

As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: [5]
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

Í say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps gráce: that keeps all his goings graces; [10]
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
 Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Annotations

[1] **As:** just as, similar to how

[1] **kingfishers:** small, brightly coloured birds, known for their expertise at catching fish

[1] **catch fire:** to receive or be struck by; to snatch or snare; to go up in flames

[1] **draw:** to attract; to create a picture of; to pull out of oneself

[2] **as tumbles over rim...stones:** stones that have been thrown over the rim or edge of a well

[2] **roundy wells:** a well with a circular rim

[3] **tucked:** plucked

[3] **each hung bell's:** Bells are typically 'hung' or suspended in the tower of a church or other building.

[3] **Bow:** the part of a bell that's struck is known as a 'bow' or 'soundbow', the part that does the striking is known as the clapper.

[4] **finds tongue:** finds the mean to express itself

[4] **fling out broad:** describes how the sound is transmitted far and wide

[6] **Deals out:** expresses

[6] **that being indoors:** that which exists inside of something

[7] **Selves:** Hopkins creates a new verb, to 'self', which means to express one's truest and deepest nature.

[7] **goes itself:** does its own thing, expresses itself

[8] **for that I came:** That's why I exist; that's why I entered the world

[9] **justices:** lives a just life; acts in a just manner

[10] **Keeps gráce:** lives in accordance with God's law and stays free of sin

[10] **keeps all his goings graces:** ensures that all his actions ('goings') are good and righteous deeds ('graces')

Tease It Out

- 1. Class Discussion:** What does Hopkins mean when he says the kingfishers 'catch fire'? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - The kingfishers are being set alight, and will soon go up in flames.
 - The fire is a metonym or alternative name for the glinting fish the birds pluck from the stream.
 - The phrase describes how the kingfishers' feathers catch and reflect the sunlight.
- 2. Class Discussion:** Hopkins is well known for using words that have several different meanings. Consider the different meanings of the word 'draw' as used in line 1. Which is most relevant in the opinion of the class?
- 3.** What is an adjective? The entire phrase 'tumbled over rim in roundy wells' could be thought of as a single adjective. What object or set of objects does it describe?
- 4.** What is happening to the stones in lines 2 to 3? What kind of sound do they produce when this happens?
- 5.** The poet describes the ringing of church bells:
 - What is the bell's 'bow'? When might this bow be 'swung'? Who might swing it?
 - **Class Discussion:** Each bell's ringing sound is described as its 'name'. What does this suggest about the quality of the sound that each bell produces?
 - How does Hopkins indicate that the sound of a bell expressing its 'name' can cover a great distance?
- 6. Class Discussion:** According to line 6, something dwells 'indoors' or within each aspect of God's creation. What does Hopkins have in mind here?
- 7.** Every single creature, according to Hopkins, 'Deals out' or expresses something. Describe in your own words what it expresses.
- 8.** Line 8 suggests that every aspect of God's creation has a purpose. What do you understand this purpose to be?
- 9. Class Discussion:** Everything the 'just man' does, according to Hopkins, must be a kind of 'grace'. Suggest two or three types of behaviour that might be considered such a 'grace'.
- 10.** Hopkins refers to the concept of the Holy Trinity, whereby God is considered to have three aspects: the Father, the Son (Christ), and the Holy Spirit:
 - The just man, by acting in a Christ-like manner, actually makes Christ present in the world. Which lines and phrases indicate this?
 - Christ, according to Hopkins, is actually visible in the physical appearance of 'just' men. What physical features does Hopkins mention in this regard?
 - **True or false:** Christ can be present in many places at once.
 - How does God the father react to the sight of the Son being made present in such a fashion?
 - The third aspect of the trinity, the Holy Spirit, isn't actually mentioned in this poem. Can you find a poem by Hopkins where it does receive a mention?

