



**2015 specification**  
first exams in 2017 (2016 for AS)

# ***Skirrid Hill* Analysis and Activities**

## For A Level (Second Edition)

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# Teacher's Introduction

This resource has been created as a comprehensive guide to *Skirrid Hill*, balanced with detailed commentary on each poem from the collection. In addition, there are a broader overview of the themes and issues explored in the text as well as a selection of critical responses to Sheers' work.

The 'task' pages are designed to encourage independent reading of the poems on the part of the students, with the 'commentary' pages that follow them providing a more detailed and in-depth analysis of each poem in order to develop and extend students' understanding. Commentary pages consist of general discussion followed by a quick-reference grid divided by the relevant Assessment Objectives in order to ensure balanced coverage. The intention is that students should work through the tasks provided before reading the relevant commentaries in order to check/confirm their findings.

At the end of the resource, there is a list of possible wider reading sources.

All technical terms included in the guide are defined on their first usage. A glossary and definitions is also included at the end of the guide.

## Second Edition

This edition of the guide has been fully revised and updated to match the skills assessed for the first time in 2017. It includes new AO specific sections and examples. The edition referenced throughout is the 2005 Seren edition, ISBN: 1-85411-403-4.



A webpage containing all the links listed in this resource is conveniently available on Education's website at [zzed.uk/6766](http://zzed.uk/6766)

You may find this helpful for accessing the websites rather than trying to find them individually.

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# Owen Sheers: The

Owen Sheers was born on 20th September 1974 in Suva, Fiji, moving to London with his mother, a teacher, and his father, a planning inspector, when he was three. The Sheers family moved to Abergavenny when Owen was nine, to a 13-acre smallholding near Llandewi Rydderch, the house that Sheers still views as home (Gee, 2005).

Sheers attended King Henry VIII comprehensive school in Abergavenny, studied English at New College, Oxford, and completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia under the tutelage of Andrew Motion. Sheers was also accepted onto the MA in International Relations and Development course in Bologna, but withdrew when commissioned by Faber to write a novel.

While at university, Sheers captained Oxford University's modern pentathlon team. Sheers has also maintained an interest in rugby, playing at scrum-half for Gwent County, and being appointed in 2011 as Welsh Rugby Union's first 'writer-in-residence', an experience that resulted in *Calon* (2013), a personal exploration by Sheers of the relationship between Welshness and rugby.

Sheers' professional life has been dramatically varied, working at various valleys, as an actor (during which he performed as Wilfred Owen in Louisa's Festival production of *Not About Heroes*), as a researcher for The Big Break television and radio presenter, including writing and presenting the 2009 *Britain*. He did consider, after leaving university, joining the army, some continuing fascination with war and military life, as evidenced by his work *F* (2012) and *Pink Mist* (2013), both based on the experiences of soldiers v

As a writer, Sheers' primary passion is poetry, with his first collection, *T*, poems on topics such as love, farming and family, and his second, *Skirrid Hill*. However, he has also written a number of prose works including the novel *by Sheers into a screenplay*) and *I Saw a Man* (published in 2015), and *The* fiction account of his great-great-uncle's experiences as a missionary in *Zimbabwe*.

Sheers has, however, turned increasingly to drama as a medium as his c plays about the World War II poets Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis (2006 National Theatre Wales productions *The Passion* (2011) and *Mametz* (2014) oratorios *The Water Diviner's Tale* (2007) and *A Violence of Gifts* (2015).

As of July 2015, Owen Sheers lives in Talgarth, near Brecon, with his wife Anwyn, and has recently taken up a post as Professor of Creativity at Sw

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*Points to Consider:*

1. How might Sheers' upbringing, cultural heritage and sense of geographic form and subject, do you think?
2. Based on his biography, how might Sheers choose to represent Wales?
3. Sheers' life has seen him involved with farming and rugby, as well as the military. To what extent might this impact on his view of gender relations?
4. Sheers' career has also seen him involved with popular media. How might this impact on his relationship to his audience in his poetry, and to the style he adopts in his writing?
5. Drawing on all the above, how do you think Sheers might construct himself in his poetry? What might we expect him to display?

## Commentary

Sheers' writing has clearly been shaped by his geographical and cultural multiplicity and, arguably, fragmentation, is clear in poems such as 'Flag in Time', with the latter poem also reflecting his abiding affection for, and

This socio-cultural sensitivity is also visible through the ways in which he writes about his travels: 'Drinking with Hitler', inspired by his experiences in Zimbabwe; 'Under the Superstition Mountain', based on his experiences in northern France; and 'Under the Superstition Mountain', based on his American travels. In each of these poems, Sheers does not simply describe his impression of place, but uses that distanced description to interrogate the human behaviours that we, as an audience, witness.

Perhaps more than anything, this at times almost immersive, analytical sensitivity, seen through an outsider's perspective (perspective: point of view), is present in the recurring image or symbol) of Welshness, the tension between Welsh and English, and the sometimes transgressive-seeming crossing of borders in poems such as 'The Fort', 'Flag', 'The Steelworks', 'Liable to Floods', 'History', and 'Skirrid Hill'.

Sheers himself has recognised the influence of Welsh culture on his writing. He has acknowledged the influence of R S Thomas' poem, 'Gifts', on his own poem, 'Inheritance', and the 'lyricism' (lyricism: emotionally focussed and song-like qualities) of Edward Thomas, a Welsh poet, on the style of *Skirrid Hill* as a whole (Gee, 2005). There are also references to Thomas, another great Anglo-Welsh poet, in Sheers' linguistic playfulness and the saturation of imagery (imagery: detailed description) that Sheers himself describes as 'music, an elemental vision' (Sheers, 2014).

As much as anything, it is possible that his frequent use of tercets (tercet: a three-line stanza) in this collection is a deliberate distancing of himself from the traditional interlocking quatrains (quatrain: a four-line stanza) that is seen so frequently in English poetry, and a reference to older Welsh epic verse forms.

Given Sheers' culturally varied upbringing and eventual settlement on the Welsh coast, it is not a surprise that, despite a slight cultural bias towards his 'native' land and Welsh, his own speaking voice should be so distinctively Received Pronunciation (Received Pronunciation: a standard English accent). This is perhaps at the root of his juxtaposition (juxtaposition: placing two things side-by-side for comparison) of the Welsh and English in poems such as 'Flag' and the diptych (diptych: two linked pieces) 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort', and the collection as a whole, as a way of exploring the boundaries between people, places and nations.

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Sheers' childhood experiences are also a key influence on the images of nature that feature so heavily in the collection and the theme of natural cycles and human intervention in 'Mametz Wood' that 'tended the land back into itself' to the traditional agricultural landscape in 'The Farrier', 'Late Spring' and 'The Equation'; from the rugged terrain of 'The Country' through to the relationship between man and nature, and the human impact on the environment in 'Hedge School'.

The focus on these masculine trades and traits is echoed by something of a masculine perspective in Sheers' poetry: from the fraternal connections and male bonding in 'Marking Time' through to the dominant and occasionally destructive masculinity in poems like 'The Farrier'. Sheers only rarely constructs a sense of a female perspective ('Amazon') or examines female perspectives, and even then it is often implied and never from a first-person perspective. This may be an issue of authenticity: Sheers' poetry depends on the construction of an apparently autobiographical (but often a fiction account of one's own life) investment on the part of the poet, fed with transitions between generations, sexual intimacy and emotional friction. The struggle to situate the self within the various identity discourses (discourse of something; a treatise) available. As a relatively young, male, poet, perhaps, as no surprise that he should so frequently focus on the concerns of the individual and on nationality.

This self-aware, constructed, confessional style is balanced by poems such as 'Swans' and 'Valentine', where the carefully composed rhythms of speech and the precision Sheers achieves, a success built partially, perhaps, on his habit of composing poems in his head, then typing it while fresh, editing the printed version.

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# Skirrid Hill

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The title, *Skirrid Hill*, is taken from Ysgyryd Fawr in the Black Mountains, the poet's hometown, Abergavenny, and around 10 miles from the Welsh/English border from which it draws its name: 'ysgyryd', anglicised as 'skirrid', refers to a ridge or hill, emphasised by its steep and unstable flanks and lengthy summit ridge.

Actually the result, most likely, of ice-age slippage, there are a number of theories about its jagged edge. The most famous is that the hill was shattered at the end of the last ice age (mentioned obliquely in 'Farther'), with the hill becoming a site of pilgrimage. It is also believed locally to be both holy and extremely fertile (as in 'Skirrid Hill'), with stones scattered on fields, included in the foundations of churches, and used in various ways.

The hill was also the site of a now-ruined Iron Age fort (as, perhaps, in 'The Fort'), and a medieval Roman Catholic church.

## Points to Consider:

1. Why might Ysgyryd Fawr be a significant location for Sheers both personally and culturally?
2. What might the symbolic relevance of the shape of the hill be, and could it be any way?
3. Why might Sheers have chosen to title the collection *Skirrid Hill*, using the Welsh word and the English word for the second?
4. What aspects of the hill's history and cultural significance might Sheers have considered from his perspective, do you think?

## Commentary:

In his 'note on the title', Sheers has recorded 'Skirrid' as derived from 'Ysgyryd', meaning 'separation'. As a title, then, *Skirrid Hill* can be seen as functioning on a number of levels: to the centrality of the landscape and the sense of fixity of place in the collection; to the recurring theme of connection and separation that features so prominently in the collection; and to the structure of the poems themselves in transition from connection to separation or from apart to together.

However, the title is also a collation of the (admittedly anglicised) Welsh words 'skirrid' and 'hill'. In this sense, linking to the geographical location of the hill, the title can be seen as both division and connection in terms of the physical border between countries, and to the poetically constructed figure of Sheers himself: consistently linked to the landscape in the collection (in 'Last Act' or 'Keyways', for example, or as the cause of his exile with self-fulfilling isolation ('Skirrid Fawr'), and culturally straddling the border between Wales and England, and effectively embodying the gradual anglicisation of Welsh culture.

Whichever is correct, there is also a link between the title of the poem and the collection: consistently, Sheers uses images of height or flight to emphasise his position ('Farther', 'Border Country'), and the collection as a whole seems to offer a sense of escape with Sheers as a literary construct, and the locations and characters who inhabit it, their omniscience limited by authorial subjectivity.

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# 'Last Act'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. What are the possible meanings of 'act', and which meanings apply here? Dramatic performance? A physical action? A phase within a play? False or deceptive behaviour?
- ii. With your answers to (i) in mind, in what sense is this poem a last act? The last performance before reality? The final action before death? The final phase of a life or an experience? The final deception before honesty?

### TASK TWO: Structure

The poem moves, arguably, from confession to the revelation of the poet as the 'actor, bowing as himself'. Bearing this in mind, try to identify quotations from the poem that match the following:

- ♦ intimate, personal addressing of the audience by the poet
- ♦ images clarifying the function of the poems in the collection (the collection as a whole)
- ♦ theatre metaphor (metaphor: describing one thing as another) to describe the relationship and of gradual revelation
- ♦ apparently 'real' representation of the author

### TASK THREE: Form

- i. Sheers has written this poem as a single stanza in free verse (free verse: no regular rhyme or metre). Why has he made this choice?
  - ♦ as an indication that he is either expressing or consciously controlling his emotions
  - ♦ as an abandonment of a façade
  - ♦ as an assertion of modernity
- ii. Look at the shape of the poem: is there any relevance to it? Could it be a 'missing teeth', the grooves of the 'record', the stage 'curtain'?

### TASK FOUR: Language

- i. The poem hinges on a series of images. For each of the following images, identify the vocabulary that contributes to each semantic field (semantic field: vocabulary related to a particular topic) and the symbolic function each image performs.
  - ♦ acting and the theatre
  - ♦ gaps and absences
  - ♦ the body
  - ♦ language
- ii. What impression might this combination of images offer of Sheers' self?
- iii. How does the style Sheers adopts in this poem, of an intimate confession, affect your response?

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**TASK FIVE: Context and Representation**

Sheers has, obviously, chosen to present this poem as a personal revelation.

- i. To what extent could we see aspects of this poem as being autobiographical?
- ii. What impression does the poet-narrator (narrator: story-telling voice) offer of the intended recipient?
- iii. What impression does the poem offer of the intended recipient?

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

Sheers has positioned this poem deliberately as a precursor to the collection of remaining poems.

- i. How then are we as an audience supposed to view the remaining poems as 'scenes stacked in the wings'?
- ii. Taking 'Last Act' as a stylistic model, what are the qualities we expect of the remaining poems?
- iii. Olivia Cole (2005) has described each moment in the collection as being 'captured, yet knowingly recollected by an 'I' who notices that even that 'I', is not here to stay'. To what extent is this sense of external truth true of 'Last Act'?

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## Commentary

It's worth interrogating Sheers' intentions in beginning the collection with 'Last Act'. Should we view this as the ending of a process, of a relationship retracing of the 'previous scenes stacked in the wings'? Is this the final poem (dramatic) before the honesty of the other poems, where he fills in the 'gaps' as a healing process?

Whichever is true, the poem itself feels personal. Sheers has adopted an iambic pentameter, offering him freedom of linguistic expression, lineation, form and rhythm (of stressed and unstressed syllables in lines of verse). That said, the lines are mostly iambic pentameter, and it's always worth noting where in Sheers' poems the iambic pentameter (hyposyllabic: fewer than the usual number of syllables), as a euphemistic tone (euphemism: a more acceptable expression substituted for an offensive) of 'to show you these', broken uncomfortably from the neatly iambic pentameter syllable line) first line, or hypersyllabic (hypersyllabic: more than the usual number of syllables) the similarly decasyllabic and perspective-shifting 'and at the centre, under the movement from the lengthier lines of performance to the shorter lines of

The personal tone is also evident in the confessional intimacy he offers the reader, the 'teeth' and the 'stuck record' of his 'tongue', an oral image continued in the poem, referencing Sheers' stammer. The image resonates with the 'zero of the vowel', potentially, the 'spotlight' that exposes the actor/author at the end. In each poem, the last, there is a lack, something needed, potentially even in a phallic/ymale genitalia and power, yonic: symbolising female genitalia and feminine speech, a numerical value. It is only the spotlight itself where the circle is the actor, both a completed absence and a framing device.

It is interesting that Sheers should use the theatre as a motif here, particularly in the context of theatrical experiences. Both poetry and acting are performative media, the former thinly veiled autobiography and the other is often seen as authorial ventriloquism. To 'show the parts we've played', Sheers is effectively breaking the fourth wall, emphasising the conscious construction of the art form through which he is performing. Irony, of course, is that he is demonstrating this deconstruction through exposing 'himself' through a carefully composed poetic voice.

As well as theatre, speech and language are recurring motifs in the collection. The 'O' is used here, though as an absence rather than a presence: the 'O' is 'silen', the 'word' is a 'zero' that is 'failing to catch'. It is this last image, of an inability to catch, is the most evocative: Sheers as a constructed voice (since we cannot guarantee the truth of the offering the poems in the collection as an apparently intensely personal

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Ambiguity of the title
- ♦ Constructed sense of honesty/confession/revelation
- ♦ Implied intimacy between narrative voice and audience
- ♦ Motifs of theatre, the body and language
- ♦ Sense of romantic involvement?
- ♦ Truth at the end of a relationship?

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Positioned
- ♦ Use of sing
- ♦ Shape rep
- ♦ Constructi
- ♦ Structural speaker ar ('we've pla perspectiv
- ♦ Use of cae line of ver sentence o create and
- ♦ Semantic f communic
- ♦ Lots of sib sounds) to

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers as actor (Hay Festival production of *Not About Heroes*, Louis de Bernière's preferred choice for Captain Corelli)
- ♦ Relative youth of Sheers at time of writing: focus on romantic and sexual intimacy, use of free verse with informal register to reflect abandonment of boundaries
- ♦ Sheers' stammer, referenced in *The Blue Book*
- ♦ Sheers' increasing shift towards theatre as a medium

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Male-dom 'Marking'
- ♦ Dissolutio 'Valentine' 'Four Mov
- ♦ Performar
- ♦ 'L. A. Ever

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ An end or a beginning?
- ♦ From a post-modern perspective, should this poem be read as honest performance? Does the poem acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity of 'I'?
- ♦ Is poetry here being linked to or juxtaposed with drama?
- ♦ Is this intended to construct an intimacy with the reader or to create

# T S Eliot, 'East Coker'

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T S Eliot was a Nobel Prize-winning Modernist poet, playwright and critic. An Anglo-American writer (he was born in Missouri but lived the majority of his life in England), Eliot was well aware of the generative friction between his birthplace and his chosen nationality, as he discussed at length in several interviews during his later life (Miller, 2001).

Eliot regarded *Four Quartets* as his masterpiece, and it was this that secured his place in English Literature. 'East Coker' (1940), the second of the poems, draws on Christian mythology in order to offer a sense of transitional processes and journey towards eternity, natural order and disorder, the interconnectedness of humanity.

It's a poem also with a clear familial relevance to Eliot, taking its title from the family lived before his ancestors emigrated to America. As such, it's not surprising to find on a number of British poets as stylistic influences, though filtering them through his own perspective.

## *Points to Consider:*

1. In terms of the language here, what might the significance be of the proliferation of comparatives ('older', 'stranger', 'more complicated')?
2. Can you identify any points of connection between Eliot and Sheers either in their poetry or their lives?
3. The quotation seems to focus on life and death, and the increasing sense of division and alienation; what thematic resonances might this have for Sheers' poems, do you think?
4. Sheers clearly intends for his audience to see this quotation as an introduction to his work. What might we infer from this choice?

## Commentary

It's extremely difficult not to see some sense of situational connectedness between Eliot and Sheers: both have experienced the distancing effect of ex-pat life and a creative drive towards interrelation; both have written in a range of literary forms; both have drawn on nature for inspiration for their poetry; both use human relationships and landscape motifs within those works; both acknowledge the influence of great writers; both have a sense of individuation and self-expression within their work.

The quotation itself is also an interesting choice in its focus on the communal experience of ageing, on the increasing sense of division and alienation that Eliot (and Sheers) experienced, and the framing influence of mortality and the complexity of simply living ('Mametz Wood', 'Border Country', 'On Going' and 'The Wake'). It's also a choice that invites the audience to share in the experience, and, perhaps, to see the creative process of developmental comparison ('older', 'stranger', 'more complicated').

At the very least, the quotation references or hints at the majority of the themes that Sheers explores in his poetry: youth and age; the experiential tensions between individuals and the world; the alienated perspective that modern life offers; the awareness of mortality and the struggle of living.

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# ‘Mametz Wood’

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## Some Context

Mametz Wood was a location in northern France involved in the Battle of the Somme (1916), the bloodiest conflict in World War I. Of the 38th Welsh Division troops stationed there, including the writers Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, David Jones, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, around 4,000 men did not survive the battle. Owen Sheers travelled to the site in 2001 to make a documentary about the 85th anniversary of the battle, and was inspired to write this poem while there, returning to the subject for his 2014 collaboration with National Theatre Wales, *Mametz*.

## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- Why might Sheers have been struck by the conflict that took place in Mametz Wood?
- What has happened to the landscape since the conflict, and why might this be significant?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- Sheers has chosen to write the poem in tercets, in lines that are either slightly above or below that. How does this fit with his subject matter? Are the lines dramatically over or under 10 syllables? Is there any significance to this?
- The poem takes us through the general process since the battle ('ten years' / '... the earth stands sentinel'), and then 'this morning'. Why might this be? What narrative (narrative: story) structure, do you think? Is there a thematic focus on time?

### TASK THREE: Language

Read through the following points regarding the language of the poem.

- Everyone in the poem is referred to by their role and/or as part of a group, not as individuals.
- There are semantic fields of farming, conflict, broken items of value.
- Sheers uses harsh, plosive (plosive: short, explosive speech sounds) throughout the poem to describe items such as the 'blown / and broken' / 'broken mosaic of bone'.
- Many of the lines feature caesuras and/or enjambment.

### TASK FOUR: References

Each of the following has a wider resonance beyond the poem. For each, what might be:

- 'the wasted young'
- 'plough blades' / 'shoulder blade'
- 'walk, not run'

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**TASK FIVE: Imagery**

For each of the following images, try to decide what it is intended to represent.

- 'the blown / and broken bird's egg of a skull', 'the wood and its nest'
- 'reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened / like a wound on the surface of the skin'
- 'a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm, / their skeletons paused'
- 'their jaws, those that have them, dropped open. / As if the notes they made with this unearthing, / slipped from their absent tongues'

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

Ultimately, what is the reader supposed to 'take away' from this poem, or what does it suggest?

- a sense that the soldiers are 'at peace' now that their voices have been silenced
- a sense of the protective, nurturing power of nature
- a sense of both the healing power and the destructive power of nature
- Carrie Etter (2006) has argued that the poem, 'by leaving the soldiers' fate on the relationship between the earth and their bones, remains a detached perspective'. To what extent would you agree that the poem offers a detached perspective? What human engagement and sympathy with its subject?

**Commentary**

Although 'Last Act' was the first of Sheers' poems that we came across in this collection, the poem Sheers has positioned as beginning the poetry collection itself.

Much like 'Last Act', the poem juxtaposes the past and present through a dual perspective. However, where 'Last Act' saw Sheers using a single stanza form (known as vers libre), 'Mametz Wood' sees Sheers still using unrhymed lines (but often anchored on the 10-syllable mark), but adopting the stanza form that was often used in Welsh poetry (these three-line stanzas are unusual in modern English-language verse, but they are common in Welsh poetry: an assertion of individual identity on the part of Sheers, rather than an attempt to establish a self-consciously 'Welsh' poetic form, perhaps echoing the Welsh epic form written in tercets); the incompleteness of the soldiers' names.

The poem begins with a deliberately vague passage of time, with soft consonant sounds on the 'f' sound in the first line ('afterwards the farmers' gentle view of the farmers' efforts to 'tend[...] the land back into itself', is linked to both weapons ('blades', 'guns') and reflecting the jaggedness of the landscape ('relic', 'blown', 'broken', 'egg', 'skull' and so on). The phrase 'the wasted generation' and then separated further by the caesura before 'turning up', echoes the phrase 'lost generation', often used to describe the generation of young men who fought in the First World War and 'turning up', however, also suggest spontaneity, the bones found with the war, but humanity but remembered by the earth.

The value and fragility of human life is emphasised through references to 'plate', 'relic' and 'egg', with the last item ironically reflected in the reference to 'guns' in the third stanza. The enjambment in this stanza also perhaps reflects the soldiers' fate towards the enemy troops, with the cutting off of 'not run' at the end of the line, reflecting the cutting off of the orders and the cutting short of lives. These abbreviated lives are a contrast to the specificity with which the men are described: 'them', 'the wasted young', 'their', 'those'. In each instance, the soldiers only possess a group identity.

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arguably a reflection of World War I attitudes to the troops, and also a sense of fraternity that we see elsewhere.

'The earth' in stanza four is used as a protective, healing presence, where the soldiers are placed against the soldiers, but also against the landscape, which is forced to 'wear the surface of the skin', describing both the discovery of the literally foreign and the removal of an undesirable item from the body of the earth, though softened by sibilance.

After the shift in focus contained within the fourth stanza, we then see a 'morning', where the men provide an image of fraternity, even death, offered thanks to the simplicity of Sheers' phrasing, and the image of the 'dance' and of death as the great leveller. The sense of being 'paused' is effective in 'back at an angle' and of their 'notes' now 'slipp[ing]' from their absent to present music links to the 'broken mosaic' in order to represent the inability of the past to be fully understood. It could also be a reference to the racial identity of the men: the idea of the 'dance' demonstrating harmonious living and fraternal bonding.

Ultimately, what Sheers appears to be discussing is the importance of re-engaging with the past in order to learn from the human experiences, of life rather than death, and of self-expression.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ A poetic war memorial?
- ♦ A metaphor for the importance of uncovering the past both personally and culturally?
- ♦ Tension caused by nationality? Or universality of experience?
- ♦ Vital importance of self-expression as a means of respecting the past?

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Tercets (and the use of the deca-syllabic line)
- ♦ Use of caesura
- ♦ Consonance and assonance for emphasis
- ♦ Structure moving from the healing present and then the distant past
- ♦ Impersonality

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers considered a military career after university
- ♦ Sheers visited Mametz Wood in 2001, returned to the topic for his 2014 play *Mametz*, and has also written two plays about war poets
- ♦ Predominantly Welsh troops fought in Mametz Wood, part of (arguably) the bloodiest conflict in modern history

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Masculinity: 'Joseph Jones'
- ♦ Relationship with 'Far Country', 'Far Intermision'
- ♦ Importance of 'Intermission'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Is the poem intended to be consolatory or as a poetic memorial for the troops?
- ♦ From a Modernist perspective, are the destructiveness and regeneration narrative cycle, or simply oppositional and irreconcilable?
- ♦ Does the poem encourage or prevent personal engagement with the conflict?

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# 'The Farrier'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- To what extent do you think Sheers might be drawing on his own experience? How might he view the character of the farrier as representing?
- This is another example of an individual defined by their gender and role. If you were intended to view this, do you think?
- Sheers is, once again, focussing on a male-centred view of an experience. How does it impact on our view of him as a poet?

### TASK TWO: Structure and Form (i)

The poem essentially follows the chronological structure (chronology: the placing of things in the order they occur) of shoeing a horse... but what is the significance of each of the following movements within that, do you think?

- static presence of male, defined by masculine role
- gender-defined female led to male
- moment of intimacy, then shared process controlled by male
- abrupt dismissal of female by male
- aftermath / consequences of event



### TASK THREE: Structure and Form (ii)

Sheers has used several features of form here that occur throughout the poem. What purpose does each of the following serve?

- tercets
- lines of an irregular syllabic count
- use of enjambment, end-stopping (end-stopping: ending lines of a stanza with a full stop that causes a stoppage of some kind) and caesuras for various effects
- a decasyllabic single-line stanza acting as a conclusion/punchline

### TASK FOUR: Gender Representation

Read through the lists of verbs, nouns and key images below, then decide which are given of each of the genders.

#### Masculinity

- blessing, pinches, waits, runs, folding, leans, catches, cups, drops, branding, gritted, pinning, placing, gives, watches, biting
- leather, rain-beaten bay, roll-up, smoke, nails, tools, steel, wood
- 'a man putting his shoulder to a knackered car'
- 'a romantic lead dropping to the lips of his lover'

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## Femininity

- ♦ led, smells, fallen, leave, walking
- ♦ neck, back leg, flank, hoof, fetlock, lips, moon-sliver clippings, from shoes, strange ground, heels
- ♦ 'dust on a lintel'
- ♦ 'fallen from a table'

## TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem

Below are some possible interpretations of the poem. For each, decide whether you support it, and what the possible counter-arguments might be. To what do you think?

- i. The poem is about the power imbalance in society between men and women. Men exercise patriarchal control over women in every aspect of life, including intimacy.
- ii. The poem is about the enduring beauty and utility of traditional traditional rural modes of life.
- iii. Lisa Gee (2005) has argued that 'Sheers's poems are imbued with a sense of place. Wales, its people and livestock. [...] Consequently, the hills, woods and valleys are almost invariably populated. Animals interact with humans or are a part of this view of the relationship between people and their natural environment. What is the poem's view of the relationship between people and their natural environment?' What does the poem say about this view?

## Commentary

Following on from 'Mametz Wood' (and 'Last Act'), 'The Farrier' also plays with the relationship between the past and the present, though here it's through the unpacking of a poem.

The poem depicts a skilled worker performing his regular task (another role), and there is a sense of familiarity, regularity and circularity to the scene. The tools and processes included have not changed fundamentally in centuries. The physical control over the mare, cutting 'moon-sliver clippings', excavating 'filing', 'branding on a shoe' with 'nails gritted between his teeth'. There is a sense of the established interaction of humankind and nature, reinforced by the traditional stanza (subtly referencing Welsh poetic heritage again?), and the use of diction to mimic the naturally flowing rhythms of speech.

However, the above aspects are also increasingly alienating for modern readers. The labour undertaken is less relevant than the 'knackered car', representing a relic of the past into the present, but also questioning the longevity of this kind of work.

It is difficult not to also interpret the poem as being about gender dynamics. The poems so far encourage readers to identify moments of connection and disconnection. The fraternal connection between soldiers and the sense of the present 'touch of the past' in 'Last Act', the apparently confessional connection between the narrator and the reader in 'The Farrier' is understood to be the connection between humankind and nature or between the past and the present. Both are valid, but ignore the gendered representation of the participant.

