

## The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by  
 was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,  
 for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty  
 was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.  
 Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts, [5]  
 the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare –  
 even to the sow that always ate her young –  
 till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.  
 But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts [10]  
 (he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),  
 the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;  
 the burning puddles seemed to reassure.  
 And then he thought he almost might endure  
 his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn. [15]  
 The farmer whom he worked for came at dark  
 to shut the cows and horses in the barn  
 beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,  
 with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,  
 safe and companionable as in the Ark. [20]  
 The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.  
 The lantern – like the sun, going away –  
 laid on the mud a pacing aureole.  
 Carrying a bucket along a slimy board, [25]  
 he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,  
 his shuddering insights, beyond his control,  
 touching him. But it took him a long time  
 finally to make his mind up to go home.

### Annotations

**Prodigal:** a spendthrift; someone who wastes his or her money in an extravagant fashion; refers to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, which appears in the Gospel of Luke

[7] **sow:** a female pig

[10] **two-by-four:** a plank of wood

[11] **pints:** refers to pint bottles of whisky, rum or other alcoholic spirit

[20] **companionable:** sociable, suited to the company of others

[20] **Ark:** refers to the biblical tale of Noah's Ark

[23] **aureole:** a halo of light

## Tease It Out

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- 1. Get in Gear:** Watch Video 1, which features the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. Were you familiar with this story? Do you think that the father's treatment of his two sons was fair? Give a reason for your answer.
- 2.** In what type of building does the prodigal live and work? What kind of work does he do there? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
- 3.** The prodigal no longer notices the foul stench of the pigsty. Which lines indicate this?
- 4.** We're told that the odour of the sty was 'enormous' and 'brown'. We're told that it was 'breathing' and had 'thick hair.' What do these phrases suggest about the nature of the odour? What kind of smell do you imagine when you read them?
- 5. Class Discussion:** Which literary device is used in the description of this odour? (Hint: it starts with an 's').
- 6.** Describe the condition of the sty's floor and walls.
- 7.** Describe in your own words the pigs' facial expressions. How does the prodigal react to the way they stare at him?
- 8.** Which lines indicate that the prodigal is an alcoholic?
- 9.** What indication is there that the prodigal is ashamed of his drinking?
- 10.** Where does he hide his pint bottles of gin or whiskey?
- 11. Class Discussion:** Some mornings the sunrise has a particular effect upon the surface of the farmyard. Describe, in your own words, what the prodigal sees on these hung-over dawns.
- 12.** Consider lines 13 to 14. What indications are there that the prodigal is unhappy with his current way of life?
- 13.** The prodigal feels a sense of dread as night approaches. Which line conveys this?
- 14.** 'The lantern – like the sun, going away'. Who does this lantern belong to?
- 15.** What does the prodigal's employer do each evening?
- 16.** Describe in your own words the cows' and horses' sleeping conditions. What indication is there that the pigs, too, sleep in a cosy and comfortable fashion?
- 17.** While the animals sleep, the prodigal completes his work for the day. What task is depicted in line 24?
- 18.** Can you suggest what 'insights' or moments of comprehension the prodigal might experience as night falls?
- 19.** Why might these 'insights' cause him to shudder? What indication is there that he usually tries to suppress or ignore these insights?
- 20.** Which phrase indicates that the bats are guided by instinct rather than sight?
- 21.** Do the bats proceed in a smooth or jerky manner as they hover through the air? Give a reason for your answer.

## Theme Talk

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- 1.** "The Prodigal" provides a wonderfully grim depiction of the squalor and misery associated with addiction. Would you agree with this interpretation of the poem? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2.** Would you agree that the poem also highlights the comforts and consolations that addicts get from their addiction?
- 3.** Group Discussion: 'But it took him a long time/ finally to make his mind up to go home'. The prodigal has a miserable existence in the pigsty. Yet he's reluctant or hesitant to change his life and return to his family. Suggest reasons why this might be the case.
- 4.** Elizabeth Bishop struggled with alcohol addiction through-out her life. Can "The Prodigal", therefore, be considered a very personal poem? Give a reason for your answer.