Exam Prep

- 1. Personal Response:** 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same'. The different aspects of God's creation are extremely diverse. But they are all similar in one important sense. How do we make sense of this paradox or apparent contradiction?
- 2. Class Discussion:** 'Each creature and object reveals God's glory by simply being itself. But human beings must act in a particular way if they want to reveal such glory'. Discuss this statement as a class.
- 3. Theme Talk:** This poem, like 'The Windhover' and 'I wake and feel the fell of dark', makes explicit reference to Christ. Write three paragraphs describing the differences in these poems' respective portrayals of Christ.
- 4. Exam Prep:** This poem is often compared to 'God's Grandeur'. Write one paragraph describing a few similarities between the two poems, and another commenting on the differences.

Language Lab

- 1.** In line 7, Hopkins uses the noun 'self' as a verb. What might it mean to 'self'? What kind of behaviour does this freshly coined verb suggest? Can you identify another example of a noun being used as a verb in line 9?
- 2. Class Discussion:** Hopkins often uses a profusion of assonance and alliteration in an attempt to capture an object's 'inscape' or unique essence. Discuss how this technique is applied to the kingfisher, the stone and the bell.
- 3.** The phrase 'keeps all his goings graces' is an example of Hopkins's tendency towards compression – the omission of what he regards as inessential words. Rewrite the phrase in your own words.
- 4.** Watch Video 15, which features a reading and discussion of the poem. Did you find the choice of images that accompanied the reading appropriate? What did you enjoy most about the presenter's interpretation of the poem?

As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame



LINE BY LINE

When Hopkins was in training to become a Jesuit priest at Stonyhust College in Lancashire, England, he was struggling with a personal moral dilemma. He had a great love for the beauty of the natural world but he felt, as Robert Bernard Martin has put it, 'that to put too much love into the perception of one flower ... was to neglect man's primary duty of love of God'.

But his reading of the medieval theologian, Joannes Duns Scotus, helped Hopkins to resolve this dilemma. Duns Scotus postulated that the material world was a symbol of God, not divorced from him, a view to which Hopkins wholeheartedly subscribed emotionally. 'As kingfishers catch fire' is, as Martin puts it, an 'explicit statement of the liberation [Hopkins] felt to love the phenomenal world because of its ultimate identity as part of God'.

Lines 1 to 8

Hopkins believes that God has given everything in the world a unique spiritual essence. This essence 'dwells' or lives 'indoors', meaning that it exists deep within each creature and object: 'that being indoors each one dwells'.

Every single creature and object was created with a single purpose in mind: 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same'. They all 'came' into the world to express the unique spiritual essence God has placed within them.

Each creature and object expresses its essence through its actions and appearances:

- The birds known as kingfishers, for instance, express their essence through their colourful appearance. Hopkins

describes how their feathers seem to blaze or 'catch fire' when struck by sunlight.

- Dragonflies, too, use colour to express their essences. They too seem to flare up when the sunlight hits them. Their multi-coloured wings seem to 'draw' or attract 'flame'.
- Even humble, ordinary stones have a unique essence that dwells within them. They, too, express their essence through their actions and appearances. A stone, for instance, might express its essence through the sound it makes when thrown or 'tumbled' into the round mouth of a well: 'As tumbled over rim in roundy wells/ Stones ring'. Hopkins seems to have in mind a stone that bounces against the sides of the well shaft as it falls, producing a chiming or ringing sound with each collision.
- Even a man-made object like a guitar string has a unique spiritual essence. It 'tells' or expresses this essences through the note it makes when plucked by a musician: 'each tucked string tells' ('Tucked' is an old word for plucked).
- A bell, Hopkins suggests, expresses its essence when it rings. Hopkins then refers to bells that might be 'hung' in the tower of a church or cathedral. The bell's 'bow' or curved outer shell is 'swung', causing it to strike the clapper and produce a ringing sound that can be heard in a 'broad' area around the bell tower.

The behaviour of each object and creature, therefore, expresses its truest and deepest nature: 'What I do is me'. Each thing's actions and appearances are likened to a shout or cry, one through which it joyfully declares its unique spiritual essence: 'Crying What I do is me: for that I came'.