The farrier himself, dressed in the symbols of his craft, static and indulgent, represents patriarchal control and masculine consumption (a sterile, destructive force which shapes rather than creates, reflected in the sharp, metallic tools of his trade and the smoke), with the mare (something organic and natural) objectified.

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domesticity and femininity, from the 'lintel' on which he checks for dust has 'just fallen from the table' through to the passive lover of the 'roman assume to be contained within the bridal dress, and even the 'knackered

It is possible even to extend this reading into something more overtly in 'the length of her neck', folds 'her back leg' and 'leans into her flank', be his lover' and then begins the 'close work' before 'placing his tools in the or patriarchal phallic image), dismissively giving 'her a slap', watching 'cutting' of the 'moon-silver clippings' could be the erosion or destruction (many ancient cultures, including Welsh, viewed the moon as a symbol of purity), with the awkwardness of 'her new shoes' and the 'strange ground impact of the experience on her. This is then reinforced by the 'sound of as a single line to represent her isolation/rejection, offering a more negative tercet, and finishing on a more plosive-dominated and sibilant line with and social ruination in the verb 'biting'.

In this reading, the poem represents male dominance through utility and control, along with the exploitation and objectification of the female, all the present, with Sheers then interrogating modern gender dynamics as than a radical recognition of the equality of the genders.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ◆ Impersonal representation of participants, defined by social roles
- ◆ Depiction of skilled trades / loss of traditions?
- ◆ Focus on patriarchal dominance and consequence of intimacy?
- ◆ Interrelation of nature and mankind?

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ◆ Tercets, but si
- ◆ Use of caesura of sibilance an atmosphere
- ◆ Observational
- ◆ Structural pat or simile (sim

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ◆ Sheers largely raised on smallholding in close proximity to farming community, and did some work on local farms
- ◆ Wales hugely influenced by industrialisation (including decline of cottage industries and smallholdings, depersonalisation of craft) in nineteenth century, followed by a shift from extractive/heavy industries to public sector work in the mid to late twentieth century

**AO4: Explore con**

- ◆ Gendered inte 'Valentine', 'V
- ◆ Relationship v 'Joseph Jones'
- ◆ Relationship v 'Border Coun
- ◆ Importance of 'History'
- ◆ Importance of 'Intermission'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ◆ Is this a poem about romantic/sexual intimacy or the decline of tradition
- ◆ From a Feminist perspective, is the relationship described here one not semi-abusive patriarchal dominance?
- ◆ Does the relative anonymity reinforce the transience of the experience o message?

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# 'Inheritance'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Consider what the word 'inheritance' actually means.

Which meaning applies here?

- ♦ birthright
- ♦ heritage
- ♦ legacy

### TASK TWO: The Dedication

Sheers refers to the poem as written 'After R. S. Thomas'. Thomas was a nationalist Welsh poet and clergyman with a dislike of the anglicisation of the Welsh landscape and people.

Find out what you can about Thomas and, in particular, the poem 'Gifts' used as a model for 'Inheritance'.

- What aspects has Sheers borrowed or referenced in the poem?
- Are there any parallels you can discover between the two poets?

### TASK THREE: Form and Structure

For each of the structural or form aspects listed, try to decide why Sheers

- three stanzas, with the first focussing on his father, the second on his mother
- two septets (septet: a seven-line stanza) followed by a single sestet (a six-line stanza)
- irregular syllabic counts
- occasional rhymes and half-rhymes

### TASK FOUR: Father, Mother and Marriage

The various images linked to the father and mother, and their marriage: what impression do these offer of each parent and of their union, do you think?

Father:

- ♦ 'a stammer / like a stick in the spokes of my speech'; 'tired blink'; 'order' in terms of the 'maps'; 'chaos of bad weather'

Mother:

- ♦ 'pain in the pleasure'; 'eye's blue ore'; 'quiet moments'; 'wet horse lathe / turning fact into fable'

Marriage:

- ♦ 'they forged'; 'shared lives'; 'testing it'; 'years' hard hammer'; 'reconciliation on its side'

### TASK FIVE: The Final Stanza

What impression is offered in this final stanza of:

- ♦ the successful marriage of the parents (and Sheers' feelings about it)
- ♦ intimacy in a general sense

### TASK SIX: Interpretations

- ♦ Sarah Crown (2006) sees the 'sense of almost marvel at the beautiful union' as being 'reflected in the poem's dialectical structure, in which father and mother lead to the joyful synthesis of the final verse'. To what view of the poem as a competitive or oppositional interaction does this refer?

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## Commentary

There has been a focus on issues of heritage and legacy throughout the poem, and this is the first of the poems to focus explicitly on family.

Sheers has labelled the poem as being 'After R. S. Thomas', and, as ever, it is as possible. First, and on a basic level, the poem is clearly influenced by Thomas' use of the phrase 'from my', which begins both poems. Thomas' poem sees two single lines, with the first tercet and single line focussing on 'gifts' he has from his country, and the second tercet and single line focussing on those he gives to his country. Sheers' use of three stanzas partially echoes Thomas, with a collative stanza for his parents, and then a final sestet focussing on their relationship and the nation they forged', in a sense the poetic product of their connection.

However, 'After R. S. Thomas' can also suggest a poetic inheritance, where Sheers adopts aspects of Thomas' work or sees himself as the literary inheritor of it. Despite his Welsh heritage and nationalism, Thomas wrote his poetry in English, and was on the Welsh landscape and the people who populate it, often lamenting the loss of traditional culture, while Sheers, as we've already seen, shares similar concerns now in this poem.

'Inheritance' can refer either to qualities or items received from a previous generation, or to receiving those qualities or items. In this instance, both definitions apply. The poem begins with the qualities he has received from his father, beginning with the 'stammer' in 'my speech', where the 'st' and 'sp' consonant clusters create a disrupted rhythm, like the interrupted cycling image (itself perhaps offering resonances of father and son, though also suggesting disrupted communication and an inherited inability to 'go Farther'). While the poem lacks a regular metre, the third line feels drawn out, perhaps, a momentary pause after the end-stopping comma, another for the father.

The 'bones' and 'bare stone', including the phonological connection of the 'n' and 's' features), suggest a situated fixity and a foundational connection between the father (and, we can infer, the innate structuring of his sense of self) and the experience of the landscape, while the final two lines juxtapose the 'order of maps' and the 'order of things', reflecting both the explicit (and masculine?) attempt to measure, rationalise, and the transient emotional uncontrollability that flows across the surface of the landscape.

The qualities from the mother are in direct opposition to this: the emotional depth of the 'pain in the pleasure'; the sense of emotionally delving into the landscape suggested by the 'eye's blue ore'; the physically connecting the father 'beside a wet horse' in the 'rain-loud stable', an image of passivity and domesticity, contrasting with the 'chaos of bad weather' associated with the father. The final image in the poem, 'joiner's lathe / turning fact into fable' suggests an interpretive shaping, of the stammer and the imposition of order of the maps. It is also perhaps a reference to his mother, an English teacher.

The final stanza explores the combined legacy of the two parents, the 'deeds' of the father with a semantic field of blacksmithing used to represent the timelessness of their marriage and, more importantly, the sense of making required in the 'forged' (though notice the past tense), and 'test[ed]', despite the pressure of this is not organic growth, it is a conscious crafting, shaping and sharing of the personal and emotional intimacy and privacy of the poem that it is a passion below the surface hidden within the intimacy of the relationship, publicly visible 'sides'.

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# Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Masculine exterior, sterile, static, structural
- ♦ Feminine interior, organic, movable
- ♦ Focus on links between people and landscape
- ♦ Relationship represented as collation of individuals, but as something collaboratively created and shaped

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Three-stanza
- ♦ Metrically irre
- ♦ Structuring re
- ♦ Thomas) and
- ♦ to offer hint o
- ♦ Use of phonol
- ♦ 'sp' to reflect s

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers' father was a planning inspector ('maps', 'order')
- ♦ Sheers' mother was an English teacher ('fact into fable')
- ♦ Idea of traditional crafts/lifestyles, rural
- ♦ R S Thomas as Anglo-Welsh writer

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Representatio
- ♦ 'Amazon', 'Or
- ♦ Male sterility/
- ♦ Farrier', 'Josep
- ♦ Familial conti
- ♦ 'Trees', 'Y Gae

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Are the two characters part of a collaborative, holistic whole, contrasting
- ♦ Is the poem about biological/familial, literary inheritance or both?
- ♦ Possible Marxist reading: interrogating historical inevitability and cycle
- ♦ Possible Feminist reading: are the inherited female qualities positive wh
- ♦ are negative, or does the relationship of the inherited features go beyond

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# ‘Marking Time’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Once again, the title could mean more than one thing. For each, decide how well it fits the poem as a whole:

- ♦ the time to mark / the time when marking happened
- ♦ waiting, pausing (as in music)

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure (1)

The poem is divided into two septets (seven-line stanzas):

- Why two stanzas? What is the focus of each? Could the split be a reflection of individual participants in the ‘marking’ event? A sense of before and after?
- Each stanza begins with an immediate reflection, then revisits a memory. What is the sense of aftermath/result/consequence. How effective is this?

### TASK THREE: Form and Structure (2)

The poem moves through several basic sections. For each one, decide how the focus of the section is presented, how the language reflects the focus and what images are associated with the focus of each section:

- reflection on the event
- the sexual experience
- the wound
- the aftermath

### TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery

- How is the process of the narrative reflected in the pronoun (pronoun: words that replace nouns, such as ‘he’ or ‘she’) use throughout the poem?
- Sheers uses a range of consonance and alliteration (alliteration: the repetition of sounds) throughout the poem, though particularly of the ‘f’, ‘w’, ‘b’ sounds. What impact do these have?
- What are the possible meanings of ‘volte’, and which do you think are the most likely?

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- iv. For each of the following semantic fields, identify which parts of the field, and the overall impression offered:
  - ♦ wounds and the body
  - ♦ water and nautical imagery
  - ♦ static and sterile imagery
- v. For each of the following examples, try to identify as many points as possible:
  - ♦ 'our lust wouldn't wait for bed, / so laid us out upon the floor'
  - ♦ 'we worked up that scar'
  - ♦ 'brand-burn secret in the small of your back'
  - ♦ 'the still waters of your skin broken'
  - ♦ 'though changed, under the bark, the skin, / the loving scar rem

#### **TASK FIVE: Doubling**

The poem features a range of examples of doubling and unification, including function do the following serve, and are there any other techniques they

- ♦ 'your back is fading / in the way our memory will'
- ♦ 'two tattered flags flying from your spine's mast'
- ♦ 'the equation of their names equalled by an arrow'

#### **TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. What impression is given of the two genders in the poem, do you think?
- ii. What might the idea of the 'wound'/'scar' suggest about relationship in particular?
- iii. What impression does Sheers give of sexual intimacy in the poem, do you think?
- iv. The description of the experience and the aftermath as being memory of the nature of the event, rather than an ongoing process. What might this suggest about sexual connections?
- v. Olivia Cole (2005) has described poems in the collection as containing 'contemplated emotion' (though also criticising Sheers' 'almost legal' style). To what extent is the authentic-seeming autobiographical style in 'Mar

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## Commentary

While 'The Farrier' can be interpreted as addressing gender as a social issue, this collection to explicitly address romantic or sexual relationships.

The title is, once again, open to a number of valid interpretations: the time for constructing a fixed point within the relationship; a pause or a break in the musical sense; in theory, it could refer to the rearing of livestock, a symbol of ownership ('a brand-burn') or on the marking of ewes during a pack placed on rams. All three are logical: this is clearly a significant moment of transition, a 'volte' (volta/volte: a shift within the structure of a poem) in the sense of the impermanence of the romantic connection juxtaposed with the fact that this is a self-enclosed and private experience, a pause from the continuing process. The scar does provide a lasting physical representation on the woman of their sexual connection, an ongoing form of intimate connection through the permanence of the scar that is created through the sexual act ('the loving scar').

The poem is constructed from two septets with lines varying in length, though it is possibly referencing a sonnet (sonnet: 14-line love poem). This is a form that often deals with the sense of transitioning between isolation to connection and in the experience of intimate connections, the two poems do share some similarities.

The pronoun use throughout the poem reflects the distinction between the experience and subsequently preserved as a memory ('our memory', 'our lust', 'laid us out'), the metaphorical 'we made our marks') and the physical record of the partnership ('upon your back', 'flags flying from your spine', 'the small of your back', 'the loving scar'). The physical scarring is described as 'finally fading', and as 'flags flying from your back', consonants sounding non-threatening and continuous, as with the alliteration 'we worked', and 'made our marks like lovers', and the gentle sibilance 'the small', further developed in the second stanza with 'the still waters of her skin' and 'the loving scar remains'.

While the poem is, technically, in free verse, there are hints of regularity around 10 syllables, with only two dramatically hyposyllabic lines, both of which are 'where we worked up that scar' and 'the loving scar remains'), suggesting a sense of being abbreviated, or in need of healing. In addition, the first stanza contains a metaphor that reflects the self-enclosed nature of the sexual experience.

Within that experience, the 'lust' is described as something urgent and intense that overpowers the participants and leaves them 'laid out'. This sense of a unifying force is similarly reflected in the image of the single mast flying from the ship (echoed in the reference to 'the still waters' of her skin), and the reference to 'the small of your back' equalled by an arrow', though both provide sterile images, despite the fact that the 'skin' is 'the small of your back'. It is this lust and the moment of sexual intimacy that resulted, which is the relationship that 'buckles under time but never leaves', allowing the narrator to 'feel the disturbance again' both physically and emotionally.

What the poem seems to suggest is that, while the emotional and romantic connection flows and ebbs, the moment of sexual intimacy that the couple have shared remains between them, even if simply a memory, though it's noticeable that it is the consequences of the act, 'under the bark' though they may be.



## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Representation of the genders
- ♦ Sex as both means of collaborative connection and dominating force
- ♦ Idea of (negative?) impact of interaction on woman represented by scar/wound
- ♦ Natural imagery juxtaposed with human reference frame

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of two sta then aftermat
- ♦ Use of irregul lines
- ♦ Reliance on er and continuity
- ♦ Personificatio human qualit
- ♦ Use of allitera atmosphere
- ♦ Pronouns shif experience to

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Possible reference to farming / marking of livestock, particularly ewes?
- ♦ Sheers' formative years spent in close proximity to a farming community
- ♦ Modern attitudes towards gender, sex and sexuality (responsibility, mismatch between male and female consequences of sexual activity, shift from external to more intimate symbols of mutuality and ownership)

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Sexual connec 'Night Windo
- ♦ Female suffer 'On Going', 'S
- ♦ Link between 'Night Windo
- ♦ Experience an Farrier', 'Shov 'Night Windo 'Landmark', 'I

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Expression of honest intimacy or interrogation of imbalance within rela
- ♦ Is the relationship here one that lasts or one that only subsequently exis
- ♦ Feminist oppositional reading possible: is this exploring the patriarchal romantic/intimate situations? Both society and sexual activity itself as fu
- ♦ Possible Modernist reading: expression of couple as trapped within / pu restrictions, defined roles made available to them?

# ‘Show’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Once again, Sheers presents his audience with an ambiguous title. Having read the poem, which of the following do you think best matches his subject? Or do they both fit at different points?

- ♦ show (n.), meaning ‘a performance’ or ‘a revelation’
- ♦ show (v.), meaning ‘to reveal’ or ‘to demonstrate’

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure (Section 1)

In terms of structure, the poem falls neatly into two sections, with each section offering a different experience, and, in a sense, a different perspective.

- What is the focus of this first section, do you think?
- For this first section of the poem, what might be the relevance of the structure to the poem?
  - ♦ three tercets followed by a final non-rhyming couplet (couplet)
  - ♦ a sense of an adapted haiku (haiku: a Japanese poem containing a syllabic count of 5/7/5) in the syllabic count (15/16/17/16), and in the use of the syllable
  - ♦ a perspective which, while personal, largely observes and describes
  - ♦ a structure which shifts from a distanced description of the models to, once again, observation of the models, to a final interpretation/judgement of the scene

### TASK THREE: Form and Structure (Section 2)

- What is the focus of this second section, do you think?
- For this second section of the poem, what might be the relevance of the structure to the poem?
  - ♦ A separation from ‘we’ and ‘they’ (Section 1) to ‘I/me’ and ‘you’
  - ♦ Quatrains rather than tercets
  - ♦ A rhyme scheme that gradually builds throughout the four stanzas, with the second and third stanzas, and abba in the final quatrain
  - ♦ The use of hyposyllabic lines for the ‘b’ rhymes in the final stanza (‘one shoulder bare’)
  - ♦ A structure that moves from the narrator leaving his partner during the performance to a deconstruction of the performance

### TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery

How does Sheers construct the following images in the text, and how do the poetic techniques reflect/reinforce the images?

- ♦ birds
- ♦ predators and prey
- ♦ art and artistry
- ♦ women as objects, intended for display

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**TASK FIVE: Form and Structure (3)**

Sheers has deliberately structured the poem in two halves. Why? What does this demonstrate, do you think? Is there a shift in the narrative perspective or the split suggest a comparative or causal link between the two passages?

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

To what extent are the following interpretations supported by the poem?

- The poem represents the surrender of the male narrator to the moment of spontaneous and revelatory beauty.
- The poem explores the falsity of performance, and acts as a judge of exploitative and calculated deceptions within relationships.
- Luke McBratney (2011) has described the poem as offering 'an imperfect perfection'. In terms of the portrayal of the woman as a construct, do you agree with this perspective?

## Commentary

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The title here could function as a verb, meaning 'to reveal' or 'to demonstrate performance' or 'a revelation'. In the first section, Sheers offers a performance 'heeled', with images that become increasingly negative, from the isolated 'stalking a narrow shore' (with, once again, the boundary between the land and sea as a metaphorical dividing line between people) to the description in the third section of 'wings / of their shoulders', an image that emphasises both the bony blackness and thus the negative impact of the male audience, along with a potentially inescapable part of the models) and their inability to fly.

It is the final two images of this section that, perhaps, most clearly indicate how to interpret this section: the bare shoulders that 'slip between the curtains' linking to the representation of the models as birds preyed on by the 'crowd' 'flash[...] their teeth for more', with the impersonally voyeuristic consumption negatively both on those watching the 'slow-motion tennis match' and on the part of the same shallow, predatory process.

The form of the poem reflects the above, with the stanzas each functioning as images offered up for evaluation and interpretation, just as the overall narrative just as the models within that metaphor are. It's appropriate in this sense that the second section should be a non-rhyming couplet, suggesting a lack, a sense of incompleteness or comparable syllabic count (15/16/17/16).

The second section shifts from the distanced and vaguely judgemental perspective to the more intimate, personal style we've seen Sheers adopt in several of his other poems ('Inheritance', 'Marking Time'), shifting from observational suggestion to direct engagement.

Sheers has used quatrains for this second section, giving a feeling of formal completeness. The image in the first stanza here offers a representation of the performance with the sense of negativity conveyed by the alliterated plosives on 'pianting' and the self-consciously provocative 'bold'. It is worth noting, though, that this is before the performance and thus can offer comparison.

'Pulling the door' then suggests a desire to shut away the falsity of the 'stage' (the performance), with the narrator subsequently separated from the 'we' that begins the first section, becoming, in effect, an audience for the 'it' that 'happens on the stage'.

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The image of the 'fall of the dress' (a hint of intimacy and exposure reinforced by the 'shoulder bare') leads to a moment of spontaneous appreciation, 'surrendered' (suggesting an element of combat or conscious competition) based on the adornment of the 'dress, the jewellery' and the posed image of 'one shoulder bare' and the reference to a 'focus' linking back to the 'crocodile' rather than the actual beauty of the woman herself, perhaps explaining why the 'second' and is described as simply a 'spell', as 'artful hocus-pocus', rather than spontaneous, and lasting.

It's noticeable that throughout the second section of the poem, the rhyme scheme of the 'corridor'/'more' of the second stanza and the 'skin'/'in' of the third and the final stanza ('pocus'/'focus' and 'there'/'bare'), where the self-enclosed rhyme scheme of the combination of the two hyposyllabic lines ('and to you standing there'/'somehow inadequate image of personal isolation, either as part of a shared experience or an isolated audience member where the privacy of the experience has been lost to conscious artistry and display of the show).

### Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Recurring image of women as birds (featherless/wings, etc.)
- ♦ Borders and separation ('narrow shore', 'curtains', 'door', 'corridor')
- ♦ Juxtaposition of models in show and partner wearing make-up
- ♦ Moment of romantic immediacy or deceptive falsity of genders?

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ First section of poem is a single non-rhymed line
- ♦ Range of sibilant sounds creating relationship between 'crocodile pit'
- ♦ Second section of poem is increasingly rhymed
- ♦ Range of negative connotations
- ♦ Continuous exposure

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers as actor (see biography), with maintained interest in dramatic performance
- ♦ Rise of catwalk fashion shows and modelling from mid-twentieth century onwards, linked to celebrity culture
- ♦ Shift in relationships in last century (increasing cohabitation, declining incidence of marriage)

**AO4: Explore contexts in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Gender relationships in 'Time', 'Valent'
- ♦ Performance / 'Act', 'Service', 'Night Window', 'The Singing'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Is this a description of intimacy in a social setting or of the falsity underpinning it?
- ♦ Possible Feminist reading: is this a depiction of the male objectification of women?
- ♦ Possible Post-modern reading: is identity here a fluid construct or simply a performance?

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# ‘Valentine’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Having read through the poem, which of the following definitions of ‘Valentine’ do you think is used most effectively, and how do the imagery, structure and language used in the poem support this?

- ♦ Valentine: ‘an annual card, message or gift conveying affection, often from a lover to a beloved’.
- ♦ Valentine: ‘the person to whom a romantic card, message or gift is addressed’.
- ♦ Valentine: ‘a third-century Christian martyr’.

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

For each of the following points regarding the form and structure, try to decide what the function is, and how it impacts on your reading of the text in question:

- ♦ tercets
- ♦ single-line stanzas between the tercets
- ♦ a split into two distinct narrative sections
- ♦ use of rhyme to conclude the poem
- ♦ a poetic nod to the sonnet form? (15 lines, structural split – volte – around the 10-syllable mark, romantic observation and loss as a sonnet couplet)

### TASK THREE: Placement within the Collection

Sheers has placed this poem as the third in a group of seven poems, all of which deal with attempted or momentary reconciliation or closure within a relationship. Is this significant? Are we intended to read these as referring to the same relationship? Or is it a combination, a clearer perspective?

### TASK THREE: Depiction of the Female

The poem offers an interesting depiction of the two genders, and women. Which aspects of the poem offer of women, do you think?

- ♦ clothing and movement: heels, swing, tassels, skirt, filling out, wet
- ♦ activity and passivity: ‘your heels, / emptying before me down the curve of your tassels’, ‘each step filling out the curve’
- ♦ links to water: ‘water torture’, ‘emptying before me’, ‘evacuated as you are’, ‘your wet lashes’, ‘wrecked voyagers’, ‘washed up on the shore’, ‘valentine’

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**TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery**

For each of the following language and image points, decide why each has been used and what impact it has:

- ♦ alternation of the pronouns 'you' and 'our'/'we' throughout the poem
- ♦ multi-sensory experience: sound of 'heels', sight of 'the swing of the door', 'wake', 'exhaustion'
- ♦ pain and pleasure: 'water torture of your heels', 'whether to laugh or weep'
- ♦ metonymical focus on objects/items (metonymy: describing something by referring to a particular aspect of it)
- ♦ motif of water and land/water boundaries
- ♦ rhymes in the final three stanzas ('for'/'shore', 'weep'/'keep')

**TASK FIVE: The Relationship**

What perspective does the poem offer of this relationship at this point, and what details support this?

- ♦ 'you'/'I' vs. 'we' and juxtaposition of opposites
- ♦ sense of female departing / male observing
- ♦ female seen through objects
- ♦ 'wrecked voyagers' image
- ♦ the recurring images of boundaries, edges, etc.

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

So, how should we interpret this poem? Which interpretation is the most convincing?

- ♦ The poem records a brief reconciliation before an expected final separation.
- ♦ The poem describes a self-enclosed moment of connection.
- ♦ The poem presents an image of female empowerment and male vulnerability.
- ♦ Olivia Cole (2005) believes that it is in 'the bruised, awkward poem's... tenderness [...] that [Sheers] excels'. In terms of the sense of interpretation, to what extent could 'Valentine' be viewed as an example of this?

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## Commentary

While the anonymity of the loved one is certainly a feature of this poem (in the collection), the idea of this being a 'Valentine' seems based more on the nature of the connection and the sense of this functioning as a kind of poem to the loved one.

However, the poem is riddled with an awareness of separation and the cost (and, perhaps, the ritualisation of aspects of relationships such as the giving of Valentine's Day cards?), rather than a sense of hope, aspiration and romance.

The form of the poem is interesting in this respect, consisting of four tercets, each line functioning as a retrospective commentary on the preceding line, and single quatrains (each self-enclosed and consisting of a single sentence) and single quatrains, with the final two tercets (a single memory spread across two lines) and a single quatrain (a single sentence) creating a sestet with a final, additional concluding line, closing rhyming couplet. In this sense, the poem echoes or references the form of a sonnet, followed by a sestet ending in a rhyming couplet, though the lack of regularity in the poem, the erratic syllabic count and the addition of the final line are not part of the form.

Again, as with the majority of the poems in the collection, the pronouns are alternating here between 'I'/'you' and 'our'/'we', in order to juxtapose the moment before the moment of intimacy in the hotel and then the connection during the moment.

It's interesting to note the relative passivity of the male partner here: it is away down 'that Paris street', whose steps cause 'the tassels' on her skin to 'curve' of her 'hip'. Arguably, there is a pattern in the collection of male partner being dominant (though not always), with the female partner socially or emotionally even allowing for this, the woman is still described metonymically, consisting of 'skirt', her 'hips', 'wet lashes': she is less a whole person, more a collection of parts, accurate in terms of the observational, masculine perspective that Sheers uses.

Water provides the key image here, acting as an extended metaphor (extended metaphor: a symbol continued throughout a text or section) for their emotional connection. The image of her heels, reflecting the agonising and rhythmic repetitiveness of the steps, the sense of the 'emptying' and 'evacuated [...] channels of our hearts' when they have been lost, before displacing that image with one of being 'wrecked voyagers' and overpowering tidal surge that sees them 'wake washed up on the shore' at a spontaneous moment of reconnection.

Ultimately, the list of the three memories, while acting as a structuring device for the subsequent ending of the relationship, that this moment of 'holding each other' is doomed to functioning ultimately as the memory of a past connection, rather than romance. However, the retention of that final memory, of a fleeting intimacy, of departure, suggests at least some positivity, a more wistful recollection rather than 'for' and 'shore', and 'weep' and 'keep', rather than the 'torture' and 'loss' of the first two tercets.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Moment of reconnection during process of deterioration
- ♦ Recurring image of water as both boundary and extended metaphor for emotional connection
- ♦ View of woman as both objectified / metonymically referenced, but also the active and emotionally dominant participant: only equal when reconnected
- ♦ Idea of sexual intimacy as most immediate form of connection?

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets (commentarie
- ♦ Split perspective retrospective
- ♦ Hint of sonnet
- ♦ Pronoun usage
- ♦ Midway split
- ♦ Final line offe

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Associations of Paris with romance and fashion, link of foreign context to exploration and intimate isolation of couple
- ♦ Cultural reference frame of 'Valentine': an increasingly commercialised social custom with connotations of anonymity
- ♦ Sheers' personal context: young writer, concerns about romance and sexuality, sense of 'drift' relating to travel and lack of anchoring point beyond the loved one

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Gender dynar  
'Marking Tim  
'Keyways', 'Jo
- ♦ Memory: 'Ma  
Country', 'He  
Hill Fort', 'Ha
- ♦ Deterioration  
'Show', 'Wint  
'Keyways'
- ♦ Use of water a  
Swans', 'Liabl

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem end with a sense of futile continuation or the potential for
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, again, could the poem be viewed as objectified female character without a verbalised voice.
- ♦ Could the romance here be seen as one more about mutual need or fear of intimacy?



# 'Winter Swans'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. Consider the connotations (connotation: an additional or carried meaning) of both words. What do we associate with 'winter'? What do we associate with 'swans'?
- ii. Bearing in mind your answer to (i), what could the title as a whole suggest? A moment of unexpected beauty? A connection between environmental and emotional coldness?



### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. The poem is, once again, written in tercets... except for the final stanza.
- ii. The lines vary dramatically in terms of their length, though there are some that are as long as the others. Which ones are they, and could there be any significance to this?
- iii. After the opening contextualisation, the poem shifts to a focus on the swans, and then the moment of reconnection. Where do these occur in the poem, and in what order, do you think?
- iv. The poem consists of seven stanzas, a number that appears significant. For example, 'Mametz Wood', 'Night Windows', 'Keyways' and 'Trees'.
- v. Many of Sheers' poems contain a 'volta', a poetic shift of subject or perspective. Can you identify the volta as taking place in this poem?

### TASK THREE: Language (1)

- i. The poem consists of four sentences, all but one stretching over multiple lines. Which sentence has the most impact in terms of the overall mood?
- ii. The third sentence consists of under two lines: "'They mate for life" over the stilling water.' What impact is this sentence intended to have?

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#### TASK FOUR: Language (2)

- i. Sheers uses personification on several occasions in this poem, linked to the landscape: 'the clouds had given their all', 'the waterlogged earth / gave might this have'?
- ii. How do the pronouns in the poem reflect the narrative of the relationship?
- iii. There are examples of enjambment throughout the poem. What effect does this have on mood?
- iv. Sheers uses caesuras only a few times in the poem, including the line 'and apart' and 'porcelain over the stilling water. I didn't reply', 'I no longer somehow' and 'and folded, one over the other'. What is the effect of these caesuras?
- v. There is sibilance throughout this poem, from 'skirted the lake, sile' to 'porcelain over the stilling water', 'slow-stepping in the lake's sh' to 'settling'. How does this add to the overall atmosphere, do you think?

#### TASK FIVE: Imagery

The poem uses four key images. For each, identify the semantic field and the effect of the image.

- ♦ the weather
- ♦ the swans
- ♦ water / the boundary between water and land
- ♦ the physical distance and then connection between the couple

#### TASK SIX: The Relationship

Based on the prompts below, what impression is offered of the relationship?

- ♦ 'clouds', 'rain', 'waterlogged earth', 'skirted the lake', 'distance'
- ♦ 'winter', 'icebergs', 'white feather', 'porcelain'
- ♦ 'silent', 'apart', 'dark water', 'boats righting', 'rough weather', 'staying'

#### TASK SEVEN: Interpretations

- ♦ The poem ends with a non-rhyming couplet and an image in which the couple's hands are joined. What impression is offered of their hands had 'swum the distance between us' like 'a pair of wings'. How are we, as an audience, intended to interpret this? Could there be a deeper meaning in interpreting this?
- ♦ Olivia Cole (2005) sees *Skirrid Hill* as being 'anchored' in a 'limbo' state. When the couple 'realized the moment' there is an 'elegiac sense of belatedness'. In a retrospective perspective adopted, to what extent could this be a reflection of the relationship?

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## Commentary

The combination of 'winter' and 'swans' suggests a moment of cold clarity and unexpected beauty. This reference then works on two levels: both the actual weather and the couple's emotional state provide the behavioural model that the couple in the poem follow, and the weather itself reflects the emotional state.

The weather at the beginning of the poem is clearly intended to reflect the emotional state of the couple, with the 'clouds' that 'had given their all' and the 'waterlogged earth' in stanza four suggesting a sense of emotional emptiness of the kind we have previously seen. This emotional detachment is also mirrored in the setting, with the 'break' and the reference to the 'shingle and sand' using the physical boundaries to reflect the emotional boundaries paralleled in the use of the caesura between 'lake' and 'silent'.

Just as the landscape reflects the relationship, so the arrival of the swans suggests a moment of reconciliation. The couple are 'stopped' by the swans' 'silence', watching as the swans 'halved themselves', isolated 'icebergs of white feathers' 'returning again' like 'boats righting'. Clearly, the structure is intended to reflect the process of disconnection and then reconnection, with the 'dark water' and 'icebergs' emphasising the murky depths and uncontrollability of the couple's emotional state. The emotional context in which the moment takes place, and perhaps suggests the emotional conflict between the couple.

As with the failure of language in 'Last Act', the successful reconciliation is achieved physically rather than linguistically: the couple have 'given their all' just as the swans' connection is 'gulping for breath' just as the earth appears to be; the lake, a shared but inaccessible emotional pool of the couple, can only be skirted 'in unison', with the 'iceberg' image suggesting the greater depth and unspoken connection. The narrator, separated through the pronoun choice in stanzas five and six, is elsewhere, doesn't 'reply'. Instead, it is their 'hands, that had, somehow, 'in unison', 'returning again', and, physically providing the connection to the couple.

The reference to the fact that 'swans mate for life' provides the structural link between the recurring feature of Sheers' poems, and, of the four sentences in the poem, the first three stretch beyond a single stanza. The enjambment in the rest of the poem creates an atmosphere reinforced by the gentle lapping of the sibilance through the lines such as 'skirted the lake, silent and apart', 'porcelain over the stilling water', 'the lake's shingle and sand', though the tone is disrupted here by the enjambment and caesura after 'water'.

The 'porcelain' reference in stanza five connotes both value and fragility. The 'you' and 'I' perhaps reflects a recognition of their individual separateness, the idea of the 'pair of wings settling after flight', a single swan, suggesting the potential for a marital joining together into 'one flesh'. The image created by the 'in unison' is, most probably, that of a heart, one that is 'halved' in the four stanzas, separate, and in this context, the final stanza is, appropriately, a non-rhymed couplet, and the humans are, ultimately, couples, though it's interesting that this is not the case in the poem. This could suggest that the third line is the 'distance between' the couple, and could also suggest that the successful resolution of the situation remains elusive.

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Parallel of swans and couple
- ♦ Idea of boundaries stretching throughout poem (water again!)
- ♦ Idea of physicality solving issues that speech cannot
- ♦ Natural world both mirroring and offering behavioural model for humans

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Pronouns den sense of unity separated just
- ♦ Frequent use reinforced by
- ♦ Volta created habits
- ♦ Ending provid sense of dissa

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Poem linked to Sheers' period as poet-in-residence at the Wordsworth Trust (2003–2004), with geographical and weather references perhaps reflecting Grasmere and surrounding areas
- ♦ Accurate representation of swan courting rituals and reference to migration. Possible link to shifts in 'normal' relationships in twentieth and twenty-first centuries away from stable marital relationships?
- ♦ Again, possible autobiographical links to Sheers' age and romantic life

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Dissolution of 'Show', 'Valer
- ♦ Symbiotic rela Wood', 'The F Floods', 'Histo
- ♦ Moment of re 'Valentine', 'N

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Could the narrator be viewed as simply imposing human characteristics rather than learning from it?
- ♦ From a psychoanalytical perspective, is it possible to see the poem as pr subject to their animal natures rather than rational?
- ♦ Does the poem once again prioritise the physical over the emotional, so
- ♦ Is this an example, as Carrie Etter (2006) argues, of Sheers stretching a c explaining the central conceit?

# Night Windows

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. What do you associate with:
  - ♦ night?
  - ♦ windows?
- ii. In combining these two aspects, how might we interpret the title?
  - ♦ a moment of intimacy linked to exposure?
  - ♦ the futility of something whose primary function is denied?
  - ♦ a shift from the framing of the outside world to inviting social voyeurism?

### TASK TWO: Form

- i. Unusually, Sheers has chosen to write this poem in quatrains. Why?
- ii. Once again, there are seven stanzas here. Could there be any significance to this?
- iii. The final stanza is a tercet. How could we interpret this?
- iv. As previously, while the syllabic count varies from line to line, seven is a common count. Which ones, and why?

### TASK THREE: Structure

- i. In many of poems, Sheers uses a volta part way through. Could we identify a volta in this poem? Where would it be?
- ii. The poem could easily be divided into the lead-up to the event, the event itself, and the aftermath. Which stanzas would correspond to which section, and how is each section marked?

### TASK FOUR: Language

- i. Unusually, in terms of pronouns, the poem interweaves 'I'/'you' and 'we'. What significance does this have? Is there any significance to the fact the poem begins with the plural 'we' and ends with the singular 'you' and 'me'?
- ii. The poem consists of three sentences. What is the focus of each one?
  - ♦ Sentence one: 'That night...' to '... so we could see.'
  - ♦ Sentence two: 'Which of course...' to 'loading you with our meagre luggage.'
  - ♦ Sentence three: 'The night windows...' to 'trailing the dress of your nightgown.'
- iii. Sheers uses a lot of enjambment in the poem, particularly in the middle. What impact might it have?
- iv. There's a low proportion of plosives here. Again, why?

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**TASK FIVE: Imagery**

Where do we see the following images in the poem, and what significant

- i. light and dark
- ii. the couple seen from outside the windows
- iii. the female body
- iv. the windows and the curtains
- v. the 'blue strobe' light outside
- vi. the shadow

**TASK SIX: Gender and Representation**

- i. In many of the other poems in the collection, women are seen as em are seen as sexually dominant. Is this true here?
- ii. In terms of linking the female body to both artistry ('impressionist t and the environment ('the curves of a distant landscape'), how does compare with the rest of the collection?
- iii. Is masculinity here seen as, essentially, passive?

**TASK SEVEN: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Is the external observation embedded in the experience a framing de
- ii. Are the 'curtains' that 'went dark' used to suggest privacy from the outside world is watching, do you think?
- iii. Is this another moment of connection, part of the fragmentation of a wider relationship, or something different?
- iv. Olivia Cole (2005) views the key successes in the collection as being oppositions of 'Instinct versus learning, queasy feeling versus certai also 'the tensions on which this undeniably seductive second collect To what extent would you agree that the focus on instinct and interj ambiguous, is what makes this poem successful?

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## Commentary

'Night Windows' is one of the most intimate poems in the collection, focusing on sexual intimacy between the poetic narrator and an unnamed partner who is the subject of 'Marking Time', 'Show', 'Valentine', 'Winter Swans' and 'Keyhole'. It has different resonances: night is a time associated with privacy, intimacy (familiarity, interiority); windows both allow and restrict access to the outside world, but at night, though 'night windows' are more likely to allow those outside to see in, it is also argued that windows at night in the absence of light have lost their function. The 'night windows' are intended to be a means of reinforcing the intimacy of the moment, 'we' because they are not 'they'.

The poem begins with the couple turning 'some of them off' (lights, presumably, but voyeurism may be intentional), apart from the single bulb maintaining 'a shared, self-enclosed visual context'. However, this privacy is juxtaposed with the outside world where the 'night windows opposite' perform 'their Morse codes' and 'other' ('other': a point of contrast against which we define ourselves), reinforcing the connectedness of the couple, but the externalised perspective also beautifies something artistic (both within the narrative offered and within the narrator's 'impressionist' vision of light and shadow where, as with the poem, the aesthetic is aesthetically appreciative ('lower yourself to me', 'your back arching like a bow' rather than graphic or pornographically gratifying).

The lack of absolute delineation offered in terms of the view of the couple is also about the intentions and activities of those watching: when 'every one of them' is because the audience is no longer there, with the light providing a sense of presence. Or are the lights off in order to visually clarify the subject for those watching? The 'siren's [...] blue strobe', 'like lightning in the corner of my eye' suggests the retained awareness of the dangers of the outside world, but also the mythological sense of 'siren') of the outside.

The language of the poem follows many of the patterns already established in the first few stanzas reinforces the single sentence that flows from the second stanza from the fifth stanza to the seventh, representing the continuity and fluidity of the landscape and relationship; sibilance recurs throughout the poem, representing the experience through phrases such as 'Morse codes, / side-swipes of curiosity' and 'sending its blue strobe across the rooftops'. That said, the poem is also a departure. Sheers begins the poem with the couple connected in the scene, but through the poem afterwards, the couple remain separate, as 'you' and 'me'.

The perspective of the female participant here is unusual in the collection. Her having 'lowered' herself to him suggests that he is both physically and emotionally dominant and that she is empowered through control over the union, though this is also a reference to her 'arching like a bow', since this requires physical dominance. It is also noticeable that it is the woman who is loaded 'with our meeting', the responsibility falling on her shoulders, just as in 'Marking Time.' However, the 'rose' from him 'with a sigh' (an implication, perhaps, of dissatisfaction?) is a 'hallway', with the departure her own choice rather than the abrupt dismissal or abandonment with the consequences, as in 'Marking Time'. The 'lit hallway' is a sense of reality, the shedding of the artistic façade, with her shadow trailing behind her, a sense of their interaction following her (as in 'The Farrier'), or the loss of the constructed.

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The woman is also, though, described as ‘the curves of a distant landscape’ as the valleys of the Welsh countryside are echoed in the ‘slick and valleyed’ of the natural process, that the sexual act is also a point that roots the couple to the land. The woman’s departure then, is a signal of the end of something greater and more than simply the sexual act.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Sense of gender rebalancing
- ♦ Sexual act as more meaningful for male participant? Separation during intercourse
- ♦ Contrast of artistic framing of experience vs. cheap voyeurism

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Motifs of light and landscape
- ♦ Use of tercets, used to reflect the couple
- ♦ Sibilance used to create a sense of intimacy
- ♦ Couple together and after. Poem as a whole

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers’ residence in both US and UK at points, including in urban areas of London and New York, contrasted with his rural upbringing
- ♦ Possible inspiration by Edward Hopper’s painting ‘Night Windows’ (1928)
- ♦ Sheers returned to the themes of social judgment and the tension between public and private in his 2015 novel *I Saw a Man*

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Female body: ‘Skirrid Fawr’
- ♦ Sexual connection: ‘Landmark’
- ♦ Connection to nature: ‘Winter Swans’
- ♦ Public and private: ‘School’

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem represent emotional intimacy, or is the focus simply sexual?
- ♦ Does the sense of almost voyeuristic observation from the other window diminish the intimacy of the couple in the poem or cheapen their connection?
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, does the poem present female empowerment and choice, or simply reinforce a clichéd depiction of femininity through its focus on fertility?

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# ‘Keyways’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Think about what keys and locks could represent. Which of the following do you think? Can you think of any more that might apply?

- ♦ restricted access, a sense of permission that can be granted or denied
- ♦ monogamy and fidelity within a relationship
- ♦ true love? The idea that there is only one person for each of us
- ♦ sexual connection: the key as a phallic image, the keyway as a yoni

### TASK TWO: Form

- Unusually, Sheers has abandoned the tercets he generally uses and is writing in quintains (quintain: five-line stanzas). Why?
- Once again, Sheers has written a poem with seven stanzas. However, it is a rhyming couplet rather than a quintain. What might this represent?
- Although the lines are irregular in terms of their syllabic count, many are in the range. Why might this be? Is there any significance to this?
- Two lines are noticeably hypersyllabic. Why might this be?
  - ♦ ‘rising and falling in unison as we listened to the Messiah’
  - ♦ ‘again it was a coming home, my stomach, the small of your back’

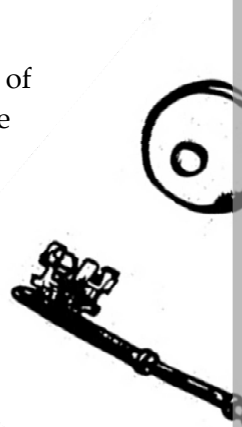
### TASK THREE: Structure (1)

The poem works through a retrospective chronology of the relationship. Where do the following points in the relationship occur in the poem?

- ♦ the failed relationship now
- ♦ first meeting
- ♦ process of completing each other
- ♦ togetherness
- ♦ failure to connect
- ♦ return to present

### TASK FOUR: Structure (2)

- Why does Sheers bring the narrative full circle during the poem?
- Does the language help to reinforce the circularity of the narrative?
- In following the chronology of the relationship, is the poem as a whole about the past?



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### TASK FIVE: Language

- i. The poem uses a lot of caesuras, and commas or full-stops end-stop
- ii. In terms of pronoun choices, the poem begins and ends with 'we'/'o
- iii. Again, in terms of pronoun choice, the rest of the poem seems to alt  
'you'/'I'. Why might Sheers do this?
- iv. Sheers often uses monosyllabic (monosyllabic: one syllable) words a  
consonance (often with plosive consonants) to reflect the mood. Doe
- v. Many of Sheers' poems show a contrast between activity and passiv  
participants. Is this reflected in the verb choice here, do you think? F  
'waiting' and 'cut', 'visit', 'take'?

### TASK SIX: Unpacking the 'Key' Image

Sheers uses keys and locks as recurring images throughout the poem, bu  
symbolic function or connotations. What do each of the following key in

- ♦ Stanza 1: 'your keys to be cut / so I can visit your flat when you're
- ♦ Stanza 2: 'lucky charms' / 'an uncut key, a smooth blade, edentate'
- ♦ Stanza 3: 'the milling and grooves of moments in time', 'our keywa
- ♦ Stanza 4: 'combinations matched, / our tumblers aligned precisely'
- ♦ Stanza 5(i): 'my knees in the hollows of yours, a master key fit'
- ♦ Stanza 5(ii): 'when did the bolt slip? The blade break in the mouth'
- ♦ Stanza 6: 'that second when [...] one of us made a turn that failed t
- ♦ Stanza 7: 'this cutting of the keys, just when we're changing all the

### TASK SEVEN: Images, Themes and Motifs

Sheers also uses several other images and motifs, linked to sub-themes. V  
the following, and how are they presented?

- ♦ time and timelessness
- ♦ the human body and connection through physical contact (inc. sex
- ♦ speech and language (inc. the failure of communication)

### TASK EIGHT: Interpretations

Olivia Cole (2005) has described the poem as having 'sad strength, flinch  
of "breaking up" that must trail after something intangible having "brok  
between connection and separation, to what extent would you agree wit

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## Commentary

'Keyways' begins with a couple 'standing in line' waiting 'for a set of yonkeys' before reconstructing the narrative of the relationship through the remaining stanzas, returning to the penultimate stanza back at the present and acknowledging the irony of 'changing all the locks' metaphorically 'changing all the locks'.

The poem has been written in quintains, an unusual choice of stanza with five lines, intended to represent the sense of two incomplete tercets (his more usual form) put together, or an overflowing, overstretched quatrain (a form that occurs in the final collection). Either would work in terms of the sense of almost resolved stanzas that resonate throughout the poem.

Keys and locks are referenced either explicitly or implicitly throughout the poem to serve a symbolic function as the final means of separation, and thus of ensuring individual privacy. In contrast, keys in the second stanza represent a series of exploration, described as 'lucky charms' with the narrator 'an uncut key' image suggesting youth and innocence, but with a hint of assertive masculine and aggressive connotations of 'blade'.

In the third stanza, keys and keyways are a more youthful parallel of the relationship where shared experiences in both poems see the relationship 'test[ed] until it breaks' ('Inheritance'). Here, the process seems gentler and more dominated by 'impression, [...] milling and grooves', until the couple 'finally' achieve the union, its perhaps ironic associations of marital union, or more positive connotations of union. It is appropriate in this sense that the union should take place through 'listen[ing] to the Messiah', 'touching at elbow, shoulder and hip' before the connotations of 'align[ing] to give and roll perfectly / into the other's embrace' suggests the fulfilment of an emotional and physical lack through their union, providing the yonic equivalent to the phallic 'key'.

While the poem lacks a regular metre, the lines are largely anchored on a pattern from about 8–12, perhaps a nod to poetic regularity. However, two lines in this sense, the reference to their 'breaths / rising and falling in unison' and 'again it was a coming home, my stomach, the small of your back'. This represents the union of the couple, carrying the implication that these moments are exceptional, perhaps, or that the relationship in a more general sense remains exceptional.

It is in the fourth image that the key/lock image is treated less positively, suggesting sleeping intimacy that allowed a 'coming home' (the exact opposite of the first, penultimate and final stanzas), we see the 'bolt slip' and 'the final image suggests both verbal violence (through the plosive, monosyllabic 'blade break[ing]') and a failure of communication in the metaphorical union. This sense of the failure of language or the deeper connection of physical union throughout the collection, though particularly in 'Marking Time', 'Valentine', 'Night Windows', in each of which the physical is prioritised over the verbal. Sheers should express this through the medium of language.

By the end of the poem, the image becomes one of failed connection, with the couple leaving the couple 'stuck half-way'. The stasis here contrasts with the initial connection in 'Marking Time', 'Show', 'Valentine' and 'Winter Swans', with the final connection; instead, it is precisely this inability to develop or proceed with the couple.

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In a sense, the whole poem could be argued to represent the ‘unpick[ing] relationship, tracing the process back to the ending that we saw at the beginning. The ultimate irony of the relationship: the final shared experience of the couple is for another to cut their keys in order to exclude each other, leaving an isolated and complete.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Recurring image of keys and locks
- ♦ Poem tracing dissolution of a relationship
- ♦ Physical, spiritual, sexual and emotional union, with whole created out of two parts
- ♦ Inclusion and exclusion

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of quintessential
- ♦ Narrative circle
- ♦ Chronological
- ♦ Some hypersensitivity
- ♦ High proportion of lines to suggest

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Relevance of personal context: cohabitation (linked to ‘young’ romantic life?), home ownership
- ♦ ‘Chapel’ and ‘Messiah’ both hint at possibility of religious union (link to twentieth- and twenty-first-century decline in marriage?), but also, perhaps, decline in membership of faith groups / perception of organised religion as irrelevant or out of touch
- ♦ Return to basics (locksmithing, bodies, weather, religion) as escape from complexities of modern life

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Physical union in ‘Winter Swans’, ‘Four Movements’
- ♦ Final moment in ‘Show’, ‘Valer’, ‘Windows’, ‘La

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ A number of reviewers have criticised the poem as overstressing the metaphorical over-explanatory ending. Is this valid?
- ♦ Does the poem suggest bemusement or a shift from naivety to experience?
- ♦ From a gendered perspective, does the poem suggest a balance within the stereotypes? (phallic/ionic image of key and lock, male body wrapped around female ownership)
- ♦ In light of the linking of inanimate, man-made objects and people, does the poem constructed aspects of setting, form and metaphor to the point of losing emotional connection?

# 'Border Country'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Which of the following is a logical interpretation of the title? Or do both?

- ♦ It refers to the area of Wales where Sheers spent his formative years
- ♦ It refers to the metaphorical boundary between childhood and adulthood

### TASK TWO: Form

- Unusually, this poem is written in six stanzas. Could there be any significance to the other poems in the collection?
- In this poem, Sheers is using nine-line stanzas. Could there be any significance to this?
- Once again, the poem avoids metrical regularity. However, there are a number of lines of between five and seven syllables. What could this be intended to convey?
  - ♦ the incomplete childhood
  - ♦ breakages and pauses
- The poem ends on a half-rhyme ('kicking a stone' / 'trying once more'). What might this be intended to convey, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Structure (1)

This poem, like 'Keyways', begins with the present before shifting to the past. What is the following in the poem?

- ♦ the present
- ♦ a retrospective account of childhood and adolescence
- ♦ the shock of a shift into forced adulthood
- ♦ a revisiting of the past
- ♦ an interpretation of the present, based on the past

### TASK FOUR: Structure (2)

- In terms of the collection as a whole, to what extent could this poem represent another 'group' within the structure, moving on from the overview of life ('Mametz Wood', 'The Farrier', 'Inheritance'), and the decline and ending of a relationship ('Marking Time', 'Show', 'Valentine', 'Winter Swans', 'Night Windows', 'Keyways')?
- How might we group the next few poems?



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### **TASK FIVE: Language and Imagery**

The poem uses a number of images, each supported by a semantic field. Consider the following, and what do they represent?

- i. the landscape and growth
- ii. technology, decline and decay
- iii. death and burial
- iv. gaps, lacks and absences
- v. motion and stasis

### **TASK SIX: Past and Present**

The poem offers a continuous juxtaposition of differing time frames. Consider the following:

- i. the past?
- ii. the present?
- iii. childhood?
- iv. adulthood?

### **TASK SEVEN: Interpreting the Poem**

Each of the following is a possible interpretation of the poem. Which do you agree with? Could they all apply at different points?

- i. The poem presents the longing for a lost past, and the impossibility of returning to it.
- ii. The poem explores an inability to progress in life due to a traumatic event.
- iii. The poem presents the sterility of masculinity.
- iv. The poem explores the broader impact of the loss of family.
- v. The poem offers a perspective of the transition from traditional Welsh to a more modern sense of nationality.
- vi. Garan Holcombe (2008) has described the poem as containing an 'increasingly abstract, almost primal sense of home'. In terms of shift from a concrete, imagined or symbolic one, to what extent do you see 'Border Count' as a concept than as a piece of autobiography?

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## Commentary

Sheers spent his childhood and adolescence near Abergavenny, a few miles from the border with England. It is difficult not to see an autobiographical relevance to the poem (the border) and the personal context (the shift from childhood to adulthood). The poem is linked to the text (and the title in particular) to Raymond Williams' novel *Borderlines*, exploring the divisions between a father and son near Abergavenny in the 1940s. The poem's particular notion of Welshness and a sense of a loss of heritage in the frame of a changing world.

The poem is written in nine-line stanzas, perhaps collating the tercets of a sonnet with the topic shifts and gaps in time that the latter would offer. The lines vary in length, and there are an unusually high proportion of lines of between five and seven syllables. The poem's incompleteness, of metrically constructed pauses.

The quarry, the setting around which the narrative revolves, provides a place of delving into the earth, a place rooting Wales in its industrial core. The quarry (either not marked at all, or marked by the absence of anything) except for the few mourning symbols: 'raised earth' for the 'hummock of a grave', 'trees' for the 'wind [...] in their leaves'. Each is fleeting, temporary, juxtaposing death and life. The narrator 'standing at its edge' is appropriate: standing at the border between Wales and England, from childhood to adulthood.

The poem continually juxtaposes the natural and the constructed/man-made. The natural is echoed in 'commas and apostrophes', translating the natural into the artificial. The needlessly destroyed, the boys 'test[ing] our voices, / young as the buzzard's cry'; the cars are 'smashed', while 'dock-leaves and nettles' grow through the wreckage. The remembered as 'a poppy sown in the unripe corn'; the 'cars' are 'smaller than remembered'. The narrator revisiting the location is paralleled by 'a buzzard' that ends the poem. The poem's life translated into verse.

Humanity here is sterile, destructive, associated with the 'graveyard of cars', the 'black holes', and 'rusting', linked, perhaps, to the final image of the boy 'stuck in time and unable to progress because of his father's incomplete experiment in adulthood, in 'shouldering the kick of your father's car'. The quarry as a gap in the earth, in the 'gap-toothed roof', 'broken beams', 'broken windows'. In each instance, the organic and natural can grow, heal; the artificial can be 'filled in'. The cars parallel the child, 'smaller' than remembered, 'going back to the past translated into 'steel and stone. / Just cars in a quarry'.

The actual trauma, the death of the father, is described as almost dictated by the contrast to the free-flowing nebulous timelessness of the past. 'Life' here is paralleled in the lack of choice suggested by the narrator's inability to 'hurry home'. However, it is the child who is 'pitched [...] through the windscreen of [...] car'. When the father is euphemistically described as having been 'found at the edge of the unripe corn', part of a broader semantic field of war, memorialisation and loss ('war', 'dying', 'reading aloud from the names of the dead'). The death of the father is on several levels: as a literal, familial loss, but also a link to the past, a continuing heritage, the possibility of natural maturation for the child, and the harsh reality of the world contrasting with the fictions of childhood.

It is appropriate, perhaps, that the final image of the poem should offer a return to the past ('Sheers') offering a poetic return to the past that cannot be achieved in reality. The poem is memorialised here as 'commas and apostrophes', 'ink-dot[s]', 'writing', 'the poem's completion suggested by the final half-rhyme of 'stone' and 'home'. What is the lost potential of a childhood, a poetic epitaph.