## Language Lab

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- 1.** The second stanza creates an atmosphere of heart-breaking loneliness. Which lines and images contribute to this atmosphere?
- 2.** Did your knowledge of the Gospel story affect your understanding of this piece? Do you think you'd have understood the poem differently without this background knowledge? Say why.
- 3.** Do you think that this poem is set in the past or in the present day? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
- 4.** Which phrase indicates that the prodigal identifies with the bats as he sees them hovering overhead? In what sense is the prodigal, like the bats, guided by 'uncertain' instincts? Where are those instincts leading him?

# An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross, [5]  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds, [10]  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind [15]  
In balance with this life, this death.

## Annotations

**An Irish Airman:** the poem is spoken by an Irish pilot serving with the British forces during the First World War (1914-18). It was inspired by Major Robert Gregory, the son of Yeats' great friend Lady Gregory. Major Robert served with distinction in the Royal Flying Corps before being shot down and killed on a combat mission in Italy in 1918.

[3] **Those that I fight:** Germany and its allies

[4] **Those that I guard:** the British people; the army in which the airman serves is dedicated to their defence

[5] **Kiltartan Cross:** a crossroads near Lady Gregory's home in Gort, Co. Galway

[9] **Nor law, nor duty:** as an Irish person, the airman is under no legal or moral obligation to fight for Britain

[10] **public men:** politicians

[12] **tumult:** a state of confusion or disorder

## Tease It Out

1. Search online for information about Irish involvement in World War I. Who did Irishmen fight with, and who against?
2. The speaker describes the moment he will 'meet [his] fate'. What do you think he imagines happening to him?
3. Where does he imagine this taking place?
4. What does the word 'fate' suggest about this moment?
5. How does the airman feel about those he is fighting? Why do you think he feels this way?
6. 'Those that I guard I do not love'. For which country's military is the airman fighting? Why might he not feel a particular kinship or attachment to the people of this country?
7. Where is the airman from? How does he characterise his native place?
8. What lines suggest that the outcome of the war will be of no consequence to his 'countrymen'?
9. The airman mentions several reasons why an individual might join the army or air force. What are these reasons? Explain in your own words.
10. The airman delights in flying and in aerial combat. Why might he enjoy this 'tumult in the clouds'? What about it might bring him pleasure and excitement?
11. The airman's impulse to fly is a 'lonely' one. What do you think he means by 'lonely'? Consider the following possibilities and rank them in order of likelihood, giving reasons for your decisions:
  - He arrived at his decision alone, without consulting with others
  - It's the only impulse affecting him
  - Not many people share the impulse to fly, making it a lonely vocation
  - He is alone in the cockpit and can only rely on himself
  - He is motivated by a desire to ascend into the clouds alone, leaving the busy world of people behind
12. What word does the airman use to capture the battle that is taking place in the skies?
13. What does this word suggest about the confusion or clarity of the participants in the battle?
14. 'I balanced all'. What does this suggest about the process that was involved in the speaker's decision to join the air force? Do you think it took him long to reach his decision?
15. The speaker 'brought all to mind'. What do you imagine went through his head while he was making this decision? What possibilities did he have to consider?
16. The speaker feels that his life prior to becoming a fighter pilot was pointless; life only really began when he became a fighter pilot. What phrase captures this?
17. Break into pairs and discuss the following statements:
  - The speaker feels that this dramatic, exciting death will make up for the boredom and the pointlessness of his existence up till then
  - The speaker feels that this pointless death is a fitting end for his pointless life

## Theme Talk

1. 'The speaker feels he has nothing but hatred and contempt for ordinary life and longs to die in order to escape it'. Write a paragraph agreeing or disagreeing with this statement. Support your answer with reference to the poem.
2. 'The speaker of the poem is essentially a thrill seeker; he has no other motivation for getting involved in the war'. Do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with lines or phrases from the poem.
3. Would you agree that the speaker is indifferent to the outcome of the war? If given the choice between going home and fighting for the other side, which do you think he would choose? Explain your answer.