Lines 9 to 14

In the poem's final six lines, Hopkins focuses on 'the just man':

- The 'just man' is someone who 'justices' on a regular basis, who makes a constant, ongoing effort to be a good person: 'I say more: the just man justices' (here we see Hopkins playing with language as he transforms the noun 'justice' into the verb 'to justice'. You 'justice', of course, when you behave in a just and righteous manner).
- The just man is someone who 'keeps grace', who lives in accordance with God's law and stays free of sin.
- The just man ensures that all his 'goings', all his doings and activities, are 'graces'. Everything he does, therefore, is a 'grace', an act of decency and good will.
- The just man is aware that he is being observed by God the father. He endeavours, therefore, to act in a Christ-like manner, to exhibit the values of compassion, forgiveness and humility. He 'Acts in God's eye [like] Christ'.

But Hopkins pushes this last point a little bit further, declaring that when we act in a Christ-like manner, Christ is actually present within us.

- When we act in a Christ-like manner, Christ inhabits our 'limbs', our eyes and the 'features of [our] faces'.
- When we look into the eyes of the just man, we look into the eyes of Christ himself. Christ, according to Hopkins, is present 'in eyes [that are] not his [own]'. He is present in the eyes of everyone at any given moment who is behaving in a Christ-like fashion.
- Christ, then, can be present in 'ten thousand places' at once, existing everywhere someone is behaving in a Christ-like manner.
- The presence of Christ within us, Hopkins declares, is a 'lovely' one. Here Hopkins is using the term 'lovely' to mean not only pleasant and attractive, but also admirable and worthy of respect.

Hopkins imagines God the father looking from heaven. God the father, Hopkins imagines, sees that His son, Christ, is present all over the world. Christ is visible 'to the father' not only 'in [the] eyes' but also 'through the features' of every just man and woman. And to God the father, that is a 'lovely' sight.

THEMES

THE BEAUTY OF NATURE

In many of his poems, Hopkins focuses on the uniqueness, or 'inshape', of each creature and object, devising complex and original poetic lines to capture that uniqueness. 'Kingfishers' is arguably Hopkins' greatest celebration of this individuality. Every aspect of nature, the poem suggests, acts in a way that expresses or spells out the unique essence that exists within it.

The poem, then, celebrates the immense beauty and variety of the natural world. It conjures up the fiery colourful beauty of kingfishers and dragonflies, as well as humbler aspects of the natural world like the noise of stones tumbling into a well.

Hopkins also celebrates the beautiful sounds made by certain manufactured objects: strings on musical instruments and church bells. While these man-made objects are not technically part of the natural world, they blend with it in the poem's celebration of life's rich tapestry.

SIN AND REDEMPTION

This poem emphasises the distinction between humanity and the rest of God's creations. Non-human creatures and objects come into this world with a simple purpose: to express through their actions and appearances the essence God has placed within them. Human beings, however, have a higher purpose: to make Christ present in the world by behaving as a 'just man'. Non-human creatures fulfil God's plan for them automatically,

simply by existing. They have no choice in the matter. Human beings, on the other hand, have been given free will. We can choose to go against the purpose God has in mind for us by living in a sinful rather than a just manner.

The poem, therefore, calls on us to turn away from sin. We must live the lifestyle of the 'just man' as outlined above. We must behave in a Christ-like fashion and make Christ present in our eyes, limbs and features. By doing so we will fulfil God's plan for us. We will seem 'lovely' in the eyes of God as he recognises Christ's presence within us.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN NATURE

'Kingfishers' also refers to another of Hopkins' central themes: the presence of God in nature.

- God, the poem emphasises, has placed a unique essence inside each creature and object.
- Each creature and object expresses this essence through its actions and appearances.
- Each creature and object, therefore, makes God present in the world.

God's presence, therefore, pulses and vibrates through the entire natural world, like unstoppable waves of electricity.

