

The Exact Moment I Became a Poet

for Kay Foran

was in 1963 when Miss Shannon
rapping the duster on the easel's peg
half obscured by a cloud of chalk

said *Attend to your books girls,
or mark my words, you'll end up
in the sewing factory.*

[5]

It wasn't just that some of the girls'
mothers worked in the sewing factory
or even that my own aunt did,

and many neighbours, but
that those words 'end up' robbed
the labour of its dignity.

[10]

Not that I knew it then,
not in those words – labour, dignity.
That's all back construction.

[15]

making sense; allowing also
the teacher was right
and no one knows it like I do myself.

But: I saw them; mothers, aunts and neighbours
trussed like chickens
on a conveyor belt,

[20]

getting sewn up the way my granny
sewed the sage and onion stuffing
in the birds.

Words could pluck you,
leave you naked,
your lovely shiny feathers all gone.

[25]

Annotations

[2] **easel**: used for holding the blackboard in place

[20] **trussed**: having your legs and arms tied together

Tease It Out

1. How did Miss Shannon attempt to get the attention of the girls in her class?
2. Why for a moment or two was Miss Shannon difficult to see?
3. What advice did Miss Shannon give the girls?
4. What would happen to the girls, according to Miss Shannon, if they failed to follow this advice?
5. Why might Miss Shannon's words have made some of the girls feel awkward or embarrassed?
6. Did the poet herself experience such feelings? Give a reason for your answer.
7. **Class Discussion:** What does the word 'dignity' mean? What does it mean for labour to possess dignity? Would you agree that all jobs, when done well, possess dignity of a sort?
8. **True or false:** The young poet felt that work in the sewing factory possessed no such dignity.
9. Use the phrase 'end up' in three separate sentences. Does it suggest a good or a bad outcome?
10. Can you suggest why this phrase, as the young poet saw it, made work in the sewing factory seem undignified?
11. 'the teacher was right/ and no one knows it like I do myself'. In what sense, according to the poet, was Miss Shannon 'right' in her assessment of the sewing factory? Suggest how the poet came to this conclusion.
12. But: I saw them. The poet's imagination runs away with her and she is struck by an intensely vivid daydream:
 - Who does the poet see and where are these individuals?
 - The poet describes how these individuals have been 'trussed up'. What do you visualise here?
 - Describe in your own words what is happening to these poor 'trussed up' individuals.

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** Pick an occasion from your time in primary school that stands out in your memory. Write a poem or short prose piece in which you describe that 'exact moment' in as much detail as possible.
2. **Theme Talk:** Meehan is well known for her depictions of childhood:
 - What do you understand by the term 'back construction' as Meehan uses it in this poem?
 - Compare this poem to 'Buying Winkles' and 'Hearth Lessons'. Which poem in your opinion most vividly captures the mentality of childhood?
3. **Class Discussion:** Consider the poem's title. What was so special about this moment in the classroom? In what sense did the young poet's understanding of language change on that day in 1963? In what sense did she become a poet at that very moment?
4. **Exam Prep:** 'Meehan is nothing if not outspoken when it comes to issues of poverty and social justice'. Write an essay responding to this statement in which you reference this poem and two others on the course.

Language Lab

1. The young poet realised for the first time that words are extremely powerful and can cause great psychological harm. What metaphor is used to describe this harm? Is it an effective one in your opinion?
2. Meehan is known for her playful, witty approach to the poetry. Is this playfulness in evidence in her depiction of the 'trussed up' mothers, aunts and neighbours? Or is this an image of pure horror? Give a reason for your answer.

The Exact Moment I Became a Poet



LINE BY LINE

This poem is set in 1963 when Meehan was 8-year-old pupil in Central Model Girls' School, Gardiner Street. The poet remembers an occasion when she and the rest of her classmates had become distracted from their lessons and were chatting and laughing. She recalls how Miss Shannon, her teacher at the time, attempted to silence the classroom.