## Language Lab

1. 'Anaphora' is a literary device in which words at the beginning of lines or phrases are repeated. Can you identify any examples in this poem? What effect does this give?
2. Identify the rhyme scheme of this poem.
3. This is a very rhythmic poem. Is there any connection between this rhythmic effect and the relentless mechanical rhythm of an airplane's engine? What does this rhythm suggest about the airman's state of mind?
4. 'A lonely impulse of delight'. Do you think of impulses as being hard or easy to resist? Is an impulse like an addiction or a desire, or is it more like a whim? Explain your answer.



## Linda France

Linda France was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. When she was young she and her family moved south to Dorset, where she was forced to lose the Geordie accent she had spoken. She credits this as an important influence on her decision to become a poet: having to ‘forget how to talk Geordie and construct for myself a new mongrel language that both did and didn’t declare its not-belonging anywhere identifiable’. France is the author of many collections of poetry, including *The Toast of the Kit Cat Club* (2005), *You are Her* (2010) and *Reading the Flowers* (2016).

## If Love was Jazz

If love was jazz,  
I'd be dazzled  
By its razzmatazz.

If love was a sax,  
I'd melt in its brassy flame [5]  
Like wax.

If love was a guitar,  
I'd pluck its six strings,  
Eight to the bar.

If love was a trombone, [10]  
I'd feel its slow  
Slide, right down my backbone.

If love was a drum,  
I'd be caught in its snare,  
Kept under its thumb. [15]

If love was a trumpet,  
I'd blow it.

If love was jazz,  
I'd sing its praises,  
Like Larkin has. [20]

But love isn't jazz.  
It's an organ recital.  
Eminently worthy,  
not nearly as vital.

If love was jazz, [25]  
I'd always want more.  
I'd be a regular,  
On that smoky dance-floor.

### Annotations

[9] **eight to the bar**: a measure of music with eight beats

[12] **Slide**: the part of the trombone that moves in and out to vary the instrument's pitch

[14] **snare**: a trap; a length of wire stretched across a drumhead to produce a rattling sound

[20] **Larkin**: Philip Larkin (1922-1985) was an English poet who wrote a book celebrating jazz music

[23] **worthy**: noble and well-meaning but lacking in energy, humour or imagination

[24] **vital**: full of energy, lively

## Tease It Out

1. Watch Video 7, which features a band playing improvisational jazz. Then answer the following questions: Do you enjoy this music? Why or why not? Does this music strike you as a good soundtrack for a love story? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think the speaker enjoys jazz music?
3. Why might the speaker compare love and jazz? Is the comparison favourable or unfavourable to love?
4. What do you understand by the word 'razzmatazz'? Explain in your own words what it means.
5. How does the saxophone make the speaker feel? What simile does she use to describe this feeling? Do you think it's an effective simile?
6. How might the saxophone be said to have a 'brassy flame'? How do you imagine this? Is the 'flame' visual or metaphorical? Is it both?
7. What does the speaker say she would do if love was a guitar? What does this suggest about her attitude to love?
8. Describe in your own words the effect that the trombone has on the speaker.
9. The poet uses a pun in stanza 5 to describe what would happen if love was a drum. Which two meanings of 'snare' is she playing on here?
10. 'If love was a trumpet, / I'd blow it.' What do you think the speaker means here? Do you think she means that she would pursue love or dismiss it? Explain your answer.
11. Who is Larkin? In what way does the speaker want to emulate him?
12. To what sort of music does the speaker compare jazz in stanza 8? What does this sort of music sound like? Pair with a partner and brainstorm five adjectives to describe this type of music.
13. Describe in your own words what the speaker means when she says that organ music is 'worthy' but not 'vital'.
14. What kind of place do you think the speaker is thinking of when she mentions a smoky dance-floor in the poem's closing lines? Where do you imagine this dance floor is located? How does it relate to jazz? How might it relate to love?