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<p><b>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Juxtaposition of nature and mankind</li> <li>♦ Lost past, childhood rehearsal for adulthood</li> <li>♦ Poem acting as poetic memorial for 'lost child'</li> <li>♦ Recurring images of stasis and stillness</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO2: Analyse way literary texts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Shift from uni</li> <li>♦ Setting as ano</li> <li>♦ Use of nine-lir</li> <li>♦ A number of l</li> <li>♦ Shift from pre</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Sheers' childhood near Abergavenny only a few miles from the English/Welsh border, with Sheers' personal history creating a sense of 'in-between' in terms of his birth, upbringing and accent</li> <li>♦ Raymond Williams' <i>Border Country</i> (1960): biographical links to author (same school attended, anglicised but still self-defined as 'Welsh', Oxbridge educated), and narrative/thematic links to poem (social decline, etc.). Semi-autobiographical novel inspiring semi-autobiographical poem.</li> <li>♦ Broader social context of decline of Welsh steel and mining industries (linked to car manufacture), with associations of masculinity and tension between agrarian past and industrial decline</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO4: Explore con</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Childhood an</li> <li>♦ 'Farther', 'Tre</li> <li>♦ Familial loss</li> <li>♦ 'The Wake'</li> <li>♦ Nature and m</li> <li>♦ Farrier', 'Win</li> <li>♦ 'The Steelwor</li> <li>♦ 'Skirrid Fawr'</li> <li>♦ Gaps and abs</li> <li>♦ 'Keyways', 'S</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Sheers (2008) has described the 'buried cars' as being 'the central image' [...] operating both as a shared cultural "memory" and as a metaphoric</li> <li>♦ Many critics interpret the father as having committed suicide. To what extent and how might it change our reading of it?</li> <li>♦ Should a reader view this as a poem about an idealised lost childhood or about social and social decline?</li> <li>♦ To what extent does Sheers appear unable to separate political and social issues from people and their landscape?</li> </ul>	

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# ‘Farther’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

The title puns (pun: a play on words) on the homophones (homophone: words that sound identical) ‘father’ and ‘farther’.

- i. How relevant is the idea of physical distance in terms of Sheers’ geographical and biographical context, do you think?
- ii. To what extent could the interrelation of the two ideas be the key to the poem?



### TASK TWO: Form

- i. Why has Sheers chosen to write this poem as a single stanza?
- ii. Look at the shape more closely: could there be any relevance to it? Is there any relevance to the shape of ‘Last Act’?
- iii. While Sheers generally avoids a regular metre, there is often some regularity in his poems. Why is it that the lines in this poem are so varied?
- iv. The following lines are either noticeably shorter or longer than the others. Why do you think?
  - ♦ ‘choosing the long way round’
  - ♦ ‘a blade of wind from the east’
  - ♦ ‘watching the dog shrink over the hill before continuing ourselves’
- v. There is no regular rhyme scheme in the poem, but there are several lines that end with a full rhyme. Why?
  - ♦ ‘name’/‘again’
  - ♦ ‘earth’/‘grief’
  - ♦ ‘view’/‘you’

### TASK THREE: Structure (1)

To what extent could the line ‘Half way up and I turned to look at you’ be the key to the poem? Does this reflect the topic and setting?

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#### TASK FOUR: Structure (2)

Try to identify where the following moments occur in the poem, and what part of the narrative:

- ♦ a shift from current moment to a retrospective experience
- ♦ the process of climbing the mountain
- ♦ taking the 'long way round'
- ♦ arrival at the cleft, pausing at the 'altar of rock'
- ♦ pausing halfway, changing the perspective of the father
- ♦ the shared experience of seeing Wales
- ♦ the preserving and shaping of the memory as photograph
- ♦ a final reflection on the significance of the experience

#### TASK FIVE: Language and Imagery

- i. How does Sheers create a sense of an intimate written style?
- ii. The first and last sentences in the poem are significantly longer. Why?
- iii. There are very few caesuras and a lot of enjambment here. Why?
- iv. In terms of imagery, where can we see instances of Sheers juxtaposition of connection and division?
- v. What might the relevance of the images of the 'altar of rock', the father, and the 'broken stone' be?
- vi. What does the photograph (and therefore the moment) represent?

#### TASK SIX: Representation of Wales

How are Wales and the narrator's father represented in the poem, do you think?

- i. WALES: 'Skirrid', 'wood', 'snow', 'dry stone wall', 'moss', 'trees', 'cleft', 'wind', 'broken stone', 'hedged fields', 'sky rubbed raw', 'mountains'
- ii. FATHER: 'Your bent head the colour of the rocks, / your breath reaching solitary'

#### TASK SEVEN: Interpreting the Poem

To what extent are the following valid interpretations of the poem?

- ♦ realisation of the frailty of the father and the rebalancing of the relationship
- ♦ a moment of connection in a relationship that's becoming increasingly distant
- ♦ moment of connection with his father and, through him, a connection to Wales
- ♦ Sarah Crown (2006) has described the 'pervading atmosphere of bridging' as 'throwing 'into poignant relief the occasional poems in which gaps are bridged'. To what extent could this poem be viewed as the bridging of a gap?

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## Commentary

This poem offers an effective thematic bridge between 'Border Country' and 'Inheritance', with its emotionally and geographically distancing effects of age, the geographic distance of origins offer, and the 'inheritance' that we gain from parental figures, all of which are contained within the title. There does also appear to be a homophonic pun contained within the title. There does also appear to be a biographical relevance to this, with 'Inheritance' and 'Border Country' both conveying a sense of distance between fathers and sons, a distance that can be seen in terms of Sheers' periods of residence in locations other than Wales.

The poem is a single continuous stanza written in an intimate, personal style, reflecting the continuous nature of the shared experience, and echoed similarly in the enjambment used in the poem and the relative paucity of caesuras. The poem is significant: perhaps it mirrors the image captured by the camera, the high contrast of the relationship, or the single cohesive connection constructed from the pair's shared Welsh landscape.

The poem does, however, also contain a volta, the pause 'half way up', which occupies the first eight lines and traces the initial climb, to the moment of 'tipping of the scales', reflected in the dramatically longer line about 'waist high', before the shift into the briefer and more regular lines referencing the 'hill', before the shift into the briefer and more regular lines referencing the 'hill', before the shift into the briefer and more regular lines referencing the literal and metaphorical split in the shape of the Skirrid.

Sheers has avoided any metrical regularity in this poem, even more so than in 'Border Country', reflecting the complexity of the relationship. This is also reflected in the sense of the poem as a whole: the wood is 'simplified by snow'; the 'dry stone wall' has 'its purpose solved' and various features of the landscape are similarly 'solved' and 'simplified'. The 'hedged field' into a single unified 'country unrolled', 'the edge of Wales' that also heals the divisions between the father and son through a sense of shared experience.

Images of division are visible throughout the poem, from the 'cleft', the 'blade' in the 'blade' and the 'broken stone'. Just as in 'Inheritance', the father is seen as a foundation and a familial link to the landscape, his 'bent head the colour of the sky' and sharp and solitary', suggesting both his age and the rigidity of his character, his fragility, reinforced by the slower pace at which he climbs, that represents the intersection of our ages', where the narrator has become the physical link between now the frail, more elderly figure.

Perhaps it is this, not just a shift in perspective, but an understanding of the landscape that allows the pair to reconnect, allowing them to 'climb[...] to the top' together, 'the country unrolled before us'. It's appropriate here that the narrator should 'climb the stone' in order to find his father (with his need to 'have my bones / not my camera's 'frame', with the structuring device of the photograph echoing 'the Windows' and the 'scenes stacked in the wings' of 'Last Act'.

The poem ends with this final caught image, recorded in a single enormous line, the final nine lines of the poem, of the unity of 'standing on the edge', the opposition to 'the world' (with its connotations of adolescence and adulthood), having offered the narrator 'some kind of purchase', 'a shallow handhold' (the gradually fading intimacy of parents and children) on their relationship, although geographically and emotionally they may be growing 'apart', to bring the narrator ever 'closer' to his father, echoed in the neat concluding 'view' and 'you'.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Idea of reconnection through natural model
- ♦ Link between familial and geographical/cultural connection
- ♦ Contrast between youthful and older perspective, with sense of overview
- ♦ Framing device of image

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Single stanza,
- ♦ Irregular line
- ♦ Concluding rh
- ♦ Frequent enja
- ♦ Sense of oppo connected thr
- ♦ Structure echo

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Biographical significance of 'Skirrid Fawr' in terms of Sheers' upbringing, but also relationship with past and significance of local myths regarding the mountain
- ♦ Geographical distance of Sheers from parents (residence away from Wales during higher education and afterwards) linked to sense of ascending/transcending borders and higher/wider perspective
- ♦ Time frame: associations of Christmas with birth, valuing of children, reconnection with family members through shared cultural experiences

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Familial conn Country', 'Tre Gaer', 'The Hi
- ♦ Experience of 'Border Coun 'Liable to Flo
- ♦ Framing of ex Windows', 'In Singing Men'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ To what extent is this a poem not so much about a familial relationship,
- ♦ Is it important to an understanding of the poem that the narrative voice male?
- ♦ Does the poem end with a moment of reconnection through familial suc interpersonal detachment?
- ♦ From a Modernist perspective, are Sheers' use of free verse and treatme 'make it new' or an acknowledgement of the importance/influence of th

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# 'Trees'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Try to consider: what could trees be intended to symbolise? To what extent does the symbolism of trees in the poem?

- ♦ growth and organic development
- ♦ continuity and stability
- ♦ strength and structure
- ♦ pand protection

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- Unusually, Sheers has used non-rhyming couplets here. What could he have chosen this verse-form over the more usual tercets?
- As with many of his poems, Sheers has used a single-line concluding couplet.
- While the syllabic counts of the lines may vary, the line 'and say "so long, which is dramatically shorter than the others. Why?
- To what extent is it possible to divide the poem into the following sections?
  - ♦ now
  - ♦ then
  - ♦ now
  - ♦ future

### TASK THREE: A Point of Interpretation

What does the 'you' in the poem mean by the response 'some time', do you think?

- there's a new arrival on the horizon, the 'rising of a sun'
- that generations may be passing, but the family remains
- that the parental figure in the poem is facing death
- that from a broader, older perspective, all things take time



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#### TASK FOUR: Language

- i. In 'Trees', there is a constant distinction between 'you' and 'I'. Why is 'I' referred to by the 'our' and 'us'?
- ii. Sheers frequently uses 'it' or 'this' to refer to the oak tree in the poem.
- iii. The poem consists of three sentences. To what extent is the length of the poem what you think? And how does it relate to the structure and content of the poem?
- iv. the first two lines ('you tell me' to 'the top field')
- v. the third, fourth, fifth and sixth lines ('when I ask' to 'should have known')
- vi. the final seven lines of the poem ('after all' to 'rising of a sun').
- vii. Why might Sheers have ended the poem with the cross-rhymed 'become'?
- viii. To what extent does the success of the poem depend on the homophony of 'become'?

#### TASK FIVE: Imagery

- i. Is it relevant that the tree in the poem is 'an oak'?
- ii. What is the symbolic relevance of the trees having been planted 'at the top of the field'?
- iii. In terms of your answer to (ii.), what then is the relevance of planting 'the sapling' at the 'top field'?
- iv. Why has Sheers described the 'sapling' as having been 'drawn by the roots'?
- v. What might be the symbolic significance of the 'reddening sky', and the 'rising of a sun'?

#### TEXT SIX: Interpreting the Poem

What is this poem about, do you think?

- ♦ the difficult relationship between parents and children
- ♦ the succession from generation to generation
- ♦ the growth and development of children
- ♦ Luke McBratney (2011) has interpreted 'the gesture [...] of planting forward beyond one's own life and wanting to be part of a continuing renewal'. To what extent is this an effective summary of the key message of the poem?

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## Commentary

'Trees' acts as an effective continuation of the familial exploration begun in 'Farther'.

'Trees' follows a similar structure to the majority of the poems in the collection: a particular moment, a poetic tableau; exploring it in its broader temporal context; which it is the end result and some speculation about the future; deconstructing the significance of the moment, often with a degree of ambiguity whose resolution is left to the interpretation of the audience.

In this instance, the moment is a superficially simple exchange regarding the 'middle of the top field', and the time frame regarding its growth. The idea is clarified, though it seems a reasonable assumption that this active, decisive figure has 'planted trees for our arrivals', who bridges the pragmatic gap between the balanced perspective of 'some time', and is connected to, it seems, the 'setting' figure and, more specifically, the narrator's father, linking to 'Border Country'.

The poem is written in non-rhyming couplets, reflecting, perhaps, the fatherly figure, though if this is a poetic depiction of a shared experience between Sheer and the narrator, that the more usual tercets have not been used. The lines vary dramatically in length, somewhere between 8 and 14 syllables. However, the line 'and say "some time"' is considerably shorter than the others, suggesting a shift in focus, a potential line final stanza, clarifying the central metaphor, and reinforcing the idea of the 'setting' or the rising of a sun', with the satisfying homophonic resonance.

The poem consists of three sentences, the first stretching across the first stanza, the central concept of the poem; the second occupying the second and third stanzas, the interaction between the two participants in the conversation. The final sentence, the last seven lines of the final four stanzas, and deals with the deconstruction of the moment.

It is perhaps noticeable that the poem seems constructed from pairings: there are four trees; the stanzas (leaving aside the final coda) each contain two lines across two lines (1), two stanzas (2), or two pairs of stanzas (3). The final line, the isolation sounded by the final line, suggesting either incompleteness (and hence the sun'), or independence (and hence an identification of the narrator with the trees).

The image of the tree itself develops throughout the poem: oak trees are associated with the potential for stability, strength, maturity and heritage, and its position in the 'middle of the top field' clearly reflects the centrality of its symbolic value for the interlocutors. At this point to complete the three-cornered square begun by the trees at the 'middle of the top field', this 'finger-thick sapling', stands alone, either a separate item or a continuation of the stability of a full-grown tree, it is described as young, growing, 'drawn up like a bow' (itself carrying a hint of Welsh heritage), a sense of shaping by external forces, reinforced by the plosives throughout the line on 'finger', 'thick', 'sapling'. This is, curiously, paralleled by the woman's 'back arching' in 'Night Window' with our meeting'. Here, instead, the sapling is 'loaded with the promise of the future', a burden of expectation, where rather than a complete and detailed shape, it is a potential whose future is undecided and undefined.

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Relationship between parental figure and narrator
- ♦ Symbolism of the 'oak' and the trees
- ♦ Shift in dynamic between parent and child
- ♦ Sense of familial continuity
- ♦ Ambiguity of future and expectations

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of non-rh
- ♦ Varying syllab rather shorter
- ♦ Single-line fin
- ♦ Continuing te
- ♦ Succession of
- ♦ Pairings

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers' parents living on a smallholding in Wales (focus on natural growth and fertility), so link between farm / planting trees and family continuity
- ♦ Possible inspiration of Philip Larkin's poem 'The Trees'?
- ♦ Sheers' movement away from Wales and residence in urban areas
- ♦ Sheers' age at point of writing collection: shift from ageing father as dominant male to Owen
- ♦ • Sheers' perception of 'bow' as weapon linked to heritage and to fathers and children (fathers crafting bows with sons)

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Familial relati  
Country', 'Far  
Gaer', 'The Hi
- ♦ Youth and po  
Country', 'He  
Spring', 'The l
- ♦ Interrelation c  
Wood', 'The F  
Spring', 'The l  
'Calendar', 'T

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Ambiguity of poem: is this the father recognising the shift in roles, and a new addition to the family?
- ♦ Does the poem look to the past, the future, or both?
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, are the trees here simply phallic symbols in a world the majority of poems in the collection appear to inhabit and ignore family members?



# 'Hedge School'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Quotation

- i. What was a 'hedge school'? To what extent is this relevant?
- ii. In terms of Sheers' focus on nature in the collection, what might the title suggest?
- iii. Could the narrative of 'The Pardoner's Tale' be relevant, do you think?
- iv. Which of the following meanings of 'goon a-blakeberyed' is the most logical here, do you think?
  - ♦ to wander aimlessly
  - ♦ to go where one pleases
  - ♦ to have fallen into temptation/corruption



### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. There is little sense of metrical regularity to this poem. Is free verse the topic, do you think?
- ii. Three lines are rather shorter than the others in terms of their syllables.
  - ♦ 'growing at the lane's end'
  - ♦ 'not to eat them at all'
  - ♦ 'just how dark he runs inside'
- iii. Sheers has written the poem in four stanzas of differing lengths (six lines). Why might the fourth stanza be considerably longer, do you think?
- iv. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- v. How does the structure offer a contrast between human and natural world?
- vi. What is the process of discovery that has taken place during the poem? What transition has taken place?

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### TASK THREE: Language

- To what extent do the sentences match up with the stanzas? Why?
- The pronoun use here is unusual in that it shifts from first person ('I') to third person ('he'). Why? What impact does this have?
- Sheers describes 'slipping the straps' of his bag to 'free up both hands' to 'pick the blackberries'. What might the shift from sibilance to harsh plosives suggest? What might you think?
- 'The picking of blackberries' sounds oddly ceremonial in terms of its language. Why? Is it deliberate?
- Sheers refers to the 'choice of how to take them'. Why might this be significant? What do you think?
- Sheers returns to plosive consonants a number of times, including 'claret', 'cupped a coiled black pearl necklace', and 'my hand blue-black as a butcher's'. What impact might this have on the overall tone and mood?
- There are relatively minor semantic fields of school/education, and of nature. Which words might link to these, do you think?

### TASK FOUR: Blackberries

What do the following images suggest, do you think?

- 'the picking of blackberries'
- 'the bitterness of an unripe red / tightly packed as a nervous heart'
- 'the rain-bloated looseness of those older, / cobwebbed and dusty as old books'
- 'a coiled black pearl necklace, / a hedgerow caviar, the bubbles of juice'
- 'an eye of one great berry, a sudden symphony'

### TASK FIVE: Representation

The narrator is represented as going through a process in the poem. What is the process? What is the final conclusion?

### TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem

Which of the following best describes the poem, do you think?

- The poem describes a child's realisation of their own darker side.
- The poem offers a juxtaposition of the natural world and the negative aspects of human nature.
- The poem depicts the destructive nature of self-indulgence.
- Carrie Etter (2006) has described the poem as 'convincingly and powerfully evocative of a childhood experience such that the reader vicariously shares in it'. To what extent does the poem support this? From the distanced, observational perspective in much of the collection, what insight into the narrative voice adopted?

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## Commentary

In a sense, 'Hedge School' compares most effectively with 'Border Country' in its link between childhood experience and the dawning of adulthood; both link humanity with destructive power and/or death; both offer an often negative depiction of nature.

A 'hedge school', of the sort indicated in the title, was a tradition (predominant from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries) where free (and often ad hoc) rural schooling would be set up by local people as a means of providing educational advancement for the rural population. Here, however, the title suggests the idea of a rural education through natural experience.

The opening quotation comes from a tale about some men who are hoping to kill themselves through their own greed. Death, destruction, greed, and the thematic parallels between the two texts. In addition, blackberries have a long history in Chaucer's poem, they represent freedom of choice, aimlessness, temptation. In Heaney's poem 'Blackberry Picking', also an influence, the picking of blackberries is a symbol of childhood, adulthood and mortality, with images such as flesh, blood, and the impossibility of this, the narrator of Sheers' poem does the exact opposite: 'I'll not touch over my skin', a moment of nihilistic, sensual destructiveness.

The beginning of the poem, dealing with the narrator's 'walk home from school' is a contrast between the human social integration of schooling (fading as he walks) and the natural, self-exploratory learning environment. The narrator's relative youth is emphasised by the 'first', the 'one by one' and 'piling' them in order to take them 'together', the symbolic reference to committing the destructive act 'just once', juxtaposed with the older berries.

The experimentation with the natural world, of the 'lesson' in 'how to take them', 'choice', the power to 'take them', their preciousness emphasised through 'a Claret / laid down for years in a cellar', 'a coiled black pearl necklace', 'just poured wine', a 'sudden symphony'. In some of the images, these are precious over time (the 'Claret', the 'pearl necklace'), in others, their transience (the 'bubbles', the 'hedgerow caviar'). All of these are more usually associated with childhood. However, the (generally suspended) destructive capacity of a child is shown by the 'knuckles scratched' and the hands turned 'blue-black red, / as black as a farmer's at lambing', all part of the cycle of life and death, and also signs of a destructive nature.

The final lesson here is a negative one, where the references to the 'low wall' suggest a testing of boundaries, where the value of the blackberries as a symbol of organic growth and the cycle of life is displaced by a desire for destruction. The decision 'not to eat them at all'. The reference to the narrator 'slowly' suggests a deliberate, considered act, with the violent 'fist' over which the narrator is acting as the antithesis (antithesis: contrasting of opposites) of the 'palm'. It is appropriate in this sense, that the narrator's hands should then be described as 'the juices, and linked to 'a butcher' and 'a farmer', two men at opposite ends of the spectrum with control over nature; the boy, in contrast, simply destroys without a thought for the cycle of life, transitioning through the 'hedge and tree tunnel' as if a rite of passage, returning to the world with a dawning self-awareness of his destructive nature and recognition of 'how dark he runs inside'.

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<p><b>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Juxtaposition of childhood and adulthood</li> <li>♦ Sense of rite of passage</li> <li>♦ Natural, organic growth and value vs. human destructive capacity and human value</li> <li>♦ Idea of physical and social/emotional consumption</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO2: Analyse way literary texts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Free verse</li> <li>♦ Some shorter stanzas: 'September', 'The Hill Fort', 'growing at the edge of the world', 'just how dark it is', 'The Hill Fort'</li> <li>♦ Stanza lengths</li> <li>♦ All first person</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Sheers' semi-rural upbringing, recurring aspects of relationship with nature</li> <li>♦ Poem written during a brief residency at Heston Blumenthal's restaurant, 'The Fat Duck', completing a National Poetry Day commission</li> <li>♦ Epigraph from 'The Pardoner's Prologue'</li> <li>♦ Poem perhaps influenced by Seamus Heaney's 'Blackberry Picking'</li> <li>♦ Image of modern masculinity: corruptive and destructive capacities more prevalent due to social, cultural and media pressures on young men</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO4: Explore context of literary texts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Childhood and adolescence: 'The Hill Fort', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Hill Fort'</li> <li>♦ The pleasure of writing: 'Marking Time', 'Late Spring', 'The Hill Fort'</li> <li>♦ Relative value of writing: 'Intermission', 'Fishmonger', 'The Hill Fort'</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ From a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, is it possible to read this poem as a journey between id (the subconscious uncontrollable, primal, instinctual self), ego (the conscious self), and superego (the subconscious moral conscience)?</li> <li>♦ From a post-Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, are the aspects of adolescence in the poem the oppositional twin drives of sexuality (<i>Eros</i>) and fear of castration (<i>Thanatos</i>)?</li> <li>♦ Is Sheers using the experience in the poem to explore the darker side of humanity in general?</li> <li>♦ Is the poem less about describing the experience of growing up and more about the sense of mortality that it involves?</li> </ul>	

# 'Joseph Jones'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- This is the only poem in the collection to be labelled by a person's name. Why is this? Is it a choice, do you think?
- It is possible that 'Joseph Jones' could have been a person's real name or a pseudonym (pseudonym: a false or fictional name). If this is so, what might it signify? Is it relevant that biblical names are popular in Wales? Is it a commonly found surname in Wales?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- Sheers has chosen to write this poem in quatrains (four-line stanzas).
- The first three quatrains keep a reasonably regular syllabic count, generally 10 syllables. However, the lines in the final stanza are around half the length. Why might this be?
- Look again at the shape of the poem. Which of the following might it suggest?
  - a succession of linked ideas and associations with the character
  - the idea of the fading of memory and the significance of the character
  - the shape of a fist, with the shape of the whole poem then echoed in the shape of each individual stanza
- How might we characterise the structure of the poem?
  - an overview of the character
  - a particularly vivid memory
  - a more general image of the character
  - fragmented, impersonal, isolated details



### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- Why does Sheers begin the poem with 'Of course'? Is it intended to suggest a conversation? Obviousness? The retrieval of a memory?
- The poem is written in a terse, masculine, elliptical (elliptical: abbreviated, essential words) style. How has Sheers achieved this and why has he?
- There is very little complex lexis used in this extract. Why has Sheers chosen this? Is it simply to reflect the direct masculinity of the character?
- While there is some irregularity in terms of the syllabic count, 'hair' is a line in the first three stanzas. Why might this be?
- Both 'Joseph Jones' and the female participant in the second stanza are mentioned through references to pieces of them and objects. What might this suggest?
- Throughout the poem, there are examples of animalistic display. What might this sound like?
- In the references to Jones getting 'his red wings', and the girl's 'skirt heels', how are women being represented?

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#### TASK FOUR: Joseph Jones the Character

- i. To what extent can we find evidence for the following aspects of Joseph Jones?
  - ♦ a focus on sex and physical prowess
  - ♦ a sense of competitive masculinity
  - ♦ a tendency towards a materialistic view of the world
  - ♦ non-procreative
- ii. Most of Sheers' characters have lost something, either personally, or professionally. What has Joseph Jones lost?

#### TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem

- i. To what extent can each of the following (or all of them) act as a real theme in the poem?
  - ♦ The poem represents distance from the past and the unreliability of memory.
  - ♦ The poem represents the futility and sterility of living in the present.
  - ♦ The poem explores the tension between growth and maturity.
  - ♦ The poem focusses on the social representations of gender, particularly masculinity.
  - ♦ The poem offers a negative depiction of masculinity.
- ii. Phil Brown has described having 'the sense that the poet is sneering at himself' [...]. In relation to Sheers' treatment of the individual described, to what extent is this true?

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## Commentary

In a number of significant ways, 'Joseph Jones' varies from the other poems of other poems are dedicated to, or appear to reference, specific individuals. The poem named after the character on which it focusses. It is worth interrogating choice: while it is possible that Sheers has used the character's real name as a pseudonym, intending the character described to function as both a believable figure. In this sense, the name is worth interrogating further: biblical first throughout Wales; 'Jones' is the most common surname. As such, we ask that in addition to a retrospective character study, 'Joseph Jones' is intended representation of a type of masculinity.

The form is also worth dissecting: Sheers has used four quatrains (as pre 'Windows' and the second section of 'Show'), with the lines of each stanza on the right-hand side of the page. While the quatrains themselves could be an anglicisation of Welsh culture, and the shifting lines across the page could represent the past and the fading of memory, the major impact of the form is visual: most is a fist, linked to the overt physicality of the 'fifty press-ups', his 'press his chest', and the 'late night fights'.

Jones is clearly a persona constructed through public performance, but this is emphasised in the first stanza by the recollection ('of course I remember' the referenced details: 'fifty press-ups', 'hair sheened with gel', 'air dead with identity', Jones is presented as the accumulation of a set of objects and behaviours.

There is also a futility, a sterility to the character: the air is 'dead' with so 'passed'; he got his 'red wings' (a reference to sexual intercourse during the war, though also connoting violence); he is remembered by his car ('XR2'); for a single trial 'with Cardiff Youth' (which we assume to have been unsuccessful). Jones is procreative or even organic: quite the opposite, even sexual intercourse and creation, is something futile and valued solely for its competitive so-called masculinity, something to be 'told'.

The 'red wings' are ironic: birds, particularly when linked to flight, are used to represent women. Instead, the wings are an image of futility, the colour of a 'umbrella blown inside out'. The woman, as with Jones, is referenced more as a cohesive individual, she is a 'skirt', 'white tights', 'high heels'.

The only creative act linked to Jones is in the 'making' of the 'small town myth'. However, the verb allows multiple interpretations: is the pose in front of the camera a myth? Is the Jones we see described here on the way to becoming a 'small town myth'?

Both are logical, and the 'myth' part is perhaps the key to the interpretation of Jones as a representative figure, two-dimensional and socially constructed, a 'myth' within the boundaries of the 'small town', and only within the boundaries of the poem.

The final stanza, the ultimate summary of his achievements, features lines of no more than four syllables each. This sense of incompleteness, of a journey towards the end, is appropriate. A car, some fights late at night, a single team: impressive perhaps at the time, but meaningless in the wider world. Jones is a collection of details, a symbol, a figure serving a poetic function, representing a real person, just as the woman he uses in the second stanza.

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**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Representative figure (named!)
- ♦ Focus on metonymical memorial reconstruction
- ♦ People as objects, items, pieces
- ♦ Character as symbolising youthful Welsh masculinity

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Four quatrain
- ♦ Visual represe
- ♦ Final stanza o much shorter
- ♦ Character rep moments
- ♦ Continuing sh 'masculinity'

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ In terms of masculinity depicted, perhaps a reference to Sheers' young manhood (Sheers has described himself as being more of a rugby player than a poet at school)
- ♦ 'Cardiff Youth' – perhaps a link to Welshness and Welsh history, with Jones representing a negative portrayal of modern Welsh masculinity
- ♦ XR2 commercially available from 1983–9, and widely associated with 'boy racer' culture. Sheers born in 1974, so car had to be second-hand and already outdated, much like the character
- ♦ Bandstand part of a popular park in Abergavenny, opened in 1884, so sign of older customs, society and culture
- ♦ Link to crisis of modern masculinity (twentieth-century associations of youthful masculinity with sport, violence and promiscuity)

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Masculinity: 'Spring', 'Drin
- ♦ Representatio 'Winter Swan
- ♦ Passing/reject emptiness of r 'Show', 'Borde 'Flag', 'The Si

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, is the poem presenting the patriarchal dom women in modern culture in an at least partially positive light?
- ♦ Is the poem criticising the type of masculinity presented in the poem or specificity of it?
- ♦ Is there a sense of cultural snobbery in the judgment apparently passed described in the poem?
- ♦ Does 'Joseph Jones' appear to be a real person or simply a symbolic or c this impact on our reading?