Pheasant

You said you would kill it this morning.
Do not kill it. It startles me still,
The jut of that odd, dark head, pacing

Through the uncut grass on the elm's hill.
It is something to own a pheasant, [5]
Or just to be visited at all.

I am not mystical: it isn't
As if I thought it had a spirit.
It is simply in its element.

That gives it a kingliness, a right. [10]
The print of its big foot last winter,
The tail-track, on the snow in our court –

The wonder of it, in that pallor,
Through crosshatch of sparrow and starling.
Is it its rareness, then? It is rare. [15]

But a dozen would be worth having,
A hundred, on that hill – green and red,
Crossing and recrossing: a fine thing!

It is such a good shape, so vivid.
It's a little cornucopia. [20]
It unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud,

Settles in the elm, and is easy.
It was sunning in the narcissi.
I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be.

Annotations

[3] *jut*: a point that protrudes or sticks out

[4] *elm's hill*: This poem was written at Court Green, in Devon, where Plath lived with her husband Ted Hughes between August 1961 and December 1962. There was a large elm tree on a hill at the back of the property.

[7] *mystical*: inclined towards spiritual or supernatural beliefs

[9] *in its element*: where it belongs

[11] *print*: snow print

[12] *tail-track*: track made by the pheasant's tail as it dragged across the snow

[12] *court*: courtyard of the property

[13] *pallor*: whiteness

[14] *crosshatch of sparrow and starling*: criss-cross pattern produced by these birds' feet in the snow

[20] *cornucopia*: an extravagant abundance, a symbol of plenty that consisted of a goat's horn overflowing with produce

[21] *unclaps*: describes how the pheasant collapses or folds its tail feathers

[23] *narcissi*: plural of narcissus, a species of white and yellow flower

Tease It Out

1. The poet and her husband have owned the pheasant for at least a number of months. Which lines in the poem tell us this?
2. What does the poet's husband intend to do with the pheasant 'this morning'? Can you suggest why he might want to take this action?
3. It seems that the pheasant spends much of its time on a hill behind the poet's house. Read the poem carefully. Can you mention three different features of this hillside?
4. What do we learn about the following features of the pheasant's appearance? In each case refer to a line or phrase from the poem:
 - The motion of the pheasant's head when it walks
 - The size of its feet
 - The colour of its tail feathers when they're up
 - The colour of its tail feathers when they're down
5. **True or false:** Say whether each of the following statements is true or false:
 - The poet is a spiritual person and feels that the pheasant has a soul or consciousness like that of a human being.
 - The poet feels it would be pointless to have more than one pheasant.
 - The poet has got used to the pheasant and no longer really notices it.
6. What is a cornucopia? Which of the pheasant's features does this unusual term refer to?
7. What do we mean when we say that something or someone is 'in its element'? Where, according to the poet, is the pheasant in its element?
8. **Group Discussion:** 'The pheasant is so confident and regal that it can seem as if this bird, rather than the poet herself, is the real owner of the house and its gardens'. Working in small groups, try to find at least four different phrases that support this statement.
9. 'Do not kill it'. Why does the poet want the pheasant to live? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - She is impressed by its 'kingliness', by its regal demeanour.
 - She gets a sense of pride or accomplishment from owning this bird.
 - She thinks it has a soul.
 - She's aware that this is a rare species.
 - She is overwhelmed by its physical beauty.
 - She doesn't really enjoy eating roast pheasant.
10. **Class Discussion:** 'Let be, let be'. To whom is the poet talking here? Can you suggest why this phrase is repeated?

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** 'It is something... just to be visited at all'. Would you agree that these lines suggest the poet's sense of loneliness and inadequacy? Give a reason for your answer. Are there any other phrases that suggest such negative feelings?
2. **Class Discussion:** Are there any hints about the nature and status of the poet's relationship? Do she and her husband seem at odds, or are they living in perfect harmony?
3. **Theme Talk:** 'The poet finds the pheasant to be not only a beautiful but also an alien and somehow overbearing presence'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
4. **Exam Prep:** 'Plath's provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry'. Write a short essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Pheasant', 'Elm' and 'Finisterre'.