Miss Shannon, in an effort to gain the class's attention, rapped her duster against the easel that was holding up her blackboard. A 'cloud' of chalk dust flew upward from the duster, leaving her 'half obscured' for a moment. She urged her pupils to be quiet, issuing them a stark warning. If they didn't 'Attend' or pay attention at school they would never find a good job later in life. They will only be able to secure employment in the local 'sewing factory': 'or mark my words you'll end up/ in the sewing factory'

The poet is upset

The young poet was deeply upset by Miss Shannon's words, by how her teacher presented the sewing factory as a worthless and undesirable place of employment. After all, some of her classmates had mothers who worked there. These classmates, no doubt, would be embarrassed to hear their mothers' workplace referred to in such a fashion. Indeed, the young poet herself also experienced such embarrassment; her own aunt worked in that very factory, as did a number of her neighbours.

The young poet was particularly upset by Miss Shannon's use of the phrase 'end up'. This phrase, she realised, suggested a negative or undesirable outcome. It implied that those who worked in the sewing factory had failed in life. It implied that they were stuck in lowly, meaningless jobs no one would ever willingly sign up for.

The young poet felt that the 'labour' in the sewing factory had its own particular 'dignity'. She must have realised that this work, while not fancy or highly-paid, was important in its own way. She must have realised, too, that the women of the factory took great pride in what they did, in producing garments that were well made and hard-wearing. Miss Shannon's words, she realised, 'robbed' the women of this 'dignity', making their 'labour' seem utterly menial and pointless.

The poet acknowledges that she's engaging in 'back construction', that she's altering or reconstructing a memory. We see this when she depicts her eight-year-old self using terms like 'dignity' and 'labour'. The poet accepts that she didn't actually know these terms when she was eight years old. However, she did have some grasp of the feelings and concepts to which these terms relate: 'Not that I knew it then, / not in those words'.

A vision formed by words

Miss Shannon's words triggered the young poet's imagination, leading to a strange and disturbing flight of fancy:

- She found herself imagining the sewing factory with its crew of 'mothers, aunts and neighbours'.
- She imagined that these women had been 'trussed', which suggests that their legs and arms were tied together, and placed on a 'conveyor belt'.
- She imagined that the women were being 'sewn up' like chickens being readied for the oven: 'the way my granny/ sewed the sage and onion stuffing/ in the birds'.

We imagine a procession of women, tied-up and helpless, being shunted along the conveyor belt until one by one they come to some monstrous sewing machine that mutilates their bodies.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Metaphor, Simile and Figures of Speech

The poem concludes with a most memorable metaphor:

- Human beings are compared to chickens.
- Our self-esteem is compared to the ‘lovely shiny feathers’ that cover a chicken’s body.
- Hurtful words are compared to hands that pluck the chicken’s figures.

Plucking hands will leave a chicken ‘naked’, utterly stripped of its feathers. Hurtful words, similarly, can leave a human being

emotionally naked, stripped of our dignity and self-esteem. Meehan, then, captures the power of hurtful words, such as those spoken by Miss Shannon in that long-ago classroom, to leave us diminished, belittled and humiliated.

Verbal Music

‘The Exact Moment I Became a Poet’, like many of Meehan’s poems, is rich in imagery. The poet wonderfully captures an everyday classroom scene (the teacher banging her duster amid a loud of chalk dust) as well as the surreal and nightmarish image of the ‘trussed’ women on the conveyor belt.

THEMES

BECOMING A POET

Meehan, in this poem, describes a crucial moment in her childhood, one when she first realised the power of words. She suddenly understood that words could have a powerful effect on the imagination. Her teacher’s comments triggered a flight of fancy image that was not only distressing but also exceptionally vivid: ‘I saw them’. For a moment, in her mind’s eye, she could see the ‘trussed’ women on the conveyor belt with a strange and disturbing clarity.