## Theme Talk

1. 'This poem brilliantly illustrates the personal connection we form with the music we love.' Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Write a few paragraphs in response, referring to the poem in your answer.
2. 'Reading the poem, we sense that the poet has been disappointed and frustrated by love. She wishes her love life was as pleasurable and exciting as the jazz music she loves.' Write a short essay in response to this statement.
3. In lines 10 to 12, the speaker says that if love were a trombone it would send a shiver down her spine. Has a piece of music ever made you feel this way? Write a few paragraphs describing the song and what makes it special to you.

## Language Lab

1. 'Appropriately for a poem about music, the poet makes excellent use of rhyme and rhythm.' Discuss this statement with reference to the poem.
2. Describe how the poet uses alliteration throughout the poem. In your opinion, what is the most effective example of alliteration in the poem?
3. 'The poem is full of sensual language that evokes both jazz music and romantic attraction.' Write a short essay in response to this statement, highlighting your favourite images or phrases from the poem.

# The Lake Isle of Innisfree



## FIRST ENCOUNTER

### Stanza 1

The poem opens with a dramatic declaration of intent. It's as if the poet has suddenly made a decision. It's as if he's suddenly realised that he's had enough of modern living and that a change of direction is needed. And this new existence, he declares, will begin immediately, for he's going to stand up any minute now and embark on a new chapter in his life: 'I will arise and go now'. He even emphasises this intention by repeating it in Stanza 3.

Yeats declares his intention to go off and live on the island of Innisfree, a small uninhabited island on Lough Gill in County Sligo. He imagines he would live a very simple life once he gets there:

- He would live 'alone' in a clearing or glade upon the island.
- He would build his own cabin: 'And a small cabin build there'. This would be a very basic type of accommodation. It would be 'small'. It would be manufactured using the ancient 'wattle and daub' technique, which involves smearing mud over interwoven sticks and twigs.
- He would even produce his own food, keeping bees for their honey and growing rows of beans: 'Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee'.

Yeats, then, seems to imagine living 'off the grid', going without the amenities and conveniences of his time. He imagines a life

without telephones and telegraphs, with no newspapers or postal service, without the primitive gas and electrical services that were available in 1890s Dublin and London.

### Stanza 2

The poet imagines the great beauty of Innisfree, taking us through a day on the island from dawn to dusk to midnight:

- The poet would wake each day to the pleasant chirping sounds of crickets: 'where the cricket sings'.
- He uses a wonderful metaphor to describe the banks of mist that drift across the island each morning, comparing them to 'veils' that drift and disperse, momentarily obscuring the island's beauty as they pass: 'the veils of the morning'.
- Noon, too, is beautiful. Sunlight glitters on the heather that covers much of the island and gives it its name. ('Inis Fraoich', in Irish, means island of the heather). This glittering heather lends the whole place a 'purple glow'.
- Evenings on Innisfree are 'full' of the sound made by linnets (small brown finches common in the west of Ireland) as they flit around the island: 'And evening full of the linnet's wings'.
- Midnight, meanwhile, sees the starlight reflected on Lough Gill, so that its waters glitter and gleam: 'There midnight's all a glimmer'.

### Stanza 3

The poet claims that the sound of Innisfree's beaches, of 'lake water lapping' on the island's shores, is always in his mind's ear. Like a catchy song he can't get out of his head, these 'low sounds' of water are 'always' present at the back of his mind.

They repeat over and over again, ‘night and day’; we sense that the poet couldn’t make them stop even if he wanted to.