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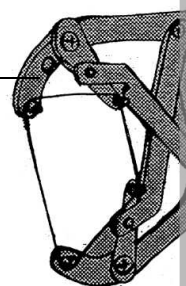




# 'Late Spring'

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## Tasks



### TASK ONE: The Title

- What are the connotations of 'late'? A delayed arrival? After the early part?
- What do we associate with 'spring'? New life? A fresh start? The early part?
- Bearing in mind your answers to (i) and (ii) above, how should we think about a delayed beginning? As referring to what happens after a beginning or a fresh beginning?

### TASK TWO: Form, Structure and Language

- Sheers has used tercets in the poem. Why might this be? If there is a Welshness in the collection, could we see the poem at least partially in that light?
- To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - contextualising moment
  - experience
  - development of experience
  - deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- The poem contains three sentences: from stanza one to stanza three; from stanza seven to stanza eight. Is this significant, do you think? Is the sentence stretches across only two stanzas?
- The poem sees a shift from 'I' and 'he' to 'we'. When does this take place?
- As usual in the collection, the syllabic count varies. However, two lines are longer than the others:
  - 'And stretching them across the made-to-purpose tool' is longer
  - 'To crown them' is shorter than the others. Why?

There are two examples of rhyme in the poem: 'purse'/'reverse' (stanza four) and 'there' (stanza seven). Is there a relevance to either of these, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Imagery

- There are a number of phallic images in the poem. Which are they and what do they represent?
- Can you identify any yonic images in the poem? How do they relate to the poem?
- Sheers describes the 'tails' in the final stanza as being a 'strange hard' poem juxtapose the natural and unnatural?
- How are skilled crafts and rural traditions represented in the poem?

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#### TASK FOUR: Masculinity and Family

- i. Based on the details provided, what impression is given of masculinity?
  - ♦ 'like a man', 'castrated', 'hard orange O-rings', 'made-to-purpose', 'play it like a cello', 'spreading', 'coax', 'one-handed', 'tool', 'clever'
- ii. What impression does the poem offer of the notion of family?
  - ♦ 'helped my grandfather', 'I'd pass to him then stand and stare', 'a windfall of our morning's work', 'a strange harvest of the seeds'
- iii. Based on your answer to (i) and (ii), to what extent does the poem relate to the relationship between the grandfather and the grandson?

#### TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem

- i. To what extent are the following valid interpretations of the poem?
  - i. The poem explores familial succession, the educative role of the grandfather and the reinforcement of patriarchy.
  - ii. The poem represents competitive, sterile masculinity.
  - iii. The poem presents the loss of tradition and skilled trades
- ii. Luke McBratney (2011) has offered a bleak view of the landscape in the poem as one in which 'the blackberries draw blood and the little lambs get caught'. Do you agree in terms of *this* poem?

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## Commentary

In the collection as a whole, 'Late Spring' bridges the gap between the poetic and destructive masculinity ('Hedge School' and 'Joseph Jones') and the connections ('Border Country', 'Farther', 'Trees'), covering aspects of both delayed awakening, a departed opportunity for a new beginning, or the poem could be reasonable readings of the poem.

The poem is constructed from eight tercets, a return to the more usual stanzaic form, and, perhaps, linking to a sense of Welsh heritage, reinforced by the description of the rearing of sheep. Structurally, it is possible to divide the poem into an initial overview of the experience, an observer's description of the experience, and a deconstruction of it.

The exploration of masculinity within an assertive and patriarchal system is clear from the first stanza: the narrator is made to feel 'like' a man rather than through the experimental aspects of adolescence, becoming a man through the denial of it, and is acquiring a traditional rural skill from an older generation. The caesura in the first line asserts both of masculine dominance (through the possibly ironic emphasis on the competitive, sterile nature of self-enclosed masculinity. The items mentioned are also ironic, in that the yonic image of the 'O-ring' in combination with the 'pliers' (something self-evidently phallic) seem to, perhaps, represent the limiting of the representation of a stable sexual connection linked to the older generation.

The tool in question is an effective symbol for masculinity: it is described as 'heavy and steel-hard', the images focussing on constructedness, artificiality, and inflexibility. However, there is also a sense conveyed of the aesthetic quality of the tool deployed: the narrator's grandfather 'turns' a lamb 'between his legs / to control and also the creation of beauty through skilled manipulation. Rather than destructive, the grandfather seems gentle, 'spreading', 'coax[ing]', 'delicately'. The potential violence involved in the assertion of masculinity through letting go, perhaps even suggesting a moment of unexpected and atypical emotion shared between him and his grandfather.

The lambs are innocent, young: the 'skin at their groins' is 'pink unwoolled beans' in a 'delicate purse', ironically implying both the value of what they represent and the potential for organic growth, emphasised by the reference to 'milking' (a traditional and declining rural trade), and to the description of the object as 'a pliers'. In gripping and fixing, the tool is used for separation, an inverted creation.

This sense of severance is reflected in the poem through the caesura and the use of words such as 'one-handed, like a man milking' and 'for the tool, a pliers in reverse'. It is represented, ultimately, in the tri-syllabic line 'to crown them', where the use of the word 'crown' conveys a sense of loss, of incompleteness, and of finality through the use of monosyllables.

The final stanza, focussing on the 'tails scattered like catkins / among the work', seems to avoid stating explicitly what this 'windfall' is, juxtaposing the natural with the unnatural ('our morning's work'). It is another irony of this poem that the assertion of masculinity and control, should be what allows the narrative to move from the first six stanzas to the collective 'we' of the final two stanzas.

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The final line provides a final, distancing sense of strangeness through the (oxymoron: a self-contradictory image) 'strange harvest' reaped from 'the' literal harvest comes not from growth, but from destruction, and the 'seed' prevent the sowing of the lambs' own seed. However, the 'strange harvest' understanding of adult masculinity, rural trade, and relationship between grandfather, constructed through this shared experience.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Loss of innocence?
- ♦ Familial bonding through shared experience
- ♦ Depiction of masculinity as destructive, competitive, sterile
- ♦ Idea of growth and development in nature

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Eight stanzas
- ♦ Overview/progression
- ♦ Varying syllable patterns dramatically
- ♦ Shift from 'The' to 'a'

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers' grandfather, a part-time farmer as well as teacher: associations of masculinity with grandfather and farming experiences
- ♦ Sheep farming traditional to (and commonly associated with) Wales, accounting for 20% of Welsh agriculture in 2011, but also impacting on secondary and tertiary industries as well as sustaining communities. However, now in decline due to environmental changes and reliance on EU funding.
- ♦ Crisis in twenty-first-century masculinity in terms of means of definition, but also linked to retained patriarchal dominance in traditional communities and societies

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Masculinity: 'The Fishmonger', 'The Country', 'The Gaer', 'The H', 'The Equation', 'The'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Grandfather educating in masculinity, or asserting patriarchal dominance
- ♦ Is the narrative voice given a sense of empowerment or emasculation through the poem?
- ♦ From a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, does the poem involve a representation of the Oedipus complex?
- ♦ Is the poem part of a wider representation of modern masculine sterility?

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# 'The Equation'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. The use of the definite article is interesting here: why is it 'the equation'? Or is this the equation that incorporates all others?
- ii. An equation is a process of achieving equality or balance, or a statement of equality. Could this idea be relevant to the collection so far? What is being balanced? What character is represented in the poem?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Sheers has used quatrains here: why might this be? What might it represent?
- ii. Why has Sheers included a single-line final stanza? What does it add to the poem?
- iii. The poem is thirteen lines long and is written in almost decasyllabic lines. Could this be a subtle reference to a more regular and traditional poetic form, do you think?
- iv. The lines are more regular in terms of their syllabic count than many of the poems in the collection, ranging mostly from between nine and 12 syllables. Why?
- v. The lines 'he'd return home to the sweet methane of the chicken sheds' and 'like a magician whose tricks are just the way of things' are the longest in the poem in terms of their syllabic count. Is there any significance to this, do you think?
- vi. The line 'to find a way through the dark' is shorter than the others in the poem. Does this reflect its thematic significance in the poem, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- i. The figure in the poem is non-specific, referred to as 'he'. Why might this be?
- ii. Why has Sheers used the oxymoron 'sweet methane' to describe the figure?
- iii. There are three sentences in the poem, with only the third stretching across two lines. Why has Sheers chosen this more rigid, more structured approach? Is this relevant?

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**TASK FOUR: Representation of the Character**

- i. In terms of the references to 'soft afternoons teaching logarithms' and '[...]hieroglyphics', how is the everyday teaching role of the character represented?
- ii. What does the change of clothing from 'his suit into overalls' represent?
- iii. How is the farming life of the character juxtaposed with his role as a teacher?
- iv. Is it relevant that the teaching experiences are visual, while the farming experiences are sensory?
- v. To what extent can both the character's roles be described as attempts to 'bring the light into the dark'?
- vi. It is possible that both 'Late Spring' and 'The Equation' describe Sheers. How does this poem represent him differently?
- vii. Sheers has, however, chosen not to specify the person described in the poem. How does this affect the way we understand him?

**TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following interpretations of the poem you agree with?
  - a. The poem represents the multiplicity and complexity of individual experience.
  - b. The poem demonstrates the deeper reality, the inexplicable 'magical' aspects of life and the artificiality of humanity.
  - c. The poem explores the restriction of human society, and the freedom of the individual.
  - d. The poem emphasises the importance of balance in a person's life, between the public and private personas.
  - e. The poem acts as a poetic memorialisation of a person from the past.
- ii. Phil Brown has argued that 'Sheers could be accused [...] of suggesting a bewitching effect of making themselves look more beautiful than they are, of focusing on the practical, useful things, such as harvesting eggs'. To what extent would you agree with this accusation?

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## Commentary

The title, as so often in the collection, allows several equally valid interpretations of balancing, of making equal; it could refer to an already existing balance or an essential balance (hence the definite article).

Although it is likely that Sheers' grandfather (both a teacher and a farmer in the poem, Sheers has, as with the other more apparently personal poems so far in the collection. As such, while it is difficult to escape a feeling of autobiography, it fully determine where the boundaries between poetic representation and reality.

The poem has been constructed from three quatrains and a final single-line stanza, viewed as offering a sense of tradition, of Englishness, and they are matched by syllable count ranging from seven syllables ('to find a way through the dark') up to the 'sweet methane of the chicken sheds'), but generally falling between nine and ten.

Although there are hints of a more regular iambic metre (iamb: a poetic foot consisting of a stressed syllable) at times, this is more a reflection of the natural rhythm of Sheers' naturalistic style, rather than a deliberate poetic construction. The regularity of terms of the stanza form and syllabic count is enough to give the poem a sense of referencing a more old-fashioned style.

This is also mirrored in the sentences used: each of the stanzas contains a complete sentence apart from the final stanza where the sentence overflows onto the final line. This reaching beyond boundaries in the speaker's connection with the natural world is dependent on this structure: the enjambment offers a feeling of calm, natural progression between the parts of the character's life that contrasts with the 'Spring'.

The identity of the subject, at least within the confines of the poem, is not clearly reported voice. This voice tells of the nebulously 'soft afternoons' dealing with the world of 'logarithms', where the transient 'hieroglyphics' of the 'blackboard' (a code of exclusionary and almost mythically inaccessible code that belongs to the world within it) can be almost dismissively 'waved away' with 'a damp cloth'. The 'sweet methane of the chicken sheds' is described as 'home', both a place and a state the speaker seems to belong.

With the transition between the environments and between designated roles (as in Sheers' poems) signalled by an almost costumed shift in clothing (from formal to casual), he moves beyond the shallow evanescence of the mathematics he teaches to a more grounded life by the alliteration), opening his 'leaking fist' to 'unfurl' a 'sail of grain' to a more evocative: the experience of caring for the chickens offers a depth and a sense of purpose that is missing from his other role, and there is a sense of the release of aggression from his 'fist', along with a sense of greater purpose to the scattering of grain and the scattering of knowledge.

There is also a sense of a greater process at work, with his provision of a final line in the penultimate stanza's reference to the way his 'hand would flatten' the 'sleeping weight of a hen' to take 'one egg, warm and bald', 'like a magic trick of things'. Here, the egg is a symbol of a living, physical reality that is at odds with the logic of the 'logarithms', demonstrating the everyday magic of life, with its lack of prestige, a final single-line stanza containing simply a single chicken egg 'in the palm', an image of care, connection with the natural world reinforced by the

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Perhaps, ultimately, the equation that is offered is not only between the and the giving and receiving embodied in the keeping of the birds, but a dominance of 'Late Spring' and the organic circularity of 'The Equation'

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Non-specific speaker described
- ♦ Representation of maths teaching and chicken keeping
- ♦ Offering balance – nature and mankind? Giving and receiving?
- ♦ Cyclical nature of fertility, growth and death, as opposed to human artificiality

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Chronological
- ♦ Use of quatrain conclusion
- ♦ More syllabic poems, some
- ♦ Final lines of p
- ♦ Some alliteration

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sense of farming heritage linked to Sheers' upbringing on a smallholding
- ♦ Possibly autobiographical (or representation of autobiography) – Sheers' grandfather both teacher and farmer
- ♦ Twentieth- and twenty-first-century decline in British agriculture and links to ongoing concerns about lack of practical applicability of content and skills taught in British schools
- ♦ Twentieth- and twenty-first-century reinvention of masculinity to incorporate aspects of traditionally/stereotypically 'female' aspects

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Skilled male c Spring', 'The S
- ♦ Relationship b 'Mametz Woc 'Farther', 'Hee 'The Steelwor 'Skirrid Faw'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem prioritise the emotional and biological over the logical/e
- ♦ To what extent does the poem describe a shift from traditional masculine gender?
- ♦ Could the poem be said to evoke a sense of wonder at the 'magic' of nat primacy of humanity and human interpretation?
- ♦ Could Sheers be said to be making the point that humankind, whatever inevitable natural cycle?

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# ‘Swallows’



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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. To what extent might it be relevant that Sheers is, once again, focussing on birds?
- ii. What is distinctive about swallows?
- iii. Could it be important, do you think, that the birds are plural and non-specific?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Why might Sheers have chosen, once again, to use quatrains, do you think?
- ii. Similarly to ‘Inheritance’ and ‘The Equation’ (arguably), Sheers has chosen quatrains. What might this be intended to convey, do you think?
- iii. The majority of lines in the poem are between five and eight syllables. How does this compare to the lines in ‘their ink to sign their signatures’ be considerably longer than this, do you think? Is the poem decasyllabic?
- iv. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function

### TASK THREE: Language

- i. As with a number of the previous poems, the sentences are all stretched. What impact does this have?
- ii. There is very little stoppage in the poem, whether end-stopping or caesura. What might this be said to reflect the content?
- iii. The swallows are represented as being extremely active, an effect achieved through the verb choices. Why have the following verbs been chosen and what effect do they have?
  - ♦ cutting
  - ♦ flying
  - ♦ dipping
  - ♦ sign
- iv. Unusually for Sheers, there is very little evidence of alliteration or consonance. Why have they made this choice, do you think?
- v. There is, however, a great deal of sibilance running through the poem. Why have they chosen to use this, do you think?

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#### TASK FOUR: Imagery

- i. The major semantic field in the poem is one of writing. Why has Sheers chosen this? What impact is it intended to have?
  - ♦ italic, script, descenders, ink, sign, signatures, page
- ii. The swallows fly 'between the telephone wires, / flying in crossed lines' – what do they symbolise, do you think?
- iii. In terms of their lack of difference, what are the swallows intended to represent?

#### TASK FIVE: Context

- i. Swallows often nest in old houses, particularly in rural areas. Could this be significant? What impact might this have on you think?
- ii. Swallows are migratory birds, and may well be negatively impacted by climate change. To what extent might this change our interpretation of the poem?
- iii. Sheers, in his comments on the poem for The Poetry Archive, has linked it to his parents' house near Abergavenny. Does this impact on our reading?

#### TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem

To what extent could each of the following be a valid interpretation of the poem?

- ♦ The poem explores the relationship between groups and individuals.
- ♦ The poem addresses the nature of family, juxtaposing transience and stability.
- ♦ The poem discusses the tension between nature and the imposed order of civilisation.
- ♦ Luke McBratney has suggested that, as readers, we should 'recognise the perfection in living through their offspring, which, in a sense, means the end of this, to what extent does the poem present the swallows as an image of continuity?

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## Commentary

Swallows are a distinctive and recognisable feature of rural life: agile, beautiful, swallows are migratory birds, often nesting in the windows and roof spaces at the periphery of human experience.

These aspects are clearly represented in the poem: their shape is 'italic', and their flight a form of joyfully interweaving 'sky-jive' (reflected, perhaps, in the music in their interweaving of the telephone lines). Their return is described as 'regeneration', one that is 'flawless to human eyes'.

The adjective 'flawless' offers a sense of both 'perfect' and 'without distinction', the idea of the birds as always plural, defined as a group, with 'no seams or joints' that offers the birds the illusion of familial continuity, of being a community rather than isolated individuals, a reassuring image of the immersive, anonymous, but lacking the complexity of individuality, at least from a human perspective.

The poem has been constructed from three unrhymed quatrains. Once again, it is contained, offering a sense of tradition that fits the sense of familial continuity, partially through the hint of metrical regularity in the similarity of the lines.

The swallows are active throughout the poem, 'cutting' between the 'telephone lines', 'dipping' in order to 'sign their signatures'. The reference to their 'signatures' of continuous motion in terms of the graphological usage of italics to suggest is reinforced by the references to 'regeneration' and the lack of a 'seam'. The swallows interrupting human interaction or at least juxtaposed with the interaction taking place along phone lines. Here, the swallows offer an alternative to linear chronology: their cycle is 'flawless', entirely in and of itself rather than tied to human experience.

However, the poem does also acknowledge the imposition of human perception as they are defined in human terms, as text through the semantic field of weaving (as Sheers' representation of them through this poem), as perfect 'to human eyes' between the appearance and reality, with the swallows only valued here for representing aspects of human experience.

The swallows act, then, as an 'other', a means by which to define ourselves as humanity, weaving in between the continuing lines of human life and yet offering a permanence that humans ever can.

It is ironic in this sense that the swallows should be described as 'sign[ing] the page of the sky'. A signature is something (at least theoretically) unique, a personal expression of self: the swallows, however, are interchangeable, lacking a permanent, a recorded representation intended to convey information by the textual process: the swallows, however, experience an 'annual regeneration' on the 'wires', 'flying in crossed lines', and leave no permanent record of their presence. It is itself that is the text for the swallows, 'the page of the sky', their transient juxtaposition with humanity.

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# Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Swallows as representing continuity and universality (migratory, periphery of human life)
- ♦ Juxtaposition of humanity and nature
- ♦ Use of recurring image of text
- ♦ Sense of construction and subjective perception, especially from human perspective

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of three q
- ♦ Relatively sho than the other to seven syllal lines
- ♦ Sentences stre
- ♦ Little use of e
- ♦ No alliteration the poem
- ♦ Use of active v

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Autobiographical relevance: swallows return to Sheers' parents' house in Llandewi Rydderch every year
- ♦ Poem partially prompted by a report on climate change, suggesting that swallows could be lost as a species
- ♦ Juxtaposition of modern communicative methods and more traditional familial continuity and connection

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Nature: 'Mam Swans', 'Bord
- ♦ Parents and d 'Trees', 'Y Gae

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Is the key focus in the poem on familial continuity or on writing?
- ♦ Are the swallows symbols of permanence and longevity or of transience
- ♦ Is the poem suggesting that we, as readers, should *envy* the swallows, ju swallows in a negative light, or trying to convey some sort of more posi
- ♦ From a critical perspective, could Sheers be criticised as viewing the swa

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# 'On Going'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Dedication

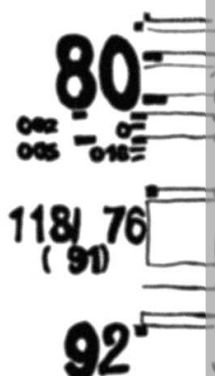
- i. The title could be read a number of different ways. Which would be?
  - ♦ as a poem on the topic of 'going' (as in 'on love', 'on beauty')
  - ♦ as a poem recording a particular departure (a specific instance)
  - ♦ as a poem describing an 'ongoing' process
- ii. The poem is described as 'i.m. Jean Sheers', Owen Sheers' grandmother.
  - ♦ 'i.m.' stands for 'in memoriam', 'in memory of'. How does this affect the poem?
  - ♦ This is the second poem in the collection to refer to a named individual. How does this appear biographically accurate rather than pseudonymous. What does this suggest about the poem?
  - ♦ Should we understand 'i.m. Jean Sheers' as suggesting the poem is dedicated to Jean Sheers in terms of its thematic relevance?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Sheers has used quatrains again in this poem. Why?
- ii. Could there be any relevance to Sheers' use of four stanzas of four lines each?
- iii. Lines in the poem are generally nine to 10 syllables long. Is this significant, do you think?
- iv. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- v. There is clear usage of caesuras and end-stopping when linked to deconstruction but frequent enjambment when describing his grandmother. What does this convey?

### TASK THREE: Language

- i. To what extent does the perspective in the poem transition from 'you' to 'I'? What effect does this have?
- ii. Where in the poem can we find a semantic field of fragility and delicacy?
- iii. To what extent does the poem depend on the movement from 'discovery' to 'loss'?
- iv. What is the effect of the alliteration in the 'connection of my kiss'?
- v. The poem ends with a high proportion of sibilance in the description 'back / into the sleep of their slow-closing'. Why?
- vi. The poem maintains a gentle, intimate tone. How is this achieved?



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**TASK FOUR: Imagery**

- i. How are the 'instruments' described in the first stanza, and what do they juxtapose with people throughout the poem?
- ii. Once again, we see a person constructed out of details, described through imagery. What is most appropriate is this here?
- iii. What does Sheers mean by 'windows into the soul's temperature', and how does this relate to the poem?
- iv. Why is the subject of the poem described as 'an ancient child'? Should this be seen as an affectionate image, or bitterly ironic?
- v. What does Sheers intend to convey through the image of the 'breath on the cheek / like a blustery wind at a blind'?
- vi. Why does Sheers describe the subject as having a 'paper temple'? Is this a reference to fragility, or does this also link to the poem itself?
- vii. Sheers represents death here as 'sleep'. Why?

**TASK FIVE: Comparisons and Connections**

- i. 'Jean Sheers' was Owen Sheers' grandmother: how does his depiction of her relate to his representation of his grandfather?
- ii. To what extent does Sheers' description of Jean Sheers resemble the descriptions of other characters in the collection and particularly Sheers' description of his mother?

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. How should we then interpret the poem?
  - i. as describing the deeper reality of human connection as going beyond the surface
  - ii. as an expression of intimacy and loss within family
  - iii. as emphasising the vital importance of moments of connection
- ii. Francesca Rhydderch (2005) has described Sheers' writing as being 'about communicating simple, real emotion'. In terms of the poem's apparent themes, to what extent could this be applied to this 'On Going'?

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## Commentary

After a poem that offers an externalised comparison and a lack of specific details, readers are left with a startlingly intimate and apparently personal poem regarding the person to whom the poem is dedicated.

The title, 'On Going', allows for several equally valid interpretations: a record of departures ('on the theme of going'); a record of a single, specific instance of a break within a previously continuous process (in the split between 'on' and 'going'); a departure that also reinforces the circularity of life. As so often with Sheers, the poem is relevant: Sheers appears to be describing his final moment of familial intimacy with Jean Sheers, describing their final meeting in vivid and highly emotive imagery. The dedication could also be read as offering a dedication to Jean Sheers rather than a record of her passing, focussing instead on the thematic resonances and emotional moment. This also, in terms of the dedication, forces us to interrogate the poem in relation to his other poems (such as 'Late Spring' or 'The Equation') as autobiographical.

The poem is constructed from four unrhymed quatrains, a neat and self-contained form that offers a sense of cultural heritage and tradition, an appropriate form for a poem about a passing generation. Syllabic counts vary somewhat, from the five syllables of 'and' to the somehow diminished 'fragile on your side' to the thirteen syllables of 'and of your eyes' and 'in their half-second of recorded understanding', with the variation in syllable count from the connection expressed through the longer lines. The poem also, through the suggestion of rhyme in the link between 'understanding' and 'slow-closing', offers a satisfying and more complete-feeling finish to the experience.

The instruments at the beginning of the poem seem ever-present, artificial, as if 'measure, record and monitor' something as intangible as the 'soul's temperature' achieved through the 'connection of my kiss' in the third stanza. However, the instruments interrupt the gentle intimacy of the tone, reflected in the consonance of 'monitor' and 'temperature' and the hints of a more regular rhythm.

It is also appropriate that the instruments should attempt to act as 'wind' and 'flicker open of your eyes' that actually provide the connection and closure, the 'being 'disconnected' from these suggests both a deeper form of connection and also, presumably, the cessation of monitoring and thus the progress towards death.

Instead, she is an 'ancient child', reflecting the vulnerability and delicacy of the 'fragile', 'working at the skin', 'blustery wind at a blind' and 'paper temperature' within the family, where we see the ultimate displacement of the older generation by the younger, a reminder of the cyclical nature of life, along with a sense of lack conveyed by the 'paper temperature'.

The ultimate 'measurement', of course, is a very human one: 'a kiss' from the 'loved one' 'registered' in the loved one's 'eyes'. This links neatly to the 'paper temperature' and the 'fragility' (and a spiritual value to this transience and vulnerability), the memorialisation of the loved one through this poem, recording the final moment of 'understanding', before the gentle assonance (assonance: the repetition of the same vowel sound in words) 'smoothly flowing 'slipped back / into the sleep of their slow-closing', as the representation of death; here, it is simply a descent into 'sleep'.

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<p><b>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Juxtaposition of familial and scientific</li> <li>♦ Sense of intimacy in moment of connection</li> <li>♦ Recurring image of fragility</li> <li>♦ Circularity of human life, inc. within families?</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO2: Analyse way literary texts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Four quatrain</li> <li>♦ Few obvious consonance, b</li> <li>♦ Smoothly flow intimacy</li> <li>♦ Typical struct reflection</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Dedicated to Sheers' grandmother (Jean Sheers), so highly suggestive of being autobiographical</li> <li>♦ Juxtaposition of timelessness of human connection and poetry with modern medicine's inability to preserve life</li> <li>♦ Generational shift, sense of younger generation taking control/responsibility</li> <li>♦ Symbolism of grandmother as symbol of the past: poem about loss of familial history and continuity</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO4: Explore con</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Familial intim Spring', 'The l</li> <li>♦ Moment of co Time', 'Winter 'Amazon', 'Th</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Does the poem seem to suggest the possibility of the grandmother's 'liv</li> <li>♦ Is life in the poem presented as being a cycle or a linear process?</li> <li>♦ In terms of its euphemistic treatment of death, is the poem more about c than actually memorialising the dead?</li> <li>♦ From a post-Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, could this poem be death, overcome through euphemism and translation into the medium c</li> </ul>	



# ‘Y Gaer’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- Why has Sheers used the Welsh title with an English translation underneath?
- What might the symbolic significances of ‘hill’ and ‘fort’ be, do you think?
- Linking back to the discussion of Ysgyryd Fawr earlier, could the hill-fort association be relevant?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- Sheers has returned to his habitual tercets in this poem. To what extent does this bearing in mind the title and the subject, do you think?
- Sheers has also returned to using seven stanzas in the poem. Why might this be significant?
- How might we characterise the narrative function of the following stanzas?
  - Stanzas 1–3: ‘it’s only defences...’ to ‘... marking the centre’.
  - Stanzas 3–5: ‘where my horse...’ to ‘stitched with river silver’.
  - Stanzas 5–7: ‘so I think understand...’ to ‘huge enough to blame’.
- Why has Sheers placed this poem here, after ‘On Going’, before ‘The End of the Collection’ as a whole?

### TASK THREE: Language

- The majority of the lines feature some form of end-stopping. What impact might this have, do you think?
- We have, once again, a poem constructed from three sentences. The first stretches over a single stanza, the second and third lasting over three stanzas each. Is this significant? Why are the second and third sentences longer?
- In the fifth stanza, Sheers uses sibilance and assonance to describe the landscape and the view. Why?
- Sheers uses frequent plosive sounds to describe both the fort and the experience of the man in ‘bad weather’. What impact does this have?