Language Lab

1. **Vivid Imagery:** Plath's gift for exquisite imagery is evident in lines 11 to 15?
 - In what part of the property did the pheasant's tracks appear?
 - What was the weather like?
 - Were they the only tracks visible that morning?
 - Describe in your own words the poet's reaction to this sight.

Pheasant



LINE BY LINE

Killing

The poet's husband, it seems, has been planning to kill the pheasant, no doubt convinced that it would make a fine dinner. He has had a particular day in mind for butchering the bird. And now that day has come: 'You said you would kill it this morning'. The poet herself, however, is having second thoughts about this plan and urges her husband to let the bird live: 'Do not kill it'.

Appearance

The bird, on this particular morning, is 'pacing' around a hill behind the house where an elm tree grows (this is the same tree that features in the poem 'Elm'). The poet watches it striding through the hill's 'uncut grass'.

The pheasant, according to the poet, has a most striking appearance. She describes how the pheasant's head 'juts' or jerks forward with every step it takes. Its head is a deep or 'dark' green in colour, which contrasts, no doubt, with its multi-coloured feathers. The term 'odd', meanwhile, captures how the features of certain species of fowl can exhibit an alien, almost reptilian, quality.

Living with an extraordinary sight all too often means taking it for granted. After a while, we don't even notice its splendour anymore. But this isn't true in the case of the poet and the pheasant. She is 'still' startled by the sight of this extraordinary

bird every time she sees it wandering around her garden: 'It startles me still'. It 'is something', the poet declares, 'to own a pheasant'. This, she suggests, is not a situation to be disregarded or taken lightly. In fact, it is a privilege to have such a creature present in one's home.

The phrase it 'is something ... to be visited at all', meanwhile, hints at Plath's psychological state. It suggests the loneliness and isolation she might have experienced while living in the countryside, far from friends and acquaintances in London. It also hints, perhaps, at a sense of low self-esteem. Maybe the poet feels so down and lacking in confidence that she is surprised that anyone or anything would ever want to come and visit her.

Reasons

The poet engages in some self-analysis, trying to work out why she is so reluctant to see the bird slaughtered. The poet is adamant that she is not a 'mystical' person. She does not want to spare the pheasant because she believes it has a soul or 'spirit' of some kind.

Perhaps her reluctance stems from the fact that pheasants are 'rare' in the United Kingdom: 'Is it its rareness, then?' The poet, however, rejects this explanation. She imagines having a 'dozen' or even a 'hundred' pheasants. She feels that even in such circumstances she would be reluctant to lose a single bird: 'But a dozen would be worth having, / A hundred, on that hill'. The bird, she concludes, simply has 'a right' to be here. This

NATURE

This poem, like many by Plath, highlights the remarkable beauty of the natural world. The poet takes great pleasure in observing this creature, with its ‘good shape’ and ‘vivid’ colours, as it wanders around Court Green. She relishes everything from its ‘odd, dark head’ to its ‘unclapped’ wings, which, using a memorable simile, she compares to a brown ‘leaf’. The poet enjoys watching it ‘sunning’ itself in summer and finds wonder in the tracks it leaves during the wintertime. The poem, therefore, concludes with a heartfelt plea that the pheasant be left alone rather than butchered and eaten: ‘Let be, let be’.

This poem also highlights the complex nature of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. We human beings partition the countryside into properties and plots of land. We turn fields into gardens. We even kill the countryside’s wildlife for food and sport.

But the countryside, the poem suggests, will never truly belong to us – it will always belong, instead, to the creatures of the natural world. The pheasant, therefore, representing all of nature, has a ‘right’ to be there and presides over the property as if it were its king or rightful owner. The poet herself, on the other hand, feels that she is trespassing as if she, as a human being, has no real right to own or occupy this land. She moves ‘stupidly’, suggesting that she, unlike the pheasant, is not in her natural ‘element’ here.