These lines, then, emphasise the intensity of the poet’s attachment to the little island. The lapping sound of its water echoes in the very ‘core’ of his heart, in the depths of his being or psyche. No matter where he goes, the sound of its waters is ever-present at the very centre of his mind, forming a kind of background music as he lives his life. But the thought of Innisfree, it seems, is especially important to the poet when he finds himself in an urban environment: ‘While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey’. We can imagine how the cold grey concrete makes him long for the island’s beauty. We can imagine how the city’s endless racket makes him long for that soothing, almost silent retreat.

Yeats, it’s worth noting, was inspired to write the poem when he was living in London and was feeling homesick for his beloved Sligo. He was walking down Fleet Street, one of that city’s busiest thoroughfares, when he saw a fountain in a shop window, which ‘balanced a little ball upon its jet’. The trickling sound of the fountain reminded him of Innisfree’s lapping waters and sparked the beginning of the poem.

## FOCUS ON STYLE

### Verbal Music

The poem contains many examples of assonance and alliteration. Assonance features in the second line, with its broad vowel sounds: ‘a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made’. It is also evident in line 7, where the repeated ‘i’ and ‘o’ sounds create a soft musical effect: ‘midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow’. The repeated ‘a’ and ‘o’ sounds in line 10 have a similar musical quality: ‘I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore’. Combined with the alliteration of the ‘l’ sounds, these techniques make this line very pleasant to the ear.

### Imagery

‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ is a poem of contrasting imagery. There is a stark difference between the imagery of the city and the imagery of Innisfree. The city is a drab and dull place, composed of roadways and ‘pavements grey’. The island, in contrast, is alive with colour and sound. We can contrast the ‘purple glow’ of the heather with the ‘pavements grey’. However, the city seems a very real place, while the island comes across as more of an imagined paradise.

### Tone, Mood and Atmosphere

In his descriptions of Innisfree, Yeats creates a very peaceful, almost drowsy atmosphere. His days will be marked by the humming of bees and crickets. It is a place where ‘peace comes dropping slow’, where he can relax and be alone in nature. However, we also suspect that this is a highly idealised version of Innisfree. Were Yeats to actually go and try to live on the island by himself, the reality might be very different.

## THEMES

### NATURE

#### Nature's Beauty

This is one of Yeats’ best-loved nature poems. Innisfree is depicted as a place of sublime tranquillity. It’s a place of great silence, devoid of any man-made sound.

Innisfree, then, is where the poet will discover the peace he so craves: ‘And I shall have some peace there’. Yeats, in a wonderful turn of phrase, presents peace as a physical substance, ‘dropping’ in the form of dew to cover the entire island. Peace, we’re told, ‘comes dropping’ slowly from the banks of mist that cover the island each morning, drenching the grasses where the crickets are busy about their song.

#### Getting Back to Nature

There are moments when each of us feels like escaping the ‘rat race’ that all-too-often constitutes modern living. We may feel, as Yeats suggests in Stanza 3, like trading in the cacophony of city living, with its endless traffic noise and car alarms, for a place of tranquillity where ‘peace comes dropping slow’. We may feel, as Yeats does in this poem, that it’s time to turn our backs on the stresses and strains of modern living, of exams and deadlines, and of career pressure and social obligations.

We may even fantasise about going off the grid completely, about living without media and devices, even without electricity. Some people even fantasise, as Yeats does here, about being completely self-sufficient, about growing their own food and building their own simple dwelling places.

Innisfree, as the poet describes it, is a place of fantasy, an idealised almost heavenly version of the actual island in County Sligo. It’s a place where the poet can live out his dream of escape from modern life. But fantasy is the operative word. For we sense that Yeats, like most people, wouldn’t last more than a week living alone and self-sufficiently upon Lough Gill. Think of the harsh winters, the difficulty of growing crops, the isolation, and the lack of warmth and electricity.

We sense, then, that the poet won’t really follow through on this decision to ‘arise and go’. We sense that this departure for Innisfree won’t happen now and probably never will, and we also sense that the poet isn’t quite prepared to leave the modern world behind and embrace what today we’d describe today as a hippy or New Age lifestyle. However, such fantasies can be important. For the poet, this dream of the simple life serves as a comfort or escape when times get tough. When the rat race proves too draining, when he tires of the grey city pavements, he can always daydream about his bean rows on the island of Innisfree.