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**TASK FOUR: Imagery**

- i. In the fourth stanza, Sheers describes the 'veins mapping under' his muscle', and her nostrils as 'full of smoking embers'. What impression is given here, do you think? What is it intended to represent?
- ii. In the fifth stanza, the land is described as being 'three-sixty', an 'an' 'stitched with river silver'. What impression is given here, do you think? What is it intended to represent?
- iii. In the final two stanzas, the 'bad weather' is described as having a 's' 'beating', an attack with 'pepper-shot', and as offering, ultimately, 's' 'blame'. What does the weather represent for the man here, do you think? What is it intended to represent?

**TASK FIVE: The Hill Fort / Context**

- i. Bearing in mind the following details, what is the impression we are given of the hill fort? What is it intended to represent?
  - ♦ 'defences', 'ring of gorse', 'yellow in Winter', 'mossy gums / of the hill' that open to the view', 'a stone pile marking the centre'
- ii. It is entirely possible that the 'hill fort' in question is the Iron Age fort. Bearing in mind the shape of the hill, the local myth regarding the link to the fertility of the earth, would this link offer any interesting resonances?

**TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem**

To what extent could we view each of the following interpretations of the poem as valid?

- ♦ The poem explores the complex relationship between people and place/nature.
- ♦ The poem records the struggle of a grieving father to cope with the loss of his son and finds in nature.
- ♦ The poem examines the different experiences of individuals in the local area.
- ♦ Sheers (2008) has himself referred to 'One of the most significant shapes in the poem is that of a poem that works (in both senses of the word) on us [*being*] their ability to translate the abstract world of thought and feeling into a physical form. This can be viewed as the reason for the father's return to the hill fort and the location?

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## Commentary

From the beginning of the poem, it is difficult not to see some kind of autobiographical experiences and locations described. The Welsh title obviously situates the poem in a specific context, and the English translation immediately following it not only offering clarification for the audience, but bridging the gap between the nationalities, reflecting the transition from a traditional culture to a more fluid, modern definition of nationality (or, perhaps, from nationalism to individualism).

It is also probable that the hill fort is a reference to the Iron Age fortifications, reinforcing the autobiographical feel of the narrative voice. This adds another layer to the hill as a place of symbolic separation, a divide caused, so the local stone is a crucifixion, another lost son; the hill is viewed locally as being a place of juxtaposition to the negative associations presented here. It is logical, then, that the tercets he has often used in the collection, with the form reflecting the Welsh language, reflecting the modern reality of Welsh culture, as well as Sheers himself.

From the beginning of the poem, the hill fort represents the destruction of the 'ring of gorse' is a natural barrier, one that has connotations of Welsh 'Winter', though less significant 'come Summer'. This sense of irrelevance to the 'mossy gums / of trench and rampart', where the once-strong fortification image is also resonant in a broader sense, though, foreshadowing the loss that could represent both the gummy grin of a baby and the toothless gap mouthed 'shout into the storm' in which the figure finds some form of release. The image, as with many circles and cycles in the collection, could be viewed as the grieving father to his past parenthood, where he provides the phallic release of the stanza's release.

The language reflects both the defensiveness and the sense of fragmentation. The harsh plosives of 'gorse', 'gum', 'trench', 'rampart' and 'gateway' offer the reader a sense of location, a place not of comfort, but of past masculine aggression and the aftermath. After all, 'the view', 'the land' that is 'three-sixty about you here', a sense of a world provided from the enclosed cycle of the fort, a wider and still bearing the 'silver': the landscape, nature, is healing over the wound of the fort, displacing (and generally masculine) aggression with the organic (and possibly feminine) 'gorse'.

Sheers has already, in poems such as 'Night Windows', linked the female figure to this is perhaps the function fulfilled by the horse here in the 'veins mapped on something functional, subservient, traditional, just as in 'The Farrier', but 'nostrils, full of smoking embers', also offers a physical immediacy that provides an urgent contrast with the desolation of the father figure.

Perhaps the key question in the poem regards what the father gains from the failures of the past: as a man who has 'lost his son', a place of protection since one must assume from his own perspective (and this is not intended) he has on some level failed to protect his son sufficiently from the world. The beating, the hail's pepper-shot' provides a form of natural punishment, but. However, the wind also provides a 'shoulder' on which he can 'lean full of aspect to the weather, of comfort. And, ultimately, the pathetic fallacy of the barriers have been brought down both personally and geographically, providing 'something huge enough to blame', though whether this is nature, the wind, or the emotional release is open to debate.

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# Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Nature as both protecting and punishing
- ♦ Link between femininity and growth
- ♦ Sense of continuity with the past
- ♦ Relationship between microcosm of hill fort and macrocosm of the wider world

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Seven stanzas
- ♦ Three sentences
- ♦ Split between 'man who lost'
- ♦ High proportion
- ♦ Use of sounds landscape, in

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Ysgyrd Fawr: split hill, local myth of father and son, location of a hill fort
- ♦ Autobiographical references to riding (horses were a constant feature of Sheers' childhood at Llandewi Rydderch)
- ♦ Link to a family friend who lost his son? (Sheers, The Poetry Archive)
- ♦ Links to loss of history/past (Y Gaer as Roman hill fort in modern Brecon, though there was also a hill fort at Gobannium near Abergavenny)

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Fathers and son 'Farther', 'Tre
- ♦ Comfort in the 'Inheritance', 'Fort', 'Skirrid
- ♦ Gaps and abs 'Keyways'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem seem to offer a sense of catharsis for the father or the reader?
- ♦ Is the image of continuity that recurs in the poem intended to reinforce perspective for the audience, or to offer a more positive point of broader
- ♦ Sheers (2006) has described the first poem as offering his own interpretation. To what extent might this sense of Sheers deliberately constructing a poem through the father actually detract from the impact for the audience?

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# 'The Hill Fort'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- What is the significance here of Sheers' use of the English title ('The Hill Fort') and the Welsh translation ('Y Gaer')?
- Since the reader would already, presumably, know the meaning of 'The Hill Fort', following the title act more as a subheading, and therefore serve a thematic purpose.

### TASK TWO: Form

- Once again, Sheers has used tercets throughout this poem. Do these tercets suggest a different interpretation of 'The Hill Fort', or does the poem suggest a different interpretation?
- Unusually, the poem is constructed out of 10 tercets. Could this be significant?
- While Sheers avoids all but the most sporadic hints of a regular poetic form, the syllabic count is more varied here than most. Why might this be?
- The poem contains four sentences rather than the usual three, with the fourth sentence stretching across the final two stanzas. What impact could this have?

### TASK THREE: Structure (1)

- To what extent does this poem fit the usual structure within the collection?
  - contextualising moment
  - experience
  - development of experience
  - deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- Could this poem be viewed as a continuation of 'Y Gaer', rather than 'The Hill Fort' as effectively the second half of the poem?
- Can 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort' be viewed as a poetic diptych?
- Many critics of Sheers' poetry refer to his tendency to 'over finish' his poems in the final stanzas. Could this be a criticism levelled at 'The Hill Fort'?



### TASK FOUR: Structure (2)

- The collection consists of either 41 or 42 poems, depending on whether 'The Hill Fort' is included. To what extent can this poem be viewed as providing a satirical commentary on the collection?
- With the structure of the collection as a whole in mind, could this poem shift from personal and individual subjects, to a broader perspective on political concerns?

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### **TASK FIVE: Language and Imagery**

- i. What impact does the use of the third-person perspective have here?
- ii. The constructed dialogue between the father and son includes the as 'scattered grains'. What impact does the use of the collective first-person have here?
- iii. What do the 'wild [...] long-maned ponies' represent, do you think?
- iv. As in 'Y Gaer', there is an image constructed of the broader landscape. What function, do you think? Or does it offer different resonances?
- v. What does Sheers intend his audience to understand by the image of 'the tongue of the wind'?
- vi. To what extent does Sheers offer us an image of making 'the circle of the diptych', do you think?
- vii. What is the symbolic relevance of the 'walls, / sunk however low' in the poem?

### **TASK SIX: Fathers, Sons and Families**

- i. What impression is given of fathers and families in the poem?
- ii. To what extent does this contrast with, or continue, the themes of 'Y Gaer'?

### **TASK SEVEN: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Sheers has noted in an introduction to the poem for The Poetry Archive that 'the experiences of a family friend whose son was killed in a car accident, who recognised the accuracy of the poem, he also provided a balancing perspective, subsequently turned into 'The Hill Fort'. To what extent can we see this in the poems?
- ii. To what extent can we view the poems as exploring the circularity of life, of time, of sense, and the relationship between nature and mankind?
- iii. Sarah Crown (2006) has described Sheers' landscapes as being 'characterised by shadows and boundaries' and as being 'linked by their liminality'. To what extent can this be applied to 'The Hill Fort'?

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## Commentary

'The Hill Fort' acts as a poetic counterbalance to 'Y Gaer', evident in the Welsh/English to English/Welsh) and in the shift from the 'bad weather' day' of the second. The poems appear, as a pair, to be intended as poetic a grieving father, a friend of the Sheers family (Sheers, The Poetry Archi initial conversation in which the grieving father referred to his occasional storms; the second records the additional perspective offered after his re

The second poem here looks backwards beyond the grief itself to the exp young son ('he'd crouch so their eyes were level'), exploring both the sy severing of the 'long / [...] line [...] before you'), and the relevance of the both as a place to relive the past and, now, to both 'protect' and 'defend' function as an independent poem in its own right, it can also be viewed providing a gentler, sadder point of view that does away with Sheers' ov retaining his presence as a mediating poetic voice.

The son, at the beginning of this poem, is presented as vital, active, 'char long-maned ponies', both in touch with, and reflecting, his natural enviro childhood innocence in his 'charging' towards the ancient hill fort.

The father's actions in crouching 'so their eyes were level, / one hand at the two, emphasising the shared experience, but also expressing a comfort effortless, paternal intimacy, conveyed similarly by the unspoken under information conveyed ('Tretower, Raglan, Bredwardine') and the subtext beneath it. The 'tracing [of] the horizon' conveys a sense of the father bro weltanschauung (weltanschauung: world view), opening his view of, and eventually cost him his life. What this view offers, primarily, is a sense of world, of the 'fathers and sons before them', and, through them, to the c embodied by the family, the line broken by the son's death.

However, there is a sense of hope contained within the memories, in tha that is important, 'but the depth of their impression'. And ever so subtly use of 'will matter' lies a hint of the awareness of mortality. While the so is the 'depth of [his] impression' that should matter, not the relative brev the subjective view of time, with '9, 19 or 90 years' being 'much the same terms of always remaining static, the same, a fixed point.

It is this, it seems in this second poem, that the father gains from 'com[ing] 'tip' the 'ashes' of his memories 'onto the tongue of the wind', offering th image of scattering a cremated body) to the natural world, to a silent and will both take away and continue his grief.

Ultimately, the hill fort functions, then, as not simply the completion of a location he and his son had visited (as opposed to the linear succession t just 'to heal or mend' (the feminine qualities associated with the potentia yonic aspects of the image), but to offer a broader perspective of the wor because the structuring of the past offers a recognisable boundary, nego the location offers a sense of both inclusion and exclusion, containment a protection and defence.

As a final note on these two poems, it is worth noting their position within poems in *Skirrid Hill* (including 'Last Act', despite its inclusion as a preface 'Fort' is number 21, marking the halfway point. In this it draws together what is covered in the collection so far: the past and present; the role of heritage; particular focus on fathers and sons; grief, death and loss; individuals, the world and relationships with the landscape; Welshness and Englishness. This poem can also be viewed as marking a shift within the collection, from the familial poems in the first half to the more general, socio-politically focused poems in the second half.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Symbolic relevance of the hill fort
- ♦ Lines of succession, including tension between cycles and lines (yonic and phallic aspects?)
- ♦ Representation of family and culture
- ♦ Importance of 'depth of impression'

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Ysgyrd Fawr: split hill, local myth of father and son, location of a hill fort
- ♦ Link to a family friend who lost his son, intended to offer real perspective as response to 'Y Gaer' (Sheers, The Poetry Archive)
- ♦ Links to loss of history/past (Y Gaer as Roman hill fort in modern Brecon, though there was also a hill fort at Gobannium near Abergavenny)
- ♦ Sheers is not a fluent Welsh speaker, and would not define himself as a Welsh poet so much as a poet from Wales
- ♦ Loss of Welsh traditions and increasing anglicisation of Welsh culture

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Partner to, or
- ♦ Poetic linking from first half
- ♦ Transition from interpretation
- ♦ Tercets, but 10
- ♦ Motif of failure

**AO4: Explore connections**

- ♦ Fathers and sons 'Farther', 'Tree'
- ♦ Comfort in the 'Inheritance', 'Skirrid Fawr'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the impact of 'The Hill Fort' depend on its relationship with 'Y Gaer'?
- ♦ Does the more positive, gentler treatment of the subject in the poem act as a response to 'Y Gaer', as argued by Olivia Cole (2005)?
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, is it possible to link the failure of the masculine to the presence of female presence in the pair of poems?
- ♦ Does the poem end on a note of resolution, or is the emptiness and transience a final admission and acceptance of defeat?

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# 'Intermission'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Dedication

- i. As the poem that begins the second half of the collection, what might it be intended to convey, do you think?
- ii. Sheers has provided us with a deliberately cryptic dedication. Who is the poem for? Why has Sheers offered us some specificity (an initial), but not more?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Why has Sheers chosen to use tercets again in this poem? Is this simply a more symbolic function?
- ii. Once again, Sheers has used seven stanzas in the poem. Why might this be significant to this choice?
- iii. Is this a poem in which the last stanza could be classed as superfluous?
- iv. The syllabic count varies between the lines, but there are some short lines. Why are they used?
- v. The poem contains one of the shortest lines in Sheers' work ('and us have, particularly in terms of its varying of the syllabic count?')
- vi. To what extent does this poem fit the usual structure within the collection?
  - ◆ contextualising moment
  - ◆ experience
  - ◆ development of experience
  - ◆ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function



### TASK THREE: Structure

- i. Could this poem be viewed as providing an 'intermission' in the collection as a whole? A pause for reflection in between the two overarching structures?
- ii. Is there a sense in which the title of the poem could be viewed as referring back to 'Last Act'? If so, what impact does this have?



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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. The poem uses sibilance on a number of occasions, but with little co contribute to a reader's interpretation of the poem?
- ii. The first stanza is one long sentence, the remainder consisting of a s end-stopping comma. Why?
- iii. There is a semantic field of light and dark sustained throughout the and what relevance does it have?
- iv. The poem explores the role played by stillness, darkness and (frater and phrases used do we see this idea?
- v. Throughout the poem, Sheers uses distancing. To what extent could encouraging his audience to adopt a fresh point of view, to analyse?
- vi. 'The shore of the other chair' is an evocative image, connoting 'othe bridge the gap. Why might he have chosen to do this?
- vii. What is the significance of the fly in the poem?

**TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following would you identify as the most effective inte
  - a. The poem records a moment of spontaneous intimacy, of an une
  - b. The poem offers a view of masculinity and of human connection
  - c. The poem is simply about the experience of a power cut.
- ii. Carrie Etter (2006) has criticised the poem in that 'the connection be escaping fly becomes subsumed in the hackneyed "small victories", suggestiveness.' To what extent is this, perhaps, an example of Shee to not trusting his audience to make the inferential connections, as c (2005) and Crown (2006)?

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## Commentary

An intermission is, self-evidently, a pause within a theatrical or cinematic performance. It is appropriate that this poem should serve that function, based on its central theme of distance from 'Last Act'. However, an intermission is also a pause for reflection on the collection as a whole, and in terms of the experience recorded here.

The dedication, 'For L' is self-consciously cryptic: for the most part, the identity of the dedicatee in Sheers' poetry can only be inferred, with the most explicitly autobiographical poems being the most conspicuous in their atypicality. In poetry generally, dedications of this kind are expressions of affection or admiration, whether required or not; here, the refusal to fully name the dedicatee is a question suggests (presumably fraternal, based on the context and actual relationship between the two) admiration but also a desire to preserve the privacy of the intimacy, an element of the poem, where the connection appears emotional and intellectual, rather than purely intellectual. The most likely candidate for the dedicatee would actually be Louis de Bernières, who was the guest author for which Sheers performed for the Hay-on-Wye literary festival. However, the lack of explicit information: Sheers has not, himself, offered it in connection to the poem, and the identity of the dedicatee has limited relevance.

The poem begins with an oddly gentle-feeling description (in terms of the use of enjambment) of the destructive power of nature and the series of events that lead to the 'house', the 'wells of darkness' and the 'doors opening onto mine shafts' and the 'chestnut tree / side-swiping the power lines' is, in this sense, effective in its depiction of the interruption of human power by the force of nature.

The portrayal of darkness is worth considering briefly: there are 'wells' of darkness, 'mine shafts' of it through doors (barriers beyond access points). Darkness is a perceptual and symbolic depth, framing the 'us' of the two-syllable final line, 'world lessened' (both literally and metaphorically in terms of the increased darkness, the 'candle's halo'. Rather than something negative, something unknown or feared, darkness clarifies boundaries, forces intimacy and consideration of the boundaries of the world. The image of the two participants 'tipping heels of whisky / against the flame' is a metaphor for exactly this: both an attempt to assert the primacy of life over the destructive power of darkness, 'dust', and a moment savoured for its sensual immediacy in terms of the momentary escape.

The perceptual shift is clear in the references to the 'unfamiliar obstacles' and the 'world lessened', with the resultant perspective acknowledging the 'quasi-escape' from the 'candle's halo'. However, the routine, the mundane, also appears to lack the same sense of environment within the poem, with the everyday passage of life seen as less relevant here. Despite the shared experience, there is a gap, a distance between the two, which is bridged, with the other chair described as a 'shore': the two are connected by the shared moment, but remain individuals.

The dream of living 'long enough to be good at the oboe' may appear, on the surface, as startlingly mundane, but functions beyond that as a reflection on life and death, not just triumph, but something individual and self-expressive, something that is not just a moment, but just as this brief moment of connection is, itself, 'enough', a 'small victory'.

The fly in the penultimate stanza is another image that reflects this idea of a momentary ability to perceive, transient, but moving towards 'the slip of space that is the end' from the perspective of the broader world, though its significance for the

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is appropriate, then, that the 'space' should be enabling freedom, escape playing of the oboe would be 'For L'.

The final stanza summarises this idea, acknowledging the importance of 'think' and 'understand', with the awareness of mortality and the ongoing world beyond the 'candle's halo' suggested by 'in the end'. A final caesura most effectively summarises the sense of values conveyed by the poem:

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Isolation by forces beyond personal control
- ♦ Juxtaposition of nature and humanity
- ♦ Sense of relative values (oboe, etc.)
- ♦ Shifting perception of life and the world based on imagery

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Seven tercets
- ♦ Contextualisation conclusion/int
- ♦ Sibilance runn
- ♦ Balance of 'us

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Poem apparently about Louis de Bernieres, who produced a play starring Sheers (2002)
- ♦ 'mine-shafts', 'whisky' and 'candles' perhaps references to cultural history of Celtic people in general and Wales in particular / escape from modern culture and communication
- ♦ Possible semantic field / references to World
- ♦ War I, linked to *Not About Heroes*, the play Sheers starred in

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Moment of co Time', 'Show'
- ♦ Importance of 'Show', 'Nigh 'Shadow Man

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ The poem is presented as being autobiographical, but is this sense of au interpretation?
- ♦ From a structural perspective, is this another example of Sheers overdev of the poem, detracting from what has gone before?
- ♦ Is this a poem in praise of connection or of isolation?
- ♦ In terms of the collection as a whole, could *this* be argued to be the centr 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort'?

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# ‘Calendar’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

What is the symbolic value of the title, do you think?

- ♦ A calendar as both a reminder of key events and a record of the past
- ♦ A calendar as representing the interconnectedness of people and powers beyond the control of humanity?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- What is a haiku, and to what extent do the four sections of this poem fit the form?
- Why has Sheers chosen the haiku as the form for this poem?
- Haiku traditionally contain, essentially, a volta from the initial image to a deeper interpretation of that image. To what extent do the four sections here follow this pattern?
- Beyond the references to the seasons, what unifies this as a poem? Can the four sections be linked together?
- The idea of this being a ‘calendar’ and of describing the seasons would suggest some degree of circularity. Can we see any?

### TASK THREE: Language

- Several of the sections demonstrate an elliptical style. Is this simply a stylistic choice, or does it have broader relevance?
- All four stanzas present their images as simple statements of fact. What effect does this have?
- In three of the sections, Sheers offers his readers a literal object, then a metaphor, then a simile that allows us to interpret the item. Which sections fit this structure? Could this be a recurring feature of his style?
- The third section offers a single continuous image, rather than a split image or a metaphor. Is this significant, do you think?
- Spring features a range of continuous sounds, including ‘s’, ‘m’, ‘v’ and ‘n’. How do these fit the content?
- Summer includes a number of harsher consonants, but also a significant number of vowels. What effect might this have?
- Autumn offers a mixture of continuous and harsher consonants. Does this fit the season, do you think?
- Winter includes a range of harsher consonants and monosyllables. To what extent does this fit the representation of the season?
- The fourth poem lacks an active participant. Does it still fit into the poem as a whole?



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#### TASK FOUR: Imagery and Representation

- i. Haiku generally offer a tableau, a frozen image. Why has Sheers chosen to describe the various seasons?
  - ♦ swallows and telephone wires / music
  - ♦ bees and foxgloves / sex
  - ♦ a spider between branches / dancing
  - ♦ rooks nesting / infection
- ii. The poem addresses four forms of human behaviour. Why have the poet chosen these?
  - ♦ music and communication
  - ♦ sexuality
  - ♦ dancing and identity
  - ♦ disease and transience

#### TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem

- i. How then should we interpret the poem?
  - a. as representing the circularity of life
  - b. as recording reflective cycles of natural and human existence
  - c. as criticising the imposition of human interpretation on nature
  - d. as focussing on the transience of the world, presenting the idea that life is a matter of perspective
- ii. Phil Brown has argued that 'The essence of this poem is to evoke the quintessentially human imagery'. Is this a fair summary, or is this too narrow an interpretation?

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## Commentary

In terms of its form, 'Calendar' is an oddity within the collection. Sheers traditional poetic forms, but this is the first poem in which he has explicit

Haiku are traditional Japanese poems that have since seen increasing popularity among poets. Haiku consist of three lines, the first and third containing five syllables and the second seven. Haiku self-consciously avoid any trace of narrative: they offer, instead, an interpretation, marked by, essentially, a volta at some point in the middle line. Descriptive and often centred on an aspect of nature, the poems often serve as a reflection of human life and often incorporate details to do with the seasons.

'Calendar' consists of four haiku, each more or less matching the definition of a haiku, are, unusually, active in terms of their central participants, however, and the shift between the focal image and the interpretation of it. The haiku are not meant to reflect images within a calendar, where a particular photograph is chosen to represent a season and in this sense the four sections are highly successful.

Spring recycles the image of continuity and communication described in the first section. Movement is described as dynamic, they 'crotchet and / minimise the telegraph'. The conscious artistry (despite the hint of negative connotations to 'crotchet') is a beautiful, natural and interweaving counterbalance to the functionality of the telegraph. The smooth continuity of the sibilance, the humming 'm' phoneme and the 'c' offering a sense of active, celebratory and energising flow.

Summer focusses instead on bees, similarly offered in plural form, but rather than the swallows, the bees 'go down' (a slang term for oral sex) at the 'lips of the telegraph'. The provision of sustenance and procreation is perhaps valid in terms of communication, but the provision of human sexuality on a non-sexual act within the insect world, though thought appropriate in terms of the different seasons that Spring should link to a continuation of life, whereas Summer should be associated with sexual virility and experience.

Autumn, though offering another image of aesthetic beauty, carries a less positive message. Rather than the groups described in the first two sections, here the spider's 'fingerprint' has been 'danced', a means of joyful self-expression to match the 'swallows' and the 'go[ing] down' of the 'bees'. However, the web that the spider spins, though it may be, is an attempt to bridge a gap, 'the space / between two worlds'. It is a choice, of both separation and combination. In contrast with the first, section, there is a lack of a clear volta from the image to the interpretation: the two are, essentially, one.

Winter is the most obviously negative of the four sections, representing death and decay, though also holding out the possibility of healing and regrowth (and returning to Spring). Here, there is a lack of a clearly active figure, something present in the first three sections. The 'rooks' are not simply a 'passing infection', but something that has actual substance left behind to 'clot in the veins / of the tree'. Here, the tree, living, stable, and enduring, is by the parasitic presence of other forms of life, perhaps with the unspoken implication that it can be viewed as the literal referent behind the metaphor. This final section is marked by consonant sounds and monosyllabic lexis ('clot', 'tree', 'rook'), echoing the image. However, the sense of potential circularity in the 'passing infection' and the death in the 'nests' absent of the birds that made them is also continued in the 'crotchet' and 'clot'.

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Ultimately, the poem works as a whole in attempting to distil the character and mood of the four seasons in the condensed poetic form of the haiku, shifts in mood and variations in phrasing and sound also, perhaps, reflect the actual calendar.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Idea of 'calendar'
- ♦ Focus on nature as reflecting human experience
- ♦ Key aspects of both human and natural life
- ♦ Series of images open to interpretation

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of haiku
- ♦ Four distinct sections forming a cyclical whole
- ♦ Largely active verbs in each section contrasting with the passive title
- ♦ Use of volta
- ♦ Sounds as reflection of nature

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Images of nature linking to Sheers' semi-rural upbringing
- ♦ Timelessness – ignoring modern culture
- ♦ Impression of modern culture pervading understanding of nature (fingerprints/spiders, infections/rooks, telephones/swallows), including attitudes towards promiscuity, communication, mortality and medicine
- ♦ Haiku: verse form from Japan focusing on natural setting and juxtaposing/integrating two ideas, with friction between them designed to increase depth of idea and with single word signalling shift within the verse

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Nature as reflection of human experience in 'Inheritance', 'Farther', 'Tree', 'Liable to Flood'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Could Sheers be criticised for once again approaching nature anthropomorphically, ignoring the unavoidable subjectivity of poetry?
- ♦ Do these four function as a single poem, or are they simply separate poems sharing a title?
- ♦ In his focus on nature as predominantly expressing joy and beauty, could this be viewed as superficial and artistically self-indulgent rather than a genuine engagement with the natural world and the topics included?

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# 'Flag'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Epigraph

- What cultural significances do flags have?
- Is the secondary meaning of 'flag' as 'tire' relevant here, do you think?
- Logue intends his meaning to be understood ironically, but is there a sense in which it could be taken at face value?
- Does the epigraph (epigraph: an inscription at the head of a chapter or section) offer the reader a handle on Sheers' intended meaning?

### TASK TWO: Form

- Sheers has, again, used tercets here. What might these be intended to do?
- Is it significant that Sheers has used eight stanzas?
- Although not metrically regular, the lines are often over the decasyllable.
- The line 'and of course with this flag' is noticeably shorter than the others on this topic, do you think?
- The line 'the country on rewind or fast forward, depending on your mood' is the longest of most of the others in the poem. How does this fit the content, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Structure

- To what extent does this poem fit the usual structure within the collection?
  - contextualising moment
  - experience
  - development of experience
  - deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- Sheers provides the reader with a 'rail journey westwards'. To what extent is this a structuring device, do you think?
- How does the reader's impression of Wales and Welshness change as the poem progresses?

### TASK FOUR: Language

- The poem is noticeably impersonal in comparison to the rest of the collection. It contains references to either a poetic narrator or the reader ('your seat' / 'our seat'). How does this style, and does it work?
- What is the impact of the enjambment here?
  - It offers the reader a sense of continuity and flow through the poem.
  - It creates odd fragmentations and divisions, disrupting the flow.
- Alliteration and consonance are used at various points in the poem. Can you identify any? Have in the following examples?
  - 'bunting, / hung like wet washing in back yards'
  - 'ghosted the paint to a bad photocopy'
  - 'blessed with a blind spot bigger than itself'
  - 'the barest of places, or glimpsed above a town hall / on a horizon'
  - 'a tourniquet, a bandage tight'

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### TASK FIVE: 'Flag'

Based on the references to the flag below, what is it intended to symbolise? Think?