She suddenly understood, too, that words could powerfully affect the emotions. Miss Shannon’s remarks about the factory, she realised, had the power to hurt not only the factory workers themselves, but also hurt the workers’ daughters nieces and neighbours who sat beside her in the classroom, so that they felt weak, vulnerable and exposed: ‘words could pluck you,/ leave you naked’.

The eight-year-old Meehan, then, at that precise moment ‘became a poet’. She didn’t, of course, immediately start writing poems and getting them published. But she knew that she would spend her life devoted to language. She would begin to learn, starting right now, how to make language work for her. She would harness the power of words to shape images in people’s minds. She would use language, just like Miss Shannon had done in the classroom, to affect the emotions of those who heard and read her.

Miss Shannon, on this occasion, used language in a negative fashion. Her words, as we’ve seen, were wounding and diminishing. The eight-year-old Meehan, we sense, is determined to use language in a much more positive fashion. She will interrogate the powerful in society while providing a voice for the voiceless, weak and vulnerable.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

We sense that the poet, even as a primary school student, was keenly aware of social inequality. She realised that people in her part of inner city Dublin were denied the opportunities granted to those from more privileged parts of the city. And this lack of opportunity, of course, was passed down from one generation to the next.

The poet’s daydream vividly conveys this social inequality. Society is compared to a nightmarish factory where generation after generation of ‘mothers, aunts and neighbours’ from inner city Dublin are processed. The image of these women being ‘trussed up’ suggests how they were constrained by lack of opportunity. The image of them being mutilated by a giant sewing machine suggests how their underprivileged lives left them mentally and physically damaged.

CHILDHOOD

‘The Exact Moment I Became a Poet’ wonderfully captures the mentality of childhood. The poem Meehan reminds us that eight-year-old children can understand ideas such as ‘labour’ and ‘dignity’, even if they lack the words to express such concepts. It also reminds us that children tend to have exceptionally vivid imaginations that sometimes lead them to strange and disturbing flights of fancy.

STRENGTH AND POWER OF WOMEN

The poem also touches on the strength and power of women, another of Meehan’s recurring themes. She reminds us that in the inner city Dublin of the 50s and 60s it was working women like these – often doing difficult, repetitive work – who were the primary breadwinners in their respective households, bringing home a wage that kept utter poverty and despair at bay.

The poet, looking back, realises that Miss Shannon, in one way, was correct in her assessment of the sewing factory: ‘allowing also/ the teacher was right’. Meehan’s own experiences of life have taught her that such factories are exhausting and dehumanising places in which to make a living: ‘and no one knows it like I do myself’. Meehan herself, then, wouldn’t want to spend her life working in such a place of employment. But Meehan, even as she accepts the truth of Miss Shannon’s comments, insists that the ‘mothers, aunts and neighbours’ who worked there retained a certain ‘dignity’. She insists that their labour, while far from glamorous, had value and meaning.

Grandfather

They brought him in on a stretcher from the world,
Wounded but humorous; and he soon recovered.
Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled
Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood
Only he can recapture. Even on cold [5]
Mornings he is up at six with a block of wood
Or a box of nails, discreetly up to no good
Or banging round the house like a four-year-old —

Never there when you call. But after dark
You hear his great boots thumping in the hall [10]
And in he comes, as cute as they come. Each night
His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock
Against the future, then his light goes out.
Nothing escapes him; he escapes us all.

Annotations

[3] **Boiler-rooms:** refers to the boiler rooms of various ships that were built in Belfast's famous shipyards. Mahon's grandfather worked as a boilermaker and was employed in the ship-building industry

[3] **gantries:** large bridge-like cranes used in shipbuilding; a travelling crane, used in the building of ships