# An Arrival (North Wales, 1847)



## FIRST ENCOUNTER

In this poem, Denise Levertov explores her family history, recounting the story of her grandmother, who was orphaned at a young age, in the year 1847. This young girl was forced to move from the mining town of Glamorgan in south Wales, where she had lived with her parents, to north Wales, where she would now live with her uncle's family.

The poem highlights several differences between south Wales and north Wales. South Wales, where the young girl grew up, is presented as industrial and relatively poor. North Wales, on the other hand, where she goes to live, is presented as a pleasant rural environment where people are relatively wealthy. In south Wales, the Welsh accent is especially pronounced. In north Wales, closer to the English border, it is less so.

The young girl travels to her new home immediately after her father's funeral. In fact, she is still wearing new outfit she had been given for the ceremony. She is wearing a formal hat that strikes her cousins as 'outlandish' or bizarre. Her outfit glitters with dark jewels: 'agleam with jet' ('jet' is a polished form of coal and was frequently used as mourning jewellery in the 1800s). She's wearing boots that have yet to be broken in and are still uncomfortable. However, she takes great pride in this brand new footwear.

The young girl, while at her father's funeral, received a number of gold coins. These 'sovereigns', we imagine, were gifts from her fellow mourners, a well-meaning effort to ease the young girl's pain. No sooner has she arrived in her new home, than she generously distributes the coins amongst her cousins.

### The young girl's impressions of her new home

The young girl is presented as being very observant. Her bright green eyes carefully observe the features of her new home. She seems to see things in a different way to those who have lived in this rural town their whole lives: 'views of the noonday sleepy town/ no one had noticed'. Her nostrils are depicted as 'flaring' or expanding as she absorbs the town's smells. This is an agricultural town, and it smells very differently to her home town of Glamorgan. She smells 'hay and stone' rather than coaldust: 'absence of Glamorgan coaldust'.

All these sights and smells are carefully registered and recorded in the young girl's memory. The poet compares the girl's eye to a camera photographing the town, and the images she captures and the observations she makes are immediately stored in her mind just as pictures are pasted into an album: 'pasted her observations quickly/ into the huge album of her mind'.

## The family's reaction to the girl

The young girl's cousins don't know quite what to make of her. They find her south Wales accent bizarre and incomprehensible. They find her funeral clothes 'outlandish'. They seem nervous and uncertain, and are reluctant to engage with this strange person who has come to share their home. The poet uses a wonderful simile to describe how they were ready to 'back off like heifers', those creatures that are known for their shyness and nervousness.

The young girl's aunt is quick to impose her authority. She confiscates the sovereigns that the young girl has distributed among the cousins. She also takes away the young girl's outfit, which she deems to be 'unsuitable'. The outfit will be 'altered', its material cut up and stitched into more appropriate items of clothing.

Very quickly, then, it is made clear to the girl that her life is to be very different in her new home. Her uncle, with whom she will now live, is a minister, a preacher in the local church. Her deceased father, on the other hand, was merely an industrial worker. She has come to live, therefore, in a much posher household. As a result, she must change her dress and behaviour. She must now to think of herself as the 'minister's niece' and not 'her father's daughter'.

## The girl explores her new world

The poem's final lines describe the girl's first few months in her new home. She would walk 'Alone' around this new world. She would explore the steep streets of this town that was built into the side of a mountain. She would pass the 'graystone chapels'. She would pass 'rockface cottages' built from stones cut from the face of the very mountain in which they stood.

As she walked, she would consider her recent loss and the wrenching change in her circumstances that had brought her from Glamorgan to this strange new world. Sometimes on these solitary walks she would find herself bursting into tears. She would weep in rage at the injustice of the world, lamenting how her parents and her home had been taken away from her.