- ♦ 'sightings', 'our flag', 'strung up', 'bunting', 'hung', 'wet washing', 'throwing fits', 'high', 'beast', 'struggling to exist', 'spawning', 'a', 'wrapped up in itself', 'Chinese burn', 'tourniquet', 'bandage', 'st

### TASK SIX: Interpreting the Poem

- i. Which of the following would be a valid interpretation of the poem?
  - a. The poem explores the fading of Welsh culture and its merging with English culture.
  - b. The poem describes the roots of Welsh nationalism as lying in socialism.
  - c. Sheers is offering his readers an analysis of the 'state of the nation'.
  - d. The poem contrasts the vibrant potential of Wales with the limited sense of culture.
- ii. McBratney (2011) describes the poem as having 'a sense of pathos [...] having fallen to the extent that "our flag" seems to have such a lowly status'. This 'simultaneously suggests both a national banner and a state of becoming'. Is this correct in suggesting that the poem appears to lament a loss of Welsh culture?

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## Commentary

Although Sheers has offered his readers references to Wales before (in 'M' example), this is the first poem in which he has explicitly addressed the explored through the various symbolic potentialities of the national flag.

A flag is a symbol of nationality, both socially cohesive and culturally divisive. The creation of a Welsh Assembly and the various movements associated with the constituent countries of the UK, flags have a renewed significance in modern times. Of course, like all symbols, flags have a secondary meaning, to 'tire' or 'fade', and Sheers also explores this in the poem, using it as a symbol of the exhausted, waning urban and industrial landscape he travels in the poem.

The epigraph is an interesting choice: it is tempting to view it as simply a statement of the view of flags in the poem. However, this is, as Sheers acknowledges, a prioritisation of the 'Flag' as a higher form than 'a liver, a heart, a brain' – to see national culture as integral to their identity.

The 'rail journey' is an effective structuring device, offering a sense of movement from the eastern border regions to the other western border of the sea (a national boundary). This would, of course, be Sheers' own journey during his periods of residence in Wales. The image of 'rewind[ing]' or 'fast forward[ing]' could be simply a reference to the dual perspective offered by the flag: is the Wales into which we travel here a reflection of the inability to escape from the past? Or is it the future? Certainly, the 'wet and faded paint on 'the flat end wall of a Swansea gym' could be taken from the early 20th century, suggesting a lack of cultural specificity along with a self-referentiality [...]. 'down the terraces' hall of mirrors.' This could also suggest economic decline, a rise to nationalist politics, to the 'strange flower that flourishes best / in the shadow of the motorway' could equally refer to the ruggedness of the Welsh landscape and the predominantly rural areas.

It is, presumably, the influence of England that offers the 'occasional surrealism' or 'bad photocopy', with its associations in terms of Wales then of holding on to the poor reproductions of a more real original, 'the beast' on the flag 'thrown away'. It does seem that this vitality is what is lacking in the shallow consumerism of modernity alongside 'the motorway', where modernity is itself a 'bad photocopy'.

The struggle between the traditional Wales and new definitions of identity is a reference to the 'dragon, / the currency of legend' of which 'sightings [...] are myth of the two dragons struggling for supremacy underpins an interpretation of national distinctiveness, the preservation of Welshness against the pressure of modernity. Carrying a sense of the bardic tradition, the nomadic storyteller whose tale is more than the facts can ever be'.

The country that Sheers actually describes here is 'old' despite 'pulsing to the bigger than itself' presumably a reference to either modernity or to England. The recognition of the simplistic antagonism of the nationalist politics that befalls Wales. The final stanza, however, offers the clearest summary of Sheers' own feelings about the proliferation of the flag in its image of the 'tourniquet' that bandages 'the land'. This, 'staunch[es] the dream of what might have been'. Rather than a living country, 'hall of mirrors', a country blinded by cultural resentment and 'wrapped in a self-enclosed rhyme of the final stanza'.

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Symbolic significance of 'flag'
- ♦ Representation of Welsh culture, inc. opposition to England and Englishness
- ♦ Idea of social and economic decline linked to nationalism
- ♦ Tension between struggle against and acceptance of broader modernity

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Tercets
- ♦ Rail journey a
- ♦ Range of sour
- ♦ positivity
- ♦ Redundant or
- ♦ Eight stanzas?
- ♦ Varying sema

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sheers' journey back to Wales when not resident (idea of 'coming home'), with outsider's view of own culture and society
- ♦ Devolution in Wales in the late 1990s, but retaining aspects of political union with England (dating back to sixteenth century)
- ♦ Decline of Welsh industry (mining in particular) during mid and late twentieth century, with widespread unemployment and poverty in many post-industrial areas
- ♦ Retention of Welsh flag and omission of Welsh flag from Union Flag (indirectly referenced by English inclusion)

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Welshness, W
- ♦ identity: 'Borc
- ♦ 'The Hill Fort'
- ♦ Floods', 'Histo

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem offer a critical, cynical view of Wales' status and fortune hope at the end, despite the general negativity?
- ♦ Is there any aspect of Welsh culture actually present in the poem, or is it post-industrial society?
- ♦ Is the perspective adopted here Nationalist or Unionist? Is it possible to
- ♦ From a Marxist perspective, is the poem sympathising with the plight of destructive aftermath of the exploitation of the working class by the bourgeoisie? Could it, instead, be viewed as a call to arms?

# 'The Steelworks'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- What is the importance of steel-working in Welsh industrial heritage?
- What connotations does 'steel' have?
- The title could be read as both specifying a particular location (where the steel works are) and a utility (steel works). Are both intended, or is one more effective than the other?
- Uniquely within the collection, Sheers has followed the title with a line of the poem. What impact does this have?

### TASK TWO: Form

- Sheers has, again, used tercets here. Why?
- The poem, unusually, contains only six stanzas. What might this be intended to demonstrate? Something lacking or missing?
- In the sections of the poem describing the current landscape and closed factory (stanzas 1–2 and 6), the lines are all below 10 syllables. Why?
- In the sections of the poem describing the current steel-working (stanzas 3–5), the lines are noticeably longer and often over 10 syllables. Why?



### TASK THREE: Structure

- To what extent does this poem fit the usual structure within the collection?
  - contextualising moment
  - experience
  - development of experience
  - deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- Where might we identify a volta as taking place in the poem? Is it the same as the volta in 'The Steelworks'?
- The poem begins and ends with a perspective focussing on what is outside the factory. What is the significance of this?
- The poem forms part of a pair (with 'Flag') that explores modern Welsh poetry. What do you think the two poems offer in combination, do you think?

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#### TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery

- i. Sheers has used an extremely short sentence to begin the poem, then essentially, two stanzas each. Why?
- ii. The poem is littered with caesuras and end-stopped lines. What effect does this have?
- iii. The poem contains a small semantic field of religion: 'kneeling', 'bowing', 'prayer'. What link is there between this link with what is being described? Is it contextually relevant?
- iv. There is, in addition, a semantic field of weightlifting: 'pressing and pulling', 'rolling up a bicep', 'kneeling and bowing', 'lateral pull', 'pumping iron', 'eyes', 'pneumatic sighs'. What might this show?
- v. Why does Sheers begin his poem with the image of a 'deserted motorway'? What impact does this have?
- vi. What is the impact of the image of 'sheep passing through the car park's breathless vents'?
- vii. Why does the poem end with a description of the weather outside, 'cold'?

#### TASK FIVE: Context

- i. Sheers has specified a location: what is significant about this location?
- ii. What might Ebbw Vale symbolise for Sheers?

#### TASK SEVEN: Interpreting the Poem

- i. What might the poem be intended to show?
  - a. the decline of Wales and Welsh industry
  - b. the reclaiming of an industrial landscape by nature
  - c. the shift to unnatural/inhuman working patterns in modern industry
  - d. the link between a decline in industry and loss of sense of masculinity
- ii. Phil Brown interprets the poem as suggesting that 'the men, now the women of their country, have started to take pride in their physical appearance and perform tasks in the name of vanity rather than productivity'. Is Brown correct? Should the poem be seen as being from 'productivity' to 'vanity'?

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## Commentary

The poem begins with a title that both records a place defined by its function (the factory is one of men within the collection as a whole) and the essential utility of the poem. The ending of the title with a comma and running into the first line demonstrates the poem's appearance and the actuality, a mirroring of the empty factory on the 'vacant' landscape. The alienation and incongruity represented by the image of the 'deserted mother' is perhaps, relevant that this maternal reference should relate to the men's lack of definition, a contrast to the masculine constructedness of the remainder of the poem.

The factory is a real one, as made clear by Sheers' noting of a location and the largest steelworks in Europe for much of the mid-twentieth century, as well as the subsequent closure of both industries (the steelworks closed in 2002) had been an area, and came, for many, to represent the decline of a once productive area. This is reflected in the tercets used throughout, and in the slightly shorter length of the poem, expect in Sheers' writing, leaving a sense of something lacking.

Nature in the poem is reclaiming the once-industrial landscape: sheep 'padding' and ignoring the 'padlocks rusting on the gates', themselves representing a natural process transcending the imposition of arbitrary human boundaries through the 'gates'. 'Breathless' is an interesting choice of adjective here: it conveys a sense of a living thing, a 'mothership' once again.

However, and as the volta between the second and third stanzas makes clear, 'elsewhere now', with the traditional human working patterns (day and night) abandoned in favour of an intensive industrial model in which it can take generally longer lines in these stanzas. Sheers' focus is very much on the process of what is produced: men are 'pressing and dipping' (referring both to the 'rolling a bicep up an arm', taking 'a lateral pull', 'pumping iron'. The workers are physical, masculine, valuing physical strength, but also suggesting futility, creativity, or a life beyond the body. This functionality has also displaced the traditional Sunday rest that most traditional working models would respect, the workers 'bowing / to the benediction' of the work itself.

The impact on the workers is clear: taking 'the strain' with 'screwed tight' and rhymed 'sighs' suggest a physical and emotional discomfort or exhaustion, representing an increasing sense in which human workers are seen as simply a machine, rather than of value as individuals.

It is possible that the middle section of the poem could be read as the workers seeking meaningful self-definition through exercise in a gym. However, an effective interpretation of the references to 'work' happening 'all day', an 'afternoon shift', though these could be interpreted ironically.

The final stanza, returning to the world outside, also reflects the lack of connection between the inner and outer worlds: 'the rain' is 'rolling off the clouds in sheets', just as the production lines within the factory, suggesting greyness, coldness, a lack of development, with the 'brushed-metal sky' representing, similarly, a negative fallacy in action as a technique.

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What the poem seems to suggest is the negative impact of the decline of sense of identity of the people in the area. The workers, defined by their reduced to functionality; work displaces religion, destroys the traditional people; the symbiotic relationship between people and landscape has been

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- Decline of Welsh industry, role of nature in reclamation?
- Masculinity as defined by function
- Precise situating of location: another 'state of the nation' poem?

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- Tercets
- Link between
- Six stanzas in
- High proportion show fragment
- Semantic field
- Impersonality

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- Ebbw Vale steelworks (largest steelworks in Europe during 1930s and 1940s, but declined from 1980s onwards, finally closing in 2002). Ebbw Vale also linked to coal mining, so representing decline of Welsh industry with consequent unemployment in the valley among the highest in the UK. Sheep perhaps a reference to older industries also in decline.
- Crisis of twentieth-century masculinity in shift away from value in terms of productivity.
- Setting up of Welsh Assembly (1997–1998), with 2001 General Election seeing huge upswing in support for Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party operating within Wales.

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- Welshness and 'Country', 'Far Floods', 'History'
- Nature and 'Farrier', 'Inheritance', 'Hedge School', 'History', 'Ski'
- Masculinity: 'Joseph Jones'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- Does the poem lament the social decline linked to the decline of Welsh references to the ongoing landscape and history of the country?
- Do we, as readers, interpret the poem differently based on the, again, offered in the poem?
- Does the poem present modern culture and modern society as being un
- From a Marxist perspective, could the poem be read as criticising the de industrialisation on workers, and the continuance of the long-term impact on societies?

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# ‘Song’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. A song can be something self-expressive or a form of conscious artistry: which might be more relevant here?
- ii. Birdsong is often viewed by humans as beautiful, but is more often territorial, warning, protective. Might this impact on how we read the poem?



### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. In terms of this being a ‘song’, is this a lyric? Or, at the very least, is it?
- ii. Sheers has, again, used tercets. Why?
- iii. The final stanza is a non-rhymed quatrain (a more usual lyrical form). Why?
- iv. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- v. Does the final stanza offer a satisfying conclusion to the poem, do you think, or is it over-explication?
- vi. What might the human equivalent of the bird experiences here be, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Language

- i. The poem includes a pronoun shift from the ‘we’ of the opening line to the ‘I’ of the remainder of the stanzas. What impact does this have?
- ii. Harsh consonants are used at various points throughout the poem, particularly in the final stanza. Are these all negative, do you think?
- iii. There is widespread sibilance throughout the poem and frequent repetition of the word ‘spring’. Why? What impact might this have?
- iv. The sixth stanza contains a rhyme connecting ‘Spring’ with ‘sing’. How does this impact the poem? What impact does it have?

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**TASK FOUR: Imagery**

- i. As with several of the early poems, there is a link between women and the sea.
- ii. Is it significant that the woman is represented as being a magpie? Why?
- iii. What is the significance of the woman being 'a siren'? Could this add to the significance of this being a 'song'?
- iv. How is the woman represented in the reference to the 'oil spill of your eye'?
- v. The 'others' are described as 'strut[ting] in, / squawking to their doc of, presumably, rival males?
- vi. How does the image of the narrator 'dropping the mites like kisses' affect your view of their relationship?
- vii. The poem ends with the image of the narrator helping his fellow man. How might we interpret this within the context of their relationship?

**TASK FIVE: Love**

The poem contains the assertion that 'all men must' realise 'that love is a

- i. The phrasing of this deserves further interrogation. Why 'all'? Why 'must'? Why does love need to be 'save[d]'?
- ii. How does this compare with the presentation of love and romance in other poems?

**TASK SIX: Interpretations**

- i. How could we interpret the poem as a whole, then?
  - a. as contrasting temptation and actual love
  - b. as emphasising the importance of balance, shared experience, nuance in a relationship
  - c. as noting the importance of free choice with any romantic connection
  - d. as exposing the shallowness, cruelty and intolerance of the wider world
- ii. Sheers (2014) has described poetry as enabling the reader to inhabit 'the living and hating body of the person'. To what extent is this a fair summary of *this* poem?

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## Commentary

The title, 'Song' allows a number of equally valid interpretations: music is reflective, often romantic, but, just as with poetry, is not simply free expression. The majority of musical forms require precision, skill, careful construction. Within the birdsong in the poem, however, music gains an additional resonance: the bird on a day-to-day basis is territorial or warning, despite its apparent beauty. The significance by the image of the 'siren in a cage', something alluring and

Despite the apparent balance offered by the central conceit of the poem, 'magpies, love', the two are not represented equally, reinforced by the 'she' and 'you were taken': the (presumably) male narrator would remain loyal, 'above' her, 'spread' his 'wings in the rain', 'fan' her with his 'feathers in winter', remaining faithful until he can 'sing' in the 'Spring', and 'help' her. The female magpie, in contrast, is a corruptive embodiment of original sin: she 'bait' and then attracts other males by the 'oil spill' of her 'plumage' and 'fatale'. The depth and emotional and social commitment of the male is not matched by the disloyalty of the female.

The 'oil spill' is an image with interesting associations in this respect: something suggesting damage, possibly falsity, with the 'darkness' of her 'eye' then 'colouring', and also a flawed and damaging less positive side.

The males attracted here are presented (as in 'Joseph Jones') as arrogant, meaninglessly 'squawking', focussed largely on a tercet constructed from physicality as they 'beat' their wings 'on the wire'. Their shallow attraction and engagement result in nothing but the farmer coming to 'wring their lives'. The submissive role played by the male results in a successful return to the first stanza.

The farmer here, to extend the metaphor, presumably represents society. His actions, the woman is trapped, but it is difficult not to see her 'cage' as being her flaws and weaknesses. It is, however, only when a broader shift in terms of emotional connection ('that love is all there is to save') can be achieved that the freedom from the cage in the metaphor, but also from temptation in her

It is noticeable that the focus in the penultimate stanza is on 'men', with a recognition of the importance of emotion conveyed by the modal auxiliary 'would'. It is interesting that Sheers should describe love as, ultimately, 'all' there is, and

The final quatrain ends the poem on a more positive note, where the narrator is rewarded by the loved one's return, and to the return to the past conveyed by 'again'. The quatrain, then, in contrast to the tercets throughout the rest of the poem, with a sense of something more developed between the two 'magpies', the sin and redemption, has enriched their relationship rather than ruining it. The connection that will allow the eventual freedom of flight.

Ultimately, what the poem seems to offer through the conjectural 'if' of the description of the emotional investment of the narrator in a relationship, is the actuality.

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# Commentary cont.

<p><b>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Extended metaphor of humans and birds</li> <li>♦ Idea of female temptation and male fidelity</li> <li>♦ Narrative suggesting shared experiences, even negative, strengthening relationship</li> <li>♦ Negative depiction of social treatment of romance</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO2: Analyse way literary texts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Tercets again</li> <li>♦ Shift from 'we'</li> <li>♦ Semantic field</li> <li>♦ Internal rhyme</li> <li>♦ Final stanza q</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Shift in twentieth and twenty-first centuries in terms of attitudes towards gender and sexuality: choice (and apparent sexual promiscuity/activity) here is on the part of the female, with male accepting place, though still retaining role as stable provider and protector</li> <li>♦ Magpies and farmers both references to natural world and, potentially, Sheers' semi-rural upbringing</li> <li>♦ Possible criticism of modern obsession with beauty and superficiality at the cost of real emotional engagement?</li> </ul>	<p><b>AO4: Explore con</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Romantic/sex 'Marking Tim 'Landmark'</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ From a Feminist perspective, does the poem present the female as having act, or is it simply continuing the objectification of women and reinforcing provider and protector?</li> <li>♦ Again, from a Feminist perspective, does the poem appear to present w swayed by material objects, as well as criticising female romantic or sex</li> <li>♦ Does the ending of the poem suggest that the narrator and his subject ha it simply focusing on a nurturing relationship that goes beyond the sex</li> </ul>	

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# 'Landmark'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Which of the following meanings of 'landmark' apply here, do you think?

- ♦ a distinctive feature of the landscape?
- ♦ something to navigate by?
- ♦ a momentous or memorable occasion?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. What effect do the tercets have here, do you think?
- ii. Sheers has used five tercets here. Why? Is there any significance to this?
- iii. Does this poem contain a volta? Where? Why is it there?
- iv. The final line of the poem ('and complete without them') is shorter than the others in the poem. Why? What is the implication of this, do you think?
- v. The poem begins immediately after the experience. Why is this? What moment?
- vi. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
- vii. contextualising moment
- viii. experience
- ix. development of experience
- x. deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- xi. After the focus on Wales and Welsh identity in 'Flag' and 'The Steel' both return to romance and sexuality. What impression is given by these poems?
- xii. Why has Sheers positioned them here rather than in the more intimate

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### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- i. Sheers has written the poem from a third-person plural perspective.
- ii. For the majority of the poem, the couple are referred to as 'they', but they become 'part of things again', linked to 'his watch, her earrings'. Why?
- iii. There is a semantic field of time that stretches throughout the poem. What impression is given of it, do you think? Why is it used?
- iv. 'afterwards', 'timeless', 'a while', 'his watch', 'the time', 'dead sheep'
- v. Two phrases in the poem use alliteration of the 'b' sound. Why?
- vi. 'blossomed branches of the blackthorn'
- vii. 'bottom of the bank'
- viii. Throughout the poem, there is a focus on objects/metonymy. Where is it used?
- ix. How are mankind and nature juxtaposed in the poem? Is there any contrast?
- x. We assume that the poem begins after the couple have had sex. In terms of 'the white-blossomed branches of the blackthorn tree', does this seem like an expression of a natural urge?
- xi. To what extent are transience, permanence and growth relevant in the poem? Think?
- xii. The poem ends with a final rhyme ('stems', 'them'). What might this suggest?

### TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem

- i. How then should we interpret the poem overall, do you think?
  - a. as describing the private intimacy of particular moments
  - b. as exploring the framing device of nature in providing boundaries
  - c. as another example of a connection through sexuality
  - d. as representing the idea that experiences, however intimate, are shared and exist only in the past
- ii. Sheers (2008) has argued that associations within locations include 'light, the weather, the engagement of humans with that place, personal history, even the smell and sound of it', while poetry 'employs rhythm, idiom to bring the many layers of association (historical, linguistic, natural) into a whole'. To what extent might this poem be an attempt to make exact associations?

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## Commentary

A landmark is a significant point, either geographical, allowing navigation, or a significant moment or occasion. Both are relevant here: the couple have, in this natural setting, created a literal mark on the land ('a double shadow of g... experience has also acted as a significant moment in their relationship, o... without them'.

In contrast to poems such as 'Marking Time' and 'Night Windows', the p... the moment when they are 'timeless', conveying both the sense of the in... sexual act and the universality of the procreation. There is also a string o... phonological cohesion in 'they lay that way for a while', suggesting intim... However, the moment is broken by their 'standing / and dressing', the p... of the couple divided through the reassertion of individuality and priva...

Rather than a corrupt or exhibitionist act, however, the placing of their c... branches of the blackthorn tree', despite the powerful plosive alliteration... innocence ('white'), fertility ('blossom'), and growth, something natural... pagan ritual (perhaps the reason for the tercets Sheers has used here) in... sacrifice of objects, and the semantic field of death in the final stanza.

The shift is abrupt, the couple becoming 'part of things again', both retu... also a materialistic object-focus that contrasts with the universality and c... shared, 'his watch' providing a time focus, 'her ear-rings' representing d... items creating caesuras to emphasise the division.

The links with the wider world are presented most clearly in the fourth s... intimacy to the intrusion of the real world, with the 'telephone wires' lin... interconnectivity in the wider world, communication, physical distance;... natural image of the 'long-dead sheep' is described through a human im... awareness of mortality juxtaposed with the 'timeless' moment in the first... image reinforced by its position ('at the bottom of the bank'), and the all... phrase.

With a nod to an earlier poem in the collection, the couple 'on going' loo... to let go would mean forever'. Their physical connection here is, as in 'V... self-aware attempt to prevent an impending severance, though the loss i... first line of the poem as it is a sense of the permanent loss of the moment... feature of the past.

The retrospect also, however, allows the increasing awareness of reality:... potentially a negative image, representing darkness and separation; it is... place of death (with perhaps a nod to the French petit-mort, a slang term... lasting depth of a permanent 'imprint' either on the landscape or on the... The moment instead now appears to have been 'shallow' and 'complete'.

This is not to suggest that the experience has become a negative one. Rat... immediacy and importance as a moment, and as a preserved memory co... transience and momentary nature essential to its beauty, and contrasting... can now see, and the physical and emotional division they are now expe... the five-stanza structure), the final line emphasised still further by the re... the rest of the poem.

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Idea of moments of connection once again
- ♦ Sexuality as means of physical connection
- ♦ Transience and memory contrasted with flawed permanence
- ♦ Links between humanity and nature once again
- ♦ Focus on aftermath of experience

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Tercets
- ♦ Five stanzas
- ♦ Shift in time p
- ♦ Third-person
- ♦ Use of caesura
- ♦ Alliteration to
- ♦ Shorter final l

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Reference to landscape linked to Sheers' formative years spent in close proximity to farming community
- ♦ Mark on body of land possible link to farming / marking of livestock
- ♦ Modern attitudes towards gender, sex and sexuality (responsibility, mismatch between male and female consequences of sexual activity, shift from external to more intimate symbols of mutuality and ownership)
- ♦ Sheers' personal context in terms of romantic experience
- ♦ Sense of links to Welsh history ('long-dead sheep') as well as other, older cultural references ('sarcophagus' contrasting with 'telephone wires')

**AO4: Explore conn**

- ♦ Sexual connec
- ♦ 'Valentine', 'N
- ♦ Link between
- ♦ 'Night Windo
- ♦ Experience an
- ♦ Farrier', 'Mar
- ♦ 'Winter Swan
- ♦ 'Late Spring',

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Expression of honest intimacy or exposing isolation within and tempora
- ♦ Is the relationship here one that lasts or one that only subsequently exis
- ♦ Feminist oppositional reading possible: is this exploring the patriarchal romantic/intimate situations? Both society and sexual activity itself as fu
- ♦ Possible Modernist reading possible: expression of couple as trapped w boundaries and restrictions, defined roles made available to them?



# 'Happy Accident'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- The title could suggest either a positive event itself or an unexpected event. Which interpretation is more logical, do you think?
- In terms of the poem describing a photographer's experience of the war, and the subsequent damage to his photographs, is the title intended ironically, do you think?

### TASK TWO: Robert Capa and the D-Day landings

Try to research 'Robert Capa' and the 'D-Day landings'.

- Who was Capa, and what aspects of his life/experience are described in the poem?
- What were the D-Day landings, why were they significant, and how do the photographs represent them, do you think?

### TASK THREE: Form and Structure

- Once again, the poem is in tercets. Is this simply Sheers' convention or does it have a broader function here?
- There are a number of decasyllabic lines here. Why?
- Sheers uses the rhetorical structure of a question and an answer. What is the effect of this?
- The poem ends with a final rhyme ('shores' and 'war'). To what extent does this offer a satisfying conclusion?
- Again, does the poem fit the typical structure adopted by Sheers in the collection?
- To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function



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**TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery**

- i. This is another poem written from a third-person perspective. Again, why is this?
- ii. The poem begins with a conjunction and a question. Why? Is this significant? Does it convey something more?
- iii. Some of the verbs used in the first stanza ('lowered', 'turned', 'dropped') describe the part of the photographer. To what extent is this reflected in other parts of the poem?
- iv. The soldiers are described impersonally, as having a group identity. Why has Sheers chosen this?
- v. The images used to describe the treatment of the photographs ('overexposed', 'faded', 'fired', 'smoked', 'heat-blurred', 'starbursts', 'grazed') all share a resonance. What is it?
- vi. The line 'stepped out on Europe's shores' is shorter than the rest in the poem. Why?
- vii. Could the poem be the literary equivalent of the photographs?

**TASK FIVE: Interpretations**

- i. What, ultimately, is Sheers trying to convey here?
  - a. the inescapability of fate?
  - b. the incomprehensible horrors of war?
  - c. the idea of imperfection sometimes being more perfect?
  - d. the tension between reality and representation?
- ii. Sheers (2014) has observed that in 'writing narrative, elegiac or heroic poetry, the physical distance from the battlefield, poets have tended to fuel the imagination rather than evoke the truth of conflict or challenge its overblown nature'. This same criticism can be made of Sheers' approach to war in poems such as 'Landmark'. In some ways a more effective media in showing the true nature of conflict is photography.

**Commentary**

The serendipitous event referenced by the title relates to Robert Capa's photographs of the D-Day landings, taken for Life magazine. The photographs, as made evident with the 'overexposed' and 'faded' quality, were developed by an inexperienced developer, so much so that, while Life printed some of them, they were accompanied by an apology for their poor quality. However, rather than diminishing their perceived value, the spontaneous, impressionistic, flawed quality of the images have come to define the events of the day for a viewing public.

The poem begins with the shock of D-Day, a sense of continuous motion, 'and', followed by the rhetorical 'how was he to know?' There is a sense of fate, perhaps of fate, certainly of a forward-moving narrative motion that carries through the lowering of the ramps as 'the air turned lead'. This is an effect of the sense of the air as a barrier preventing them progressing, but also the perceived slowness of their motion. On a literal level, it also describes the drop of the marines (only ever a group identity, plural, just as in 'Mametz Wood'), 'into the water', where it is unclear whether the marines are alive or dead from Capa's point of view at the time.

The poem is constructed from five tercets, identical to 'Landmark', with a regular structure suggesting some rigidity, structure, order, tradition, but only partial: the experience, retains a sense of disorder, pushes the boundaries.

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In the event, Capa took 106 photos, with the spontaneity that we see in the poem of time 'to set aperture or exposure'. Despite his skill, his training and his experience he is reduced to acting and reacting on instinct: any technical ability or experience or simply a primal drive onwards, the same mixture of experience and instinct that the marines would rely, with the reference to 'shoot and shoot' a repetition of the action itself.

However, the role of experience is lacking from 'the lad, barely sixteen', the double-meaning of working in 'Life's office', both a literal magazine and a training ground in a broader sense. As with the marines, the damage has been done almost accidentally, by someone perhaps distanced from the action, someone who is not directly involved.