[11] **cute:** clever

[12] **shrewd:** astute, sharp-witted

Tease It Out

1. Based on your reading of the poem, how old do you think the poet was when his grandfather came to live with him?
2. The grandfather was injured when he arrived at the poet's house? Based on your reading of the poem, can you suggest how this injury might have occurred?
3. Did it take the grandfather a long time to recover from this injury? What might this suggest about his personality?
4. In what industry had the poet's grandfather worked in all his life?
5. What does the phrase 'rolled away' suggest about the grandfather's memory of his working years? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - Those years no longer seemed important to him.
 - He was eager to think and talk about his career.
 - The grandfather's memory was failing.
6. What type of projects did the grandfather undertake while he was living with the young poet?
7. **Class Discussion:** Consider the phrase 'getting up to no good'. What does this suggest about the young poet's attitude towards these projects?
8. What phrase indicates that the grandfather made a lot of noise early in the morning?
9. What phrase indicates he was usually absent from the house most of the day?
10. When the grandfather came home in the evening was he eager to talk to the other members of the family? Give a reason for your answer.
11. The grandfather is described as 'bolting the door... against the future'. What does this suggest about the grandfather's attitude to the future? Rank the following in order of plausibility:
 - He is terrified of death.
 - He doesn't like the direction in which society seems to be headed.
 - He would rather relive memories of the past than think about the future.
12. **True or false:** The poet regards his grandfather as a highly observant person.

Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** Imagine you are the poet's grandfather. Write a diary entry describing an average day. Your entry should begin early in the morning and conclude late in the evening.
2. **Class Discussion:** 'This poem depicts an elderly man enjoying a second childhood'. Discuss this as a class, saying whether you agree or disagree with the statement.
3. **Theme Talk:** Mahon's poetry is deeply concerned with the theme of community and solitude. List the different ways in which the grandfather is part of the family's community. List the different ways in which he remains a solitary figure, one who keeps that community at a distance.
4. **Exam Prep:** 'Derek Mahon explores people and places in his own distinctive style'. Write a short essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Grandfather' and at least two other poems on your course.

Language Lab

1. **Poet of Precision:** As a class, consider the poem's opening line. What does it suggest about the relationship between the grandfather and the outside world? How had the grandfather's social role and responsibilities changed with his retirement?
2. **Group Discussion:** The poem provides several hints about the poet's grandfather. Working in small groups, list as many as you can. Then come up with three adjectives that in your opinion best capture his demeanour and approach to life.

Grandfather



Belfast shipyards

LINE BY LINE

In this poem, Mahon remembers his paternal grandfather. The grandfather, like generations of Mahon's relatives, spent his life working in Belfast's thriving shipbuilding industry. He was a boilermaker by trade and spent countless hours in the boilerrooms of various ships that were under construction, installing the machinery that enabled these huge ships to make their way across the oceans.

The grandfather continued working until he was quite old. Finally, however, he fell foul of a workplace accident. Mahon is vague on the precise details of this incident. However, it seems that the grandfather was 'Wounded' by some tool or piece of equipment in the shipyard.

The grandfather's injuries were severe enough to end his career in the shipyard. It also meant that he was no longer able to live alone. Since his wife had passed away some years before, he went to live with the young poet and his family in their house.

Mahon, we remember, was an only child. He describes himself as having been a quiet, thoughtful boy: 'a strange child with a taste for verse'. We can imagine, therefore, how fascinated he must have been by this new addition to the household. He vividly remembers his grandfather arriving in an ambulance and being stretchered into the house: 'They brought him in on a stretcher from the world'.

The grandfather's daily life

Thankfully, the grandfather 'soon recovered' and was up and about again. The poet provides a memorable portrayal of the grandfather's daily life in his new home:

- The grandfather was an early riser: 'Even on cold/ Mornings he is up at six'. We get the impression that he would be the first to get up each morning and would busy himself around the house while the others were still in bed.
- The grandfather, it seems, would be absent from the house for most of the day. He was 'Never there when

you call'. We get the impression that the young poet and his parents didn't really know what the grandfather was doing during these lengthy absences.

- Only 'after dark' would the grandfather return to the house. We get the impression that he rarely greeted the other members of the household on his return. They would hear him taking off his 'great boots' in the hallway and then heading up to his room and shutting his door.