The poem seems to hint at a future in which humanity is no longer around, where we, through our short-sightedness and stupidity, have eliminated ourselves from the planet. We can imagine the grass, weeds and trees slowly reclaiming a property like Court Green. We can imagine the pheasant and other woodland creatures retaking their rightful place as the rulers of the countryside.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Vivid and Unsettling Imagery

‘Pheasant’ features several startling and memorable images:

- There is the image of the markings left by the various birds on the pristine coat of snow and the track produced by the pheasant’s tail running across the ‘crosshatch’ left by the feet of smaller birds, such as sparrows and starlings.
- Another startling image occurs when the poet imagines dozens or even hundreds of pheasants ‘Crossing and recrossing’ the hill in a festival of colour.
- Equally memorable is the image of the pheasant rising from the narcissus flowers to settle in the elm tree.

The nature imagery in ‘Pheasant’, it should be noted, is elegant and uplifting and lacks the disturbing, violent quality found in other poems by Plath, such as ‘Elm’ or ‘Finisterre’.

is ‘its element’, the setting in which it belongs. The poet in fact seems to feel that the pheasant has a greater right to be here than she and her husband do. She seems to suspect that the countryside belongs more to such creatures than it does to human beings like herself.

The pheasant, too, on some instinctive level, seems to realise that this is ‘its element’ and that it has a ‘right’ to be here. This causes it to exhibit a ‘kingliness’, a regal and commanding demeanour. It wanders around the garden, as if it were the true owner or ruler of the property. This sense of ownership is reinforced by the poet’s recollections of the previous winter. It’s as if the pheasant was marking its territory by dragging its tail through the snowfall. It stamped its ‘big foot’ on the fallen snow like a king stamping some royal declaration.

Plath’s description of the property’s courtyard as ‘our court’ further reinforces our impression of the bird’s regal nature. The pheasant, we sense, is very much the king, while the poet and her husband are merely its courtiers (here Plath is playing on Court Green, which was the name of property in question).

The poet recalls a particular morning from the previous winter when the ‘court’ or courtyard of the property was covered in snow. She recalls how the footprints of ‘sparrow and starling’ had created a ‘crosshatch’ pattern on the snow fall. The traces left by the pheasant, however, stood out among those left by the other birds. She recalls noticing the ‘print’ of the pheasant’s ‘big foot’. She also recalls the ‘track’ left by its tail as it dragged through the ‘pallor’ or paleness of the fallen snow. This, according to the poet, was a sight that filled her with ‘wonder’.

Back to beauty

The poet focuses once more on the bird’s extraordinary appearance. Her simple declaration that the bird has ‘such a good shape’ wonderfully captures the pleasure she derives from studying this creature. Some aspects of the natural world, such as the pheasant, have a shape, a combination of contours, symmetry and proportion, that is ‘good’ to look at. They are simply pleasing to the eye in a manner that defies rational analysis.

The phrase ‘so vivid’, meanwhile, refers to its multi-coloured feathers and features. The pheasant, we remind ourselves, has coppery gold plumage, a dark green head and long, reddish-brown and black tail.

The poet uses a metaphor from Greek mythology, comparing the pheasant to a ‘cornucopia’, which was a horn-shaped vessel that over-flowed with fruits, flowers and other delights. The description of the pheasant as a ‘little cornucopia’, therefore, captures the abundance and variety of the colours it displays. The poet watches the pheasant ‘sunning’ itself in a patch of narcissus flowers. Then it ‘unclaps’ or opens its wings. It flaps its wings repeatedly, producing a ‘loud’ whirring sound, and flies up into one of the elm tree’s branches. It settles there in what the poet describes a relaxed and ‘easy’ manner.

Street

He fell in love with the butcher's daughter
When he saw her passing by in her white trousers
Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt.
He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones.