Sometimes the young girl would weep in response to the choirs in the towns 'greystone chapels'. Wales is a country famous for its choral singing and the sound emanating from the chapels struck the young girl as one of 'glory', as being absolutely extraordinary. It seemed to be both 'dark' and 'golden', to embody both suffering and ecstasy.

It's hardly surprising then, that as this music spilled from a nearby chapel, she would find herself weeping uncontrollably. She would be so overcome with emotion that the world around her seemed to spin. The hills surrounding the little town, we are told, 'skipped like lambs'.

## FOCUS ON STYLE

### Imagery

The poem makes several references to minerals and the mining industry. The girl's eyes are described as 'moss-agate eyes', and the clothes that she wears are 'agleam with jet', a polished form of coal.

### Metaphor and Simile

The poem features a number of similes. The girl's cousins are likened to 'heifers' because of the way they stare at her in bewilderment, unsure about what she is and ready to quickly back off. The girl's exotic accent and manner of speech is compared to the sounds a parrot makes: 'talk strange to them as a sailor's parrot'. The poem finishes with the poet likening the way the hills seem to sometimes come to life to skipping lambs: 'the hills/ skipped like lambs'.

## A CLOSER READING

This poem highlights the difficulty of loss and bereavement and the difficulty of moving to a new environment. But it also highlights the extraordinary character of this young girl:

- She is depicted as being highly observant, noting and mentally recording the features of her new home.
- She is depicted as resourceful and self-reliant. She chose her own funeral outfit and she explores the town on her own, getting to know her new environment.
- She is generous, distributing the gold sovereigns amongst her cousins.
- She is resilient. She refuses to weep in front of her new family and only does so on her solitary walks through the town.

The phrase 'proud pain' is interesting in this regard. It refers, as we have seen, to the discomfort of the girl's new shoes. But it also refers to bereavement. The bereavement, naturally, causes the young girl great pain, but it pain she experiences with great pride, as it links her to her mother, her father and her home town of Glamorgan. We sense that the poet, Denise Levertov, too experiences a mix of pride and pain as she thinks back on this observant, resilient ancestor.

# The Russian Doll



## FIRST ENCOUNTER

When Paula Meehan was seven years old, she received a gift of a matryoshka doll from her grandmother. The doll became one of Meehan's most special possessions and is referenced several times in her poetry. For Meehan, the doll serves as a symbol of poetry, creativity and imagination.

This poem describes the day on which Meehan received the matryoshka doll. It is a 'persona poem', a poem in which the poet writes in the voice of someone other than herself. Meehan, in this instance, writes in the voice of her grandmother.

The poem is set in the winter of 1962. January, the grandmother tells us, is 'almost over'. The weather has been very bad: 'It had been grey all month and damp'. It has been a time of 'Bitter' cold. The long winter has taken its toll on the speaker's family. She describes how her family 'felt every year in [their] bones', suggesting that the endless grey months had left them exhausted in both body and mind.

The grandmother's household, then, are feeling pretty low. And in this depressed state they've been thinking about loved ones that have passed away over the years. The grandmother seems to think that the family have become too melancholic, have been dwelling too much on those who have passed on: 'our dead had been too much with

us'. She seems to think that the family need cheering up, that they need to re-focus on the future and what it holds.

The grandmother has journeyed into town to buy food for the family. While shopping, she notices a Russian doll in one of the shop windows. This is a 'matryoshka', a set of hollow wooden dolls of various sizes. The second largest doll is placed inside the largest, and so on.

The grandmother is attracted by the doll's bright colours: 'Her colours caught my eye'. She mentions carmine (red), turmeric (deep yellow-orange), indigo (bright blue) and purple. The doll's colours make her think of faraway lands that are filled with warmth and sunlight, weather conditions very different to this bleak Irish January.

As she looks at the doll, the grandmother is gripped by a flight of fancy. She finds herself thinking of the doll as a lucky charm or even as an enchanted, magical item. She fantasises that the doll, with its colours so redolent of warmer climes, could cast a spell that would bring 'dry weather'. She imagines that buying the doll could somehow hurry spring along for her long-suffering family.