The grandfather also engaged in carpentry or DIY, working with 'a block of wood' and a 'box of nails'. We can imagine him erecting shelves, perhaps, or making cupboards. According to the poet, he did so 'discreetly' or secretly. This suggests that he worked when there was no one else around and didn't discuss what he was building with the other members of the household. The poet amusingly describes how the grandfather was 'up to no good' when he undertook such projects. We can imagine the young poet's parents complaining about dust and noise and half-finished contraptions that were left lying around the place.

A sketch of the grandfather

The grandfather, even in old age, remained physically strong and powerful. We see this in how he recovered quickly from his injuries. The phrase 'great boots', too, suggests his imposing stature. The terms 'thumping' and 'banging', meanwhile, reinforce our sense of his imposing physical presence. There was nothing dainty, then, about the grandfather. He was a big, burly boilermaker, who made his presence felt wherever he went.

The grandfather also comes across as someone who was resilient and uncomplaining. This was someone who didn't mind getting up early in the morning, no matter how cold it was! The phrase 'Wounded but humorous' suggests that he didn't complain about the injuries caused by his accident. Instead, he made light of the accident and the considerable suffering it must have caused him.

The poet also emphasises the grandfather's mental sharpness, even in old age. The grandfather, according to the poet, was 'as cute as they come', was as quick-witted and intelligent as anyone could hope to be. The phrase 'Nothing escapes him' emphasises that the grandfather was a highly observant person, one whose 'shrewd eyes' had the ability to assess and evaluate all he saw.

The grandfather's second childhood

The grandfather's life changed the moment he was stretchered into the young poet's house. He was no longer burdened with the responsibilities of work, of managing his finances or of running his own household. In an important sense, he was no longer part of the world of work and adult responsibility. As a young man, he had ventured out into this world, gaining

employment in the shipyards. Now, as an old man, he was leaving it again: 'They brought him in on a stretcher from the world'

For years, the grandfather had been too pre-occupied with work to think much about the past. Now, in retirement, he has the time to dwell on his long-ago childhood. He has the space to 'recapture' aspects of his own personal history, incidents and details that no one else living can recall: 'a childhood/ Only he can recapture'.

There is a sense of the grandfather enjoying something of a 'second childhood' while residing in the young poet's house. As we noted above, the grandfather no longer has any real responsibilities. He is free to come and go as he pleases, and to tinker about with various projects and activities that may or may not be finished.

There is something childlike, too, about how the grandfather went 'banging round the house' We get the impression that he made quite a bit of noise as he moved from room to room and wasn't terribly bothered about who he disturbed. There were moments, it seems, when the poet's exasperated parents felt like they had taken in a 'four-year-old' child rather than an elderly man.

The grandfather and the future

The grandfather, it seems, has an old-fashioned, mechanical clock in his room. Such clocks had to be wound each evening to ensure they kept accurate time. They would be synchronised or 'set against' the radio, often against the chimes of Big Ben which were broadcast at 10pm each evening.

Mahon, however, declares that his grandfather sets his clock not against the radio but 'Against the future'. This is an example of the poetical device known as 'metonymy', which occurs when a thing or concept is referred to by the name of something closely associated with that thing or concept. Mahon, in this instance, refers to the radio as the 'future'. It is as if the wireless radio, this new-fangled device, represents a future that will be increasingly defined by technology, connectivity and communication.

The grandfather, according to the poet, took a dim view of this technological future. He was someone from an earlier age, who didn't appreciate or even understand the modern world that was dawning in the Belfast of the 1950s and 1960s. The grandfather, we sense, attempted to avoid thinking about these societal changes as much as possible. Metonymy is once again used to illustrate this mindset. We are told that the grandfather would 'bolt the door' not against any physical intruders, but against the future itself. To the grandfather, then, the future is something invasive and intrusive, something to be repelled as much as possible.