One day he followed her [5]
Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles.
A door stood half-open
And the stairs were brushed and clean,
Her shoes paired on the bottom step,
Each tread marked with the red crescent [10]
Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top.

Annotations

[6] *shambles*: slaughterhouse

[11] *crescent*: a half-moon shape

Tease It Out

1. What colour clothing did the young woman wear?
2. What did she carry on her belt?
3. What substance did she leave behind her as she walked along the street?
4. What indicates that the young woman works in her father's business?
5. Which phrase indicates that the man saw the young woman on a regular basis?
6. What did he decide to do 'one day'?
7. **Class Discussion:** Was this a spontaneous decision or a pre-meditated one?
8. Suggest why the young woman might live and/or work near the shambles.
9. 'A door stood half-open'. Does this door lead to the woman's home or her place of work, or both?
10. What items does she leave at the door?
11. What mark does she leave on each step of the stairway?
12. Describe in your own words how these marks were created?
13. Suggest why these marks were 'faintest at the top'.

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** The poem ends with the man looking in the 'half-open door':
 - What do you imagine might have happened next?
 - Pick three emotions that he might have experienced while he stood there.
 - What is your opinion of the man's behaviour?
2. **Class Discussion:** 'Even familiar streets and familiar people contain mysteries, hidden lives we only occasionally glimpse'. Discuss this statement as a class in relation to 'Street' and other poems by Ní Chuilleanáin.
3. **Theme Talk:** 'Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry explores love in all its forms'. Do you think it is fair to refer to 'Street' as a love poem? What sort of love does it describe?
4. **Exam Prep:** 'Ní Chuilleanáin presents us with narratives or stories that are tantalisingly incomplete, giving glimpses into the lives of others and leaving us wondering what happens next'. Write an essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Street' and at least three other poems on your course.

Language Lab

1. What impression do you get of the butcher's daughter from the hints provided in the poem? Are we given any indications as to her lifestyle and personality?
2. How would you describe the atmosphere of this poem? Does the atmosphere change as the poem progresses? Give a reason for your answer.
3. This short poem contains a series of striking and memorable images? Identify two images that you found particularly vivid and interesting, and give a reason for your selection.



LINE BY LINE

I The poem focuses on a young man's response to seeing the local butcher's daughter as she passes along the street where he lives or works.

On this particular occasion, the girl is striding down the street in her butcher's attire. A bloodied knife hangs from her belt. The fact that the girl's knife is dripping with blood suggests that she has just come from her work in the 'shambles' or slaughterhouse, where she slaughters animals, dismembers their corpses and cuts them up into joints and pieces of meat. All of this, of course, is bloody business, and the girl's knife will be dripping with blood at the end.

Perhaps on this occasion the daughter is on an errand. Perhaps she is delivering some meat to a local customer. But she hasn't changed out of her blood-stained work attire. She hasn't even removed her dripping knife from its ring on her belt.

The young man is so struck by this sight that he immediately '[falls] in love' with her. What grabs his attention, in particular, is the blood that drips from her knife as she strolls along the pavement. When she has passed by he stands staring at the 'dark shining drops on the paving-stones'.

II The butcher's daughter, we sense, regularly passes along the street as she runs errands. And the young man, no doubt, is always excited and delighted to see her pass by. We can imagine him keeping an eye out for her, hoping that she will pass by.

Finally, 'One day' the young man decides to follow the girl as she returns from whatever errand she has been on. He follows her along the street and down a lane that leads to the family home. The lane is described as being at the back of the shambles, suggesting that the butcher's family lives adjacent to their place of work.

When the young man arrives at the entrance, the door is 'half-open'. He walks up to the door and peers inside. Inside the door are a set of stairs that lead up to the family living quarters. The stairs are kept very neat and orderly. We are told that they are 'brushed and clean'. The girl has removed her shoes and placed them neatly on 'the bottom step'.