On the spur of the moment, then, the grandmother decides to purchase the doll. It costs five pounds, which is all the money she has with her: 'I'd a fiver in my pocket: that's/ all they asked for'. She must choose, then, between

buying dinner for her family or buying the doll. She chooses the doll, deciding that it will make a great gift for her grandchild.

Is it a coincidence that the doll cost five pounds, which is precisely the amount of money that the grandmother had with her? The grandmother, no doubt, bargained with the shopkeeper, getting him down to a price she could afford. She even prevailed on him to gift wrap the doll into the bargain.

The grandmother, having spent all her money, must walk the seven miles from town back to where she lives. The weather is still unpleasant, with a cold northerly breeze blowing into her face as she makes her way home. As she walks, however, she notices the 'first primroses' of the year, an early indication that spring is on its way.

The speaker passes through the woods that surround her family's home. She sees smoke rising from the chimney of her house. She is returning without the food she went out

to buy in the first place. For she has 'spent the dinner', has spent the money that was intended to feed the family that night. They must now go hungry or make do with whatever leftovers remain in the house.

The grandmother, however, doesn't regret her decision. She's delighted to have come home with the brightly coloured matroyshka doll, this beautiful gift for her grandchild.

## FOCUS ON STYLE

### Simile

In a wonderful turn of phrase, the grandmother compares the matroyshka to a 'Holy Fire'. It is as if she is carrying a candle that had been lit from some sacred temple flame. This suggests the care with which she carries the doll home; she's like someone trying to keep a candle ablaze in the teeth of a gale. It also suggests the high regard she has for this wooden object; to her it is something almost miraculous.

## A CLOSER READING

### A PORTRAIT OF THE GRANDMOTHER

This poem provides a powerful portrait of the grandmother.

- This is a tough, practical woman, who lived in difficult times. We see this toughness and practicality when she bargains with the shopkeeper and when she uncomplainingly walks the seven miles home.
- The grandmother also comes across as someone deeply concerned about the welfare of her family. She is aware that this winter has been difficult on them and that they need something to lighten their moods.
- She also comes across as selfless. She goes without food and walks the seven miles home so she can afford this gift for her grandchild.

There is also a dreamy or imaginative side to the grandmother's personality. She's captivated by the doll's colours and imagines that it will bring 'dry weather' into the lives of her family. Perhaps she even imagines that this 'spell' is working when while walking home from town she spies the first primroses of spring. She carries the doll with great care, as if it were a sacred object: 'I carried her home like a Holy Fire'. The grandmother, however, downplays her reaction to the doll, referring to it as 'gaudy'. She wants to maintain her tough, practical exterior. She doesn't want her family to know that she responded to the doll in such an intensely emotional fashion.

### THE GRANDDAUGHTER AND THE DOLL

This practical grandmother, then, makes what seems like a very impractical decision, choosing a wooden doll instead of food for her family. But she knows immediately that her grandchild will be very taken with the matroyshka doll: 'I knew you'd love your gaudy doll'. The doll is intended as more than a simple treat for the grandchild, something to lift her spirits after a long winter. For the grandmother understands that the doll will trigger something in the grandchild. She recognises that the grandchild has a sensitive, poetic nature and will respond to this object in a profound way.

### THE DOLL AS A SYMBOL OF POETRY

The doll serves also as an embodiment of poetry itself. It is associated with colour and with fire, which are ancient symbols of creativity. We can imagine the child exploring the matroyshka, opening each doll to reveal another one inside. This suggests, of course, how poems contain hidden depths or layers of meaning.

The grandmother is convinced that her granddaughter will love 'what's in' the matroyshka. For what it contains is not only a series of dolls but also the gift of poetry itself. For the matroyshka, we sense, fired the young girl's creativity and played a role in her becoming the poet she is today.