions and uses of language.
- Which poems would you compare it with? (Look at *Lullaby* and *Nettles*)

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Nettles by Vernon Scannell

What is the poem about?

The first line really sums up what this poem is about - "my son aged three fell in the nettle bed" - it is the boy's accident and his father's reaction to it that forms the focus of the poem. The boy falls in the nettles, is hurt and upset and goes to his parents for comfort. His parents soothed him and then his father went and slashed the nettles down and burned them. Two weeks later they had grown again. The poet reflects on his son's pain both on this occasion and looking into the future.

The parent

The poet is the father who loves and wants to protect his child. He cannot bear to see the wounds caused by the nettles "white blisters beaded on his tender skin" and so, after his son begins to feel better, he sharpens his billhook (garden tool) and "slashed with fury" at the nettles that caused his son the hurt. When the nettles grow again, he realises that his son will be hurt in the future and on these occasions too he will not be able to do anything else other than feel anger.

The child

The child is a little boy aged three. His youth is described through his "sobs and tears" - the descriptions of the nettles also give a sense of his small size compared with the soldier metaphor. He is a brave child who, once soothed gives his parents "a watery grin".

The tone of the poem

The father's voice is paternal concern interleaved with a poet's view of the nettles; a sense that his mind working on two levels - the father and the poet and that he is enjoying finding a metaphor to use to describe the nettles. He relishes the defeat of the nettles - and also their resurrection. He returns to focus on his son and his concerns for him in the last line. The poem begins with the voice of the father describing what happened in a matter-of-fact way in the first line. The poet then arrives on the scene, wondering about the use of the word bed and musing upon how unsuitable a word it is and then introducing his own metaphor with a hint of relish?

The shape of the poem

A poem regular in rhyme/rhythm, describing an incident in the lives of the parent and child in one stanza.

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

This poem is similar to *A Parental Ode* in its mixture of two registers - the poet and the parent. The parent describes his son's misfortune with concern, tenderness and sympathy - describing the boy's suffering in detail using alliteration - "white blisters beaded on his tender skin".

The poet begins to use the **metaphor** of war and really develops his theme. The nettles are "green spears" which focuses our thoughts on their sharp, serrated wound-inflicting edges. Then they are described as a "regiment of spite" which gives them a sense of human motives - this effect is known as **personification**. On line 11 this **image** of soldiers is extended to describe the nettles as standing to attention, a "fierce parade" and the sense of **personification** is still being used when the poet "lit/A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead". This gives a sense of honour to the proceedings, as if his anger had worn off and he accepted that the nettles weren't exactly to blame for what had happened and that he had perhaps been a little out of control when he "slashed with fury" and executed them. The last glimpse of the military **metaphor** is in the expression "tall recruits" to describe the new growth which had taken just two weeks.

What now?

- You have to make up your own mind about this poem.
- How do you see the relationship being described here?
- What do you like about the poem and why?
- Think about descriptions and uses of language.
- Which poems would you compare it with? (Look at *A Parental Ode*, *Catrin* and *Lullaby*)

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Lullaby by Rosemary Norman

What is the poem about?

A child addresses his/her mother, trying to reassure her and persuade her not to worry. Each stanza refers to a different age in childhood - the newborn, the baby, the toddler, the first day at school, primary school age, adolescence, leaving school and then leaving home.

The parent

The mother who is the focus of this poem is the caring, worrying, over-anxious protective mother whose concerns and worries for her child are practically universal. You can hear the mother's voice in some of the phrases used by the child in which there is a sense of mimicry: "I won't/give you a lot of lip/not like some" and "a really worthwhile job".

The child

The universal child (it is made clear that this child represents both sons and daughters in lines 25 - 26) is being gently mocking as she/he tries to reassure his/her mother that she has been well brought up and is prepared to face the world alone without a mother fussing around. The child is also trying to reassure his/her mother that they are aware of danger and know how to keep themselves safe.

The tone of the poem

The poem has the sound of a lullaby - the "Go to sleep" beginning, the repetition, the lulling pattern of "Sleep, Mum, sleep" - but, of course, it is a lullaby on its head as mothers sing lullabies to their babies. Which is, of course, where the poem begins, at the cot side of the newborn.

The shape of the poem

A long, thin poem, divided into stanzas, each one dealing with a different part of childhood. It is also circular in its ideas - the new grown-up leaving home promising, "if/I need any milk, I'll yell" which revisits babyhood with its yelling for milk as well as linking with the milk for tea and coffee in independence. This could be seen as **ironic** - for the mother can't sleep when the baby's yelling for milk!

The poet uses list form to great effect, particularly in stanzas 3, 5 and 7, as the worries increase in number and magnitude as the child grows.

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

The poet uses **friendly, colloquial** language - "Mum" "won't" "drop in" to create a sense of snug intimacy

You can really hear the **timing** and **expression** of a young person when the poem is read aloud - the emphasis in "Go to sleep, Mum" and "Mum, I won't swallow/the pills the doctor gave you". There's a sense of exasperation about "...or even consider/Sweets from strangers".

The poet reflects the **alliteration** of everyday speech to create aural emphasis: "climb out of my cot" "sweets from strangers", "a lot of lip" and

The poet breaks with convention and uses the oblique (forward slash) to separate yet join words "myself/my girlfriend" - this shows that the poem is not seen as spoken by any specific boy or girl. Another example is "I won't forget/to drop in/phone/write" - this **reflects** the way people speak which isn't in formal sentences!

A last thought: the poet is a woman. Is the poet a mother? Is the poet a mother reassuring herself by telling herself what she would like to hear? A mother's lullaby to herself?