However, the girl has managed to get blood on the soles of her bare feet. Perhaps blood from her knife dripped onto the floor when she was removing her shoes and she stepped in this before climbing the stairs. The blood on her heels leaves a 'red crescent' mark each time she presses her foot down on one of the steps. Each step she takes diminishes the amount of blood on her foot and so the marks begin to fade as she climbs: 'Each tread marked with the red crescent/ Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top'.

LOVE

This poem highlights how we can become infatuated with people we see regularly in our neighbourhood. The young man, in this instance, develops a powerful fascination with the butcher's daughter who passes regularly along the street. The infatuation in this case is rather one-sided. It is likely that the butcher's daughter is unaware of the young man's feelings. She might not even know he exists.

Many readers are taken aback by the young man's fascination with the blood that drips from the knife. Perhaps this suggests something abnormal about his psychology, an obsession with death and violence. But we can also read this fascination in a more positive light. Perhaps the young man views the blood as a symbol of the daughter's strength and independence of mind. For this is a young woman, after all, who does what might be considered traditional masculine work: the slaughtering of animals. And she makes no attempt to prettify herself when she

leaves the shambles to run an errand. Instead, she walks boldly along the street with her dripping cleaver, indifferent to what others might think of her.

What are we to make of the young man's decision to follow the butcher's daughter? Perhaps this is a spontaneous, harmless gesture, born of his fascination with this proud and strong-willed woman. Or perhaps there is something inappropriate, maybe even stalkerish, about how he follows her down the lane and peers inside the doorway to her home.

The poem, then, presents a most mysterious portrait of love, or at least of infatuation. We can choose to view the man who falls in love with the butcher's daughter in two very different ways. We can view him as a death-obsessed oddball who has stalker-ish tendencies. Or we can view him as a spontaneous romantic who is overcome with awe and admiration for this strong-willed woman.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Imagery

There is something very cinematic about this poem. Each section seems like a scene from a movie. We can imagine how the first four lines might work on the big screen.

We have an establishing shot of the street, followed by a medium range shot of the butcher's daughter walking down the street.

- The camera zooms in on the knife that dangles from the ring on her belt and drops of blood that fall to the pavement.
- We then cut to the young man who is, perhaps, standing inside the window of the newsagents or pharmacy where he works.
- The girl catches his eye and he is immediately infatuated.
- He walks out onto street as she passes and sees the blood dripping from the knife. He walks over to where the drops have landed and stares silently at the 'dark shining drops on the paving-stones'.

We can imagine how the second part of the poem could be one continuous shot, as we follow the girl down the street, turning down the passageway alongside the shop, walking by the shambles at the back before reaching the entrance to the house. The door is pushed open and we see the shoes neatly arranged on the bottom step. As the camera moves in on the stairs, we see the 'red crescent' blood marks on each of the steps, fading as we reach the top.

Gapped and Mysterious Narratives

'Street' plunges us into a narrative with little or nothing in the way of background information. We have no idea who the 'He' mentioned in the opening line is. Is this the first time he has seen the butcher's daughter, or does he see her regularly?

Rather than providing us with a coherent story that enables us to make easy sense of the characters and events described, the poet gives us two segments of the narrative, leaving us to fill in the gaps ourselves. We transition abruptly from an account of the unidentified young man observing the butcher's daughter walking down the street to an occasion where he decides to follow her home.

The poem also ends in an abrupt manner, with little or no sense of resolution or conclusion. The reader is left wondering where the narrative will go and what will happen next. Will the young man continue to follow the girl up the stairs, and, if so, what are his intentions at this moment? Or will he simply turn back and leave the property, returning to his place of work or to his own home?

Many of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems feature references to strange or mysterious buildings to which someone is granted access. In 'Street', the young man who follows the butcher's daughter comes to a door that has been left 'half-open'. We might wonder why the girl did not close the door after her. Has she been expecting the young man? Has the door been deliberately left open so that he may enter? Like with so many of Ní Chuilleanáin's poems, the reader is left guessing as to what the significance of certain details are and what comes next.