What now?

- You have to make up your own mind about this poem.
- How do you see the relationship being described here?
- What do you like about the poem and why? (Think about descriptions and uses of language.)
- Which poems would you compare it with?

Upon My Son Samuel his Going for England Novem.6, 1657

What is the poem about?

This poem is in the form of a prayer - it is addressed to God not to the child himself. Ann Bradstreet's beloved son Samuel is about to emigrate from America to England and she is entrusting him into God's care and asking that she can see him again - if not while she is alive then in Heaven after she is dead.

The parent

She is clearly distraught at losing her son but brave in her support for him and her trust in God. Her simple yet deep faith shines through in her acceptance of God as "mighty" and his ability to control, preserve and protect. She is giving her child back to God whom she also sees as her friend. She doesn't question Samuel's decision to emigrate and has accepted this decision even though it is causing her great pain: "Here I resign into thy hand" She is assigning the love of a mother to God in addition to his more usual role as a Father.

The child

We do not hear Samuel's voice or response to his mother's prayer. We do know that she waited a long time to have him: "The child I stay'd for many years" and that he was the result of "prayers, of vows, of tears". She feels that he was definitely a gift from God and that he is blessed as a result "For sure thy grace on him is shown".

The tone of the poem

The poem is clearly a prayer: it begins "Thou mighty God" and includes lines such as "Thy will be done" and also reminds the reader of a hymn through its direct praise of God and its acknowledgement of his powers. It also has a straightforward rhyme pattern of couplets - the last two lines are particularly reminiscent of a hymn.

The shape of the poem

A very regular poem - most lines have eight beats and there are ten rhyming couplets which bravely carry Ann's words through to end. The ten beats in line 16 give us a hint of Ann's anguish and how hard she is trying to keep calm and her faith - the emphasis squeezed out of the extra word "even" showing us her voice in its anguish.

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

We know that this is the **language of religion** in its use of older language "thou mighty God" and "thy grace". The use of **liturgical** words also adds emphasis to this: "vows" "mortal" "dust" "praise" "bless"

This also shows the reader that Ann Bradstreet is writing a long time ago as she uses **older meanings** and spellings: "stay'd" to mean wait and "wrack" instead of wreck.

The **internal rhyme** in line 7 adds to the sense of receiving and giving back: "He's mine, but more, O lord, thine own"

She has made up or chosen to use a very **unusual word**, a word with huge depths of meaning: "happely'd" to describe the blissful union with God (and reunion with her son) that she foresees after her death and for Samuel after his death. This simple phrase carries all her unfaltering faith that she will see her son again.

What now?

- You have to make up your own mind about this poem.
- How do you see the relationship being described here?
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For Heidi with Blue Hair

What is the poem about?

The poem is about an incident of rebellion against school rules, when the poet's god-daughter, Heidi, dyed her hair blue and was sent home from school. Her father intervened and the school gave in and allowed her back. This led to other pupils following in Heidi's footsteps.

The parent

Heidi lives with her "freedom-loving father" who supports his daughter and is touchingly descriptive of how much he appreciates his child: "She's not a punk in her behaviour". Heidi's mother is dead - it is the sympathy created by this fact in her circumstances which the poet feels helps the school decide to allow her back.

The child

We know that Heidi is well-behaved in school and that she is upset by the furore surrounding her actions ("You wiped your eyes") although this could show that she is touched to tears but her father's supportive words about her. Heidi's courage grows with her father's support - we hear her voice once in the poem, bravely sticking up for herself, with all the relevance of a teenager: "And anyway, Dad, it cost twenty-five dollars...."

The tone of the poem

This is the only poem in *That Old Rope* not written from the point of view of the parent or the child. It is the fond, supportive onlooking god-mother who is writing a poem for Heidi, to capture this teenage rebellion, to remind her when she's older of what she did, once, at school. The poem is a snapshot of people (Heidi and her father) in a situation which show them both in a very good, loving, supportive light.

The poet is totally supportive of Heidi's blow for freedom of hair colour and even joins in the argument, referring to eyes which are "also not in a school colour". The poet also pokes sly fun at the school and the teachers to show them as petty and trivial - mocking the headmistress's tone and attempt at humour "apart from anything else, not done in the school colours". The poet shows the school as authoritarian and holding things "against" its pupils and also doesn't flatter the teachers who "twittered". There are darker hints that the school is racist, that Heidi's black friend would not have been treated leniently had not Heidi led the way in winning the "battle".

The shape of the poem

The poem is written in six stanzas of five lines. It doesn't rhyme, but each stanza represents a stage in the saga, describing actions and words.

Some examples of the poet's specific use of language

The poet describes Heidi's hair in **detail**, unhappy with just plain "blue" she develops this for the reader with a sense of admiration and appreciation: ".....ultramarine/for the clipped sides, with a crest/of jet-black spikes on top" More fine expression of detail is used in the expression "shimmered behind the arguments" which so exactly sums up the sympathy of bureaucracy. The **precise choice of word** completes the meaning here.

She uses words with many **associations** - the word "crest" describing the hair is also a word used to describe a school badge. The friend's "witty solidarity" could be interpreted as with Heidi or with the school - or with both, another pupil who is well behaved but wishes to have her hair coloured as she pleases. She mocks the tone of the headmistress "...not specifically forbidden....apart from anything else..." and unflatteringly uses **alliteration** to give us a picture of weakness and contempt: "the teachers twittered and gave in"

The poet uses different **voices** to bring the poem to life, carefully capturing the tone and words of the headmistress, the teachers, Heidi's father, Heidi and, of course, her own voice bringing the entire incident together to record as a poem.