The destruction of the images evokes the images of the destructiveness of war: 'blister', 'melt', all fragmented by the caesuras in the stanza, with the images conveying both the (again ironic) burning of the photographs of the 'front' and the actual images themselves. The 'smoke' from 'under the dark room door' suggests death or simply the unknown, the cryptic, ambiguous, hidden room where the action takes place.

The actual images, 'skies heat-blurred', given 'starbursts of light', their 'squeals' convey not simply the literal events, the factual content: presumably Capa took those. Instead, these images, accidentally corrupted, having suffered through the process as the troops, 'describe so perfectly / the confusion of that day', 'stepped out on Europe's shores', a line significantly briefer than the others, is only a border, but a helpless transition into something of greater scope and scale: 'headlong through the trapdoor of war', with a final, ironic rhyming couplet.

### Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Importance of perception as opposed to reality
- ♦ Loss of / lack of control
- ♦ Construction of reality, just as poem
- ♦ Representation

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Five tercets
- ♦ Some decasyllables
- ♦ Continuous flow of images, continuous expression
- ♦ Final rhyme pattern
- ♦ Ironical title?

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Robert Capa, photographer for *Life* magazine, took part in D-Day landings
- ♦ Link between Sheers and Capa in terms of artistic interpretation / expression of real context
- ♦ Second World War context (loss of life, oppositional relationship between participants, idea of 'lost generation')

**AO4: Explore context of literary texts.**

- ♦ Perception, reality, 'Show', 'Night', 'Shadow Man'
- ♦ War: 'Mametz'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Possible Post-modern reading of history as subjective?
- ♦ Does Sheers seem to view the damaged photographs as being more 'true' or 'false'? Can they be seen as further distancing the audience from the individual suffering?

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# 'Drinking with Hitler'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- What relationship is conveyed by 'drinking with' a person?
- What is a reader's first impression of the use of 'Hitler' in the title, do you think? Why?
- What cultural connotation (connotation: an additional or carried meaning) might 'drinking with Hitler' have, do you think?
- Sheers has given the reader a specific location and time frame. What is the impact of this?
- Why has Sheers only clarified the identity of the figure in a note at the end of the poem, do you think?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- The poem has been written in quatrains. Why might Sheers have made this choice?
- To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - contextualising moment
  - experience
  - development of experience
  - deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- Sheers immediately follows his description of Dr Hunzvi with a description of his victims. What impact does this have?
- The first and last stanzas focus on Hunzvi's interactions with women. What is the impact of this?
- The final stanza deals with the aftermath of Hunzvi's exit. What impact does the redundant final stanza have?
- There are some half-rhymes at various points in the poem ('it'/'night', 'film'/'night'). Are these moments significant?
- The final stanza includes a concluding cross-rhyme (abcb). What impact does this have?

### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- The majority of the poem describes Hunzvi from a third-person perspective. What is the impact of this?
- Is it important that Sheers includes the first-person reflection in stanza 10? Why?
- To what extent do the images of 'aftershave', 'a CD selected', 'a flower' contribute to the performance of Hunzvi, do you think?
- Sheers describes the 'bruises' of Hunzvi's victims as 'fruit'. Why?
- The Zambian businesswoman is a major focus of the imagery in the poem. What is the impact of her in the initial references to her being 'film pretty', 'delicate and fragile', 'fingert', 'dark and quiet'?
- In the final stanza, she is described as 'washing him away / with one eye'. The imagery here is unusually literal and toned down for Sheers. What is the impact of this?

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**TASK FOUR: Context**

- i. Sheers is writing in English for a predominantly Western audience: necessary for our reaction to Hunzvi's nickname, and thus our impression of him.
- ii. The meeting is, at least partially, based on real events. Sheers' reaction is passive as the businesswoman's: how do we respond to this as an audience?
- iii. The year 2000 saw Hunzvi's War Veterans leading the occupation of farms. He died in 2001 (from AIDS, malaria or a heart condition: the cause is unclear). These timings relevant to our interpretation of the poem, do you think?

**TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. To what extent are the following readings of the poem valid, do you think?
  - a. The poem is simply a character study of a war criminal.
  - b. The poem represents evil as a performative thing that is dependent on the audience to witness it.
  - c. The poem juxtaposes the public and private sides of high-profile figures.
  - d. The poem presents the masculine basis of violent political oppression.
- ii. Luke McBratney (2011) has argued that Hunzvi, in the poem, 'is being constructed as a figure, whose own high opinion of himself is unmatched by those of others'. Do you think the poem an example of self-defeating masculinity undermined by a lack of self-awareness?

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## Commentary

While Sheers has represented individuals, sometimes also named, in the poem to act as, essentially, an extended poetic character study. The title refers, of course, to the well-known figure of Robert Mugabe, the Chairman of the Zimbabwean Liberation War Veterans Organisation, a paramilitary arm of Zanu PF and the group behind the violent expulsion of white farmers from their homes in 2000. 'Hitler' was a nickname he was given to have chosen when he joined the armed struggle for Rhodesian independence. The name was chosen for its shock value in linking him with the archetype of a figure of fear, particularly to the generally white, Western forces against which he was fighting. The poem's association of 'drinking with Hitler' with 'supping with the devil'. The date of the poem is in or around 2000, but it was published in 2005, four years after the events of the year and location allows us to read the poem as autobiographical, with relevance, depth and importance.

The description of Hunzvi wearing 'his power like an aftershave', suggests also the permeating, corruptive effect of his presence: he is a figure defined by an oppressively overpowering that 'women about him flounder in it'. The poem's tone and the smiles that they 'try out', as 'brief as fireworks on the night' both suggest a performative falsity that matches his own. Hunzvi's behaviour towards the women is described as 'slid[ing] into place', compared to a 'CD selected / with play button'. Hunzvi, as the self-representative nickname suggests, chooses from a range of personas in his environment, self-conscious playfulness visible to his audience.

Sheers immediately follows this deceptive public performance with the description of the surroundings Hunzvi, that Sheers has 'heard' (perhaps also a matter of perception). Sheers halfway through the second stanza to the negative aspects of Hunzvi's reputation, two as being equally parts of him as a constructed persona, his performance in the environment of the bar dependent, we assume, on the awareness of his reputation.

Hunzvi's burning of the 'workers' homes' represents an exploitative, abusive figure, with the comparison of the 'scorched huts' to 'cauterised wounds'. Hunzvi's actions are wounding not just people but the nation as a whole. The poem, in a deliberately oppositional (and potentially immoral) reading, to view the poem as an attempt to prevent further suffering, since wounds are 'cauterised' for healing. Thankfully, this reading does not fit with the remainder of the poem.

The description of the '5th brigade trucks' arriving 'in the night' and being 'beaten instead' suggests impersonality, a contrast with the high-profile Hunzvi (the anonymous and abusive aggressors) from the 'men' and 'workers' viewpoint (perspective), but viewed by Hunzvi and his troops as simply a group, as a target.

The Zambian businesswoman refers us back to the assertive masculinity of the poem is 'film pretty' (publicly performative), defined by external appearance and 'jewellery'), and a complete contrast in being 'long-fingered' and 'quiet' with the extroversion. His exit from the bar is a final confirmation of this: he walks out of the world he owns/controls, and the world he has caused), a deceptive performance (in a noticeably shorter line), 'conducting' (controlling and directing) the 'laughter' and directed rather than real) 'laughter', his actions broken by caesuras and a sense of discomfort for the reader.

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The businesswoman's reaction offers a coda to this: staring into her own she cleanses himself of his presence, of him having 'lightly touch[ed] her blue-painted eyes', with the final rhyme of 'thigh' and 'eyes' linking the actions with the sense of perception of him. Ultimately, the poem offers of Hunzvi as a symbolic figure of abusive masculine power both publicly functioning symbiotically, but with the passivity of the audience, not just businesswoman in the poem, but also our own passivity as readers, desire discomfort, complicity in his actions.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- Function of poem as a character study or as a representation of abusive masculinity
- Passivity of audience as complicity?
- Mismatch or symbiosis in public performance and hidden reality?

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- Use of quatrain
- Shift between
- Images of per
- Narrative stru and aftermath
- Final rhyme a structuring de

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- Dr Chenjerai 'Hitler' Hunzvi (1948–2001), leader of the Zimbabwean National Liberation War Veterans (1997 onwards)
- Meeting between Sheers (researching *The Dust Diaries*, so linking to personal context) and Hunzvi in July 2000, but Hunzvi dead by time of *Skirrid Hill*'s publication
- Cultural associations of 'Hitler' with leader of Nazi Germany during Second World War
- Juxtaposition of modern European attitudes towards gender with gender representations in poem

**AO4: Explore con**

- Masculinity: 'Joseph Jones' 'The Singing M
- Individual cha Jones', 'The Ec 'Shadow Man 'The Wake'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- Does the poem juxtapose the positive and negative aspects of Hunzvi's demonstrate the monster underlying the apparent man?
- From a Feminist perspective, could Sheers' description of Hunzvi and t argued to reinforce the objectification of women in the poem?
- Could it be argued that Sheers, by failing to explicitly criticise Hunzvi, i continuation of the persona he adopted?

# ‘Four Movements in the Scale of Two’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- i. The title suggests that this is the poetic equivalent of a symphony. Based on this, what might we expect from the poem?
- ii. A ‘movement’ can be viewed as a shift or change within a broader structure, particularly in terms of linguistics. What stages might this refer to in terms of human relationships?
- iii. Could ‘in the Scale of Two’ suggest that the poem is a series of power-plays or shifts in balance?
- iv. What do the titles of the four sections suggest? Why have they been chosen, and is there any clear link between them?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Pages and Line-Break are written in tercets, whereas Still Life and Eastern Promise are written in couplets. Why might this be?
- ii. Line lengths are dramatically varied across all four sections. However, the first and last lines of each section are generally briefer and more similar in their length. Why might this be?
- iii. What is the key narrative focus of each section, and what are the main themes?
- iv. The second section, Still Life, consists of a single-sentence question. To what extent does this fit the content of the section?
- v. The second and third sections consist of a short sentence followed by a question. To what extent does this fit the content of the remaining stanzas. Why?
- vi. The fourth section, Line-Break, begins with a single line. Why might this be? To what extent does the content of the section, do you think?
- vii. Pages, Still-Life and Eastern Promise all feature even numbers of stanzas, whereas Line-Break includes only three complete stanzas. Why?

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### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- i. What might the four key focal images of the sections suggest about?
  - ♦ Pages: 'back to naked back'
  - ♦ Still Life: 'my naked back / a canvas on which you paint'
  - ♦ Eastern Promise: 'drawing the language from deep, / summoning to their bed'
  - ♦ Line-Break: 'a glass / dull-snapping in the hand / beneath the sky'
- ii. Why does Sheers use the following images in Pages, and why such a choice?
  - ♦ 'an overhead shot', 'foetus curled', 'bass clefs, / the elegant scars of a butterfly's white wings', 'the double heart of a secret fruit', 'an open book / with blank pages'
- iii. Pages also features a high proportion of caesuras and end-stopping. What does this suggest about the content?
- iv. In Still Life, what do the following images represent?
  - ♦ 'my naked back / a canvas on which you paint', 'the impression of a sentence of your spine'
- v. There is a high proportion of sibilance in Still Life. Does this reflect the mood? Think?
- vi. In Eastern Promise, what do the following images represent?
  - ♦ 'the dark tent of her down-falling hair', 'she cracked their consciences on the shock of new ice in old water'
- vii. Do the sibilance and then plosive alliteration used in Eastern Promise reflect the mood? Think?
- viii. In Line-Break, what is the function of the following images?
  - ♦ 'a caesura', 'a glass / dull-snapping in the hand / beneath the weight of a signal of blood, uncurling from below'
- ix. The phrasing of the final section, Line-Break, uses caesuras and frequent end-stopping. What does this suggest about the content?

### TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem

- i. Which of the following interpretations is valid, would you say?
  - a. The poem represents the gradual deterioration of a relationship.
  - b. The poem explores the interplay of the genders within a relationship.
  - c. The poem describes the various intimacies and forms of connection.
- ii. Olivia Cole (2005) has described Sheers as being 'Adept at probing the boundaries between person or place, the endings of lives and love affairs'. To what extent does this description of *this* poem?

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## Commentary

The 'Four Movements' in the title refer, presumably, to the movements (adagio, minuet/scherzo, allegro/rondo), though this appears to be more conceit rather than a link to the specific musical movements. The link at which the four sections function holistically, linked by recurrent themes in linguistics, a 'movement' can also be a section of discourse, a different section within the poem do appear to fit this meaning: early intimacy, the couple, the cracks appearing, the split. However, the 'Scale of Two' also competition between the two participants, and there is a clear shift in the two, from the equality of Pages, to the woman in control in Still Life and puzzlement of Line-Break.

The first section, Pages, begins cinematically, cutting to 'an overhead shot' connection here appears equal, innocent, non-sexual: they are 'foetus-cut' they are 'bass clefs', the 'elegant scars on the hips of a cello', suggesting a though also hinting at the link between intimacy and suffering on the page butterfly's white wings, resting', conveying transient beauty, purity, trans the unknown here: they are the 'double heart of a secret fruit', suggesting 'an 'X' in the equation'. The mystery is linked here to the idea of the couple open book': their relationship is a connection between them, an interpen but remain separate, the caesuras and end-stopped lines of erratic length togetherness, but not yet full intimacy.

Still Life continues the intimacy but with a retained sense of partition. Despite their bodies, the pronouns remain separate: 'I sit', 'you paint'. However, more cohesive than the first section, suggesting a firmer linking between the two couplets rather than tercets, in the more regular line lengths, and in the shift across all six stanzas. The woman 'paint[s]', 'drawing', 'shading', 'adding realise', clearly in control. It is her physicality, her body, that gives her control her 'hair', her 'breasts', her 'tongue'. The result of this is their physical in emotional and psychological connection through intercourse, and providing a moment of both self-awareness and connection, 'that bodies, like souls, / While romantic and intimate, the realisation is, of course, that it is the moment matters rather than the continuous process.

Eastern Promise records the shift towards division within the relationship. The 'falling hair' suggests a reassertion of privacy, with language, drawn 'from a sibilant 'Steppe and Siberian snow' (presumably a reference to the woman's origins), providing a physically and emotionally cold atmosphere, distancing the proximal warmth conveyed in the first two sections. The division is further alliterated consonants in the two final stanzas of the section. It is also fitting throughout the collection, that it is an image of water that represents the are dropped 'to him' like 'the shock of new ice in old water'.

The final section describes the division of the couple, the image of the Line suggesting an unexpected severance part way through the expected process. This section implies confusion, and is one shared by both participants left 'pu division between the two is further reinforced by the form, with the single isolation) followed by tercets, in this context conveying an incomplete connection incorporating a number of caesuras breaking the lines themselves.

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The final image, of the 'glass' breaking 'beneath the washing water' and 'signal of blood' is suggestive on a number of levels: the domesticity of the low-key; the 'smoke-signal' implies a failure of communication, a broken 'uncurling from below' connects the emotional and physical suffering, just as the formative phases of the relationship, the final rhyme of 'so' and 'below' suggests it is possible that this could be interpreted more literally, with the 'foetus' of the poem in the last representing a failed pregnancy.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Four stages of a single relationship
- ♦ Interplay of power between the genders
- ♦ Connection in a series of moments
- ♦ Sexual intimacy as a means of achieving connection

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Shift from tense to past
- ♦ Four stanzas
- ♦ Use of caesura to reflect mood
- ♦ Single line, monosyllabic as structuring

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Cultural link to other artistic genres (film, painting), though with particular focus on genre of music – symphony, with allegro, adagio, minuet/scherzo and allegro/rondo as sections?
- ♦ References to 'Eastern', 'Steppe', 'Siberian snow', 'tent' juxtapose cultural familiarity (Welsh / generic British) with more distanced Eastern European / Russian references
- ♦ Autobiographical relevance in terms of film-making / status as author

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Relationship between 'Marking Time', 'Swans', 'Night' and 'Mametz Wood'
- ♦ Juxtaposition of 'Mametz Wood' and 'Drinking with the Enemy'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does this work as a single poem, even when split into four parts? Do the four parts work as individual poems?
- ♦ Could Sheers, again, be accused of gender stereotyping through representation of women as temptresses, sexually manipulative and objectified?
- ♦ Is Sheers so caught up in autobiographical expression that he is unable to write about other people's poems?

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# ‘Liable to Flood’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

Which of the following interpretations of the title do you think could be

- ♦ likely to flood frequently
- ♦ helpless before, or subject to, natural events such as flooding
- ♦ held as responsible before or by nature

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- Sheers has turned to quatrains again here. Why might this be?
- The poem is relatively longer than usual (10 stanzas). Why?
- While the majority of lines range between eight and 12 syllables, several are shorter, such as the examples below. Why might this be?
  - ♦ ‘in black and white’
  - ♦ ‘sweeping in a line’
- There are also lines that are dramatically longer, such as the examples below. Why might this be?
  - ♦ ‘and laying a fatherly hand on the farmer’s shoulder’
  - ♦ ‘they felt the backbone of the rock, shallow beneath the soil’
  - ♦ ‘preparing for the landings on Utah and Omaha’
  - ♦ ‘of the rain’s fusillade and the artillery of thunder’
- The poem follows a rough chronology over the course of three days. In the expanded time frame here, do you think?
- Half of the poem is taken up with description of the actual flood and reactions to it, while the actual camping and training occupy only the last third. What does this suggest, do you think?



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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. How are the army and soldiers presented in the poem? As defined by the map?
- ii. What is the purpose of the image of the map, do you think? A statement of 'white', with the later irony of 'bleeding [...] like ink from a broken canteen' – does it impose human order on nature?
- iii. How is 'the major' presented in the poem, 'tipping back his cap', and what does this suggest?
- iv. What do the images of 'the backbone of the rock, shallow beneath the surface' and 'the shoulder' suggest about the landscape, and how does this contrast with the soldiers?
- v. The American troops are described as 'sweeping in a line / through the desert'. How should we interpret this as a transgressive crossing of natural and man-made boundaries?
- vi. How relevant in understanding the poem, do you think, is the contrast between the 'known' of which they are forewarned ('liable to floods') and the 'unknown' of the 'desert' and 'the horizon'?
- vii. Is there an irony, do you think, to the soldiers originating in 'Kansas' and 'Utah' and 'Omaha' and crossing across the world to land in 'Utah and Omaha'?
- viii. The poem contains a semantic field of warfare in the sixth, seventh and eighth stanzas: 'the rain', 'thunder' and the behaviour of the river. What function does this have?
- ix. The river is described as female ('pulled herself up') and is compared to a woman. How does this fit with Sheers' presentation of nature and femininity?
- x. The river is also described as 'swallowing', as having 'gathered' and 'swallowed'. How does this contrast between the destructive capacity of war and the power of nature?
- xi. Are we intended to interpret the image of the soldiers having been 'cut off' as comic or tragic, do you think? Is this an image of death, or just a temporary setback downstream?
- xii. The final stanza of the poem ends with a rhyming couplet that also features repetition, and an image of the 'tide of war'. To what extent does this contribute to the wider purpose in the poem?

**TASK FOUR: Interpretation**

For Sheers (2008), poems are capable of 'excavat[ing] the layered associations of place, revealing these places to be not just a physical locale, but also [...] geographical spaces with their own internal geographies of memory, history and language'. To what extent does this poem do this?

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## Commentary

The poem is based, clearly, on a real event: the flooding of an American in the run-up to the D-Day landings (a topic already covered from a different angle in 'Accidents'). The poem is written in quatrains, with lines generally bound to 12 syllables, though with some notable exceptions, collectively suggesting a sense of rhythm and rigidity; the same conditions faced by the soldiers in the poem, and so effective a point of natural comparison.

The title, as ever in the collection, allows several equally valid (and relevant) literal meanings of 'likely to be flooded', but also a sense of 'helpless before the elements' or 'held accountable by nature'. The farmer is clearly intended to reflect the land, geographically and naturally situated, in contrast to the foreign troops. The assertion is also supported by the 'arching down' of the letters on the map and 'white' (and emphasised by a much shorter line), and thereby juxtaposed with the 'blue' hung somewhere just over the horizon'.

However, the military, masculine (and possibly American) arrogance of the soldiers to 'listen', instead jauntily 'tipping back his cap', addressing the farmer as 'Jack' and 'laying a fatherly hand on the farmer's shoulder', a patronising gesture, is contrasted with the 'farmer's shoulder' to 'Moel Siabod's shoulder' (the masculine personification of the river) in the fourth stanza.

The other soldiers are treated simply as a group, lacking any kind of individuality: they are 'them', 'they', 'GI's', 'Greenhorns'. Their lack of connection with the land ('Kansas, Ohio and Iowa' and landing on beaches labelled 'Utah and Omaha') and American ownership, just as in the training area here) is evident in the river penetrating through the 'shallow soil' (perhaps also the apparent irrelevance of the river with the natural strength and depth of the 'backbone of the rock'.

The behaviour of the troops during their training similarly represents a lack of respect for boundaries: they are 'sweeping in a line' (a clearly masculine structure in contrast to the and enveloping femininity of natural images in the collection) 'through the land'. The reaction from nature is to mirror their behaviour: human warfare is contrasted with the 'artillery of thunder', an assertion of natural power over man-made warfare. The personified female river who pulls 'herself up and spread[s] her wings', is linked more closely to nature, particularly birds.

The image of the river 'bleeding through the camp like ink from a broken bottle' is a result of ignorance of the map and the warning have resulted in the 'ink', the river will during the attack. However, the bleeding could also be interpreted, like menstruation, the assertion of female, cyclical, fertile and biological power over construction and destruction, 'swallowing the jeeps'.

The image of the 'tin cans and cups' floating 'and clinking against each other' is both ominous and comically celebratory: the troops are facing imminent death, the prospect that only their 'ghosts' will be left to 'clink' their 'cups'. In this stanza, the river having 'gathered them all and ushered them off', is ambivalent, as the men having died, the phrasing euphemistically gentle? Or is this a reference to the troops being carried off on the river?

There is a moment of realisation provided for the GIs, partially on an ins (a link back to the third stanza), of 'how suitable this was', of the weather experiences. The troops, after all, have already been clumped together, s caught up in something larger and more destructive than themselves, fig 'taken at night without any say', being carried along, being 'swept away' repetition, rhythm and rhyme of the final couplet.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Comparison of mankind and nature, with gender as basis for comparison
- ♦ Representation of farmer and soldiers
- ♦ Soldiers as group identity, impersonal, and on foreign soil
- ♦ Slight anti-American bias? Or simply anti-military?

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of ten qua
- ♦ Some regulari lines
- ♦ Chronological
- ♦ Use of semant (and female) p
- ♦ Lack of specif
- ♦ Characters de
- ♦ Final couplet:

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Poem written as part of the Dolwyddelan Project, an exploration of local identity through various artistic forms
- ♦ Focus on natural understanding acquired by farmers (Sheers' upbringing in semi-rural community)
- ♦ Mountain situated in visual distance of the majority of the highest Welsh mountain peaks, with largely Welsh-speaking community living in the area
- ♦ Widespread emigration to United States during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with many of the GIs viewing Wales as part of their cultural heritage. US troops key part of D-Day landings, but suffered huge casualties

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Military/masc Accidents', 'D
- ♦ Nature and m Country', 'Far Hill Fort', 'Th

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem seem to offer a sympathetic awareness of the soldiers' se critical of their imposition and failure to engage with the landscape?
- ♦ Is it possible that Sheers is using a historical event (D-Day) in order to c as the Iraq war, or to lament the increasing Americanisation of Welsh c
- ♦ Could Sheers' poem be read as anti-war, anti-American and/or against r

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# 'History'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- i. How do we define 'history'? What are the different ways of interpreting history?
  - ♦ as a shared cultural heritage
  - ♦ as a causal process
  - ♦ as a back-story clarifying the present
  - ♦ as a record of an individual's, society's, culture's or family's past
  - ♦ as a written interpretation of the past
- ii. Why has Sheers given us a specific location, the 'Lleder Valley'?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. Once again, Sheers has used quatrains. What might this suggest?
- ii. The third, sixth and eighth stanzas are non-rhyming couplets. What might this suggest? Why are they half the length of the other stanzas?
- iii. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function
- iv. Five of the lines contain only four syllables. Why might these be relatively shorter, in terms of their content?
  - ♦ 'disused quarry'
  - ♦ 'and black as oil'
  - ♦ 'drilling its notes'
  - ♦ 'prise it apart'
  - ♦ 'a book of slate'
- v. The lines of the penultimate stanza, apart from the four-syllable third line, are all five syllables each. Why might Sheers want this stanza to seem more regular?
- vi. The longest lines in the poem are nine syllables each (including both lines of the non-rhyming couplet). Why might these be relatively longer, in terms of their content?
  - ♦ 'in the pages of a history'
  - ♦ 'and there, beside the falls of moss'
  - ♦ 'in every head, across every heart / and down the marrow of every bone'



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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. The poem contains a range of imperatives, such as 'don't try to learn yourself a blade of slate'. Why might this be?
- ii. The poem contains a number of juxtaposed images of nature and man: 'water lies still / and black as oil', 'the blackbird's song / drilling its nose', 'the stone' / 'drilling its nose'. Why might this be?
- iii. Look at the sentence lengths in the poem: the first sentence lasts for three lines, the second for a single stanza each, the fourth and final sentence for three lines. How does this affect your interpretation of each section, do you think?
- iv. Sibilance, as often in Sheers' writing, runs throughout the poem, through phrases such as 'water lies still / and black as oil', and 'a story of stone'. What might its widespread use suggest?
- v. There are also examples of harsh consonants used to reflect the content: 'praise it apart', 'book of slate'. What effect do these have?
- vi. The poem uses a wide range of enjambment. What impact does this have?
- vii. There are two rhymes used in the poem: 'apart'/'heart', and 'stone'/'nose'. How do these offer any cohesion, do you think?

**TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following is the most effective interpretation of the poem?
  - a. The poem contrasts the transience and limitations of human experience with the continuity of nature.
  - b. The poem explores the interconnectivity of humankind and nature.
  - c. The poem describes the negative impact of humankind on nature.
- ii. Sheers (2008) has described the landscape as being able to 'simultaneously hold contemporary and historical signatures of a place'. Is this, perhaps, the case within the poem?

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## Commentary

As any historian would admit, 'history' as a notion is problematic: it can't capture details; the interpretation of causal structures and processes; the narrative of society's existence. In this poem, Sheers contrasts 'history' as dry, human-made, 'history' as natural and experiential reality. The location, the Lledr (to us, the Valley, offers a sense of concrete presence, specificity, a grounded reality. The aspects of the poem, suggesting also an almost Romantic interconnectivity and poetic inspiration.

There is a directness, an authority to the narrative voice adopted in the poem. More gentle, descriptive/declarative 'Sheers' in most of the collection so far, such as 'don't try', 'go instead', 'pick yourself' and so on. This is, perhaps, 'learn this place / in the pages of a history', the semi-passive acceptance of a perspective that is distanced from the physical reality of the location, and the educational process. This is, of course, ignoring the mild irony of our access to this location in his poem.

The alternative is to 'go instead' to the 'disused quarry' (a place reclaimed by the capacity of humankind), to 'where the water lies still' (unmoving or removed, conveyed by the sibilance). There is a repeated implicit comparison between water and the quarry: water is 'black as oil' the 'blackbird's song' is 'chiselling', 'drilling', the 'book' (the plosive 'b' consonants in each conveying a sense of directness). This is either the human aspect that is destructive, or that makes nature's behaviour the human shaping of nature, nature itself is changing, inter-penetrating.

The 'blade of slate' is an effective image: rather than the violence and the implied by the 'blade', the slate can become 'a book' by being 'gentle' as the activity conveyed by the plosive consonants and the monosyllables) in a clear contrast between the slate and the 'history' of the first stanza.

This image is ambiguous: it could convey the sense of identifying Stonehenge, tracing of human history; it could suggest a more geologically focussed history of the location; it could imply, in a more abstract fashion, the interaction of nature, the sense that the narrative of society and culture is the result of geological activity. Whichever is correct, the sibilant monosyllables of the phrase link with the rest of the poem, offering a calm, peaceful atmosphere, and perhaps the second stanza flowing through the rest of the poem.

The poem is written in quatrains, a form that has appeared in several of the collection, though with non-rhyming couplets providing the third, sixth, and eighth lines, which appear to act as, in effect, miniature conclusions: the first ends the process of the location from the abstraction of the 'history' book; the sixth ends the conclusion of the 'book'; the eighth offers the concluding interpretation, a sense of the dependence of the natural environment on the local population. There are occasional half-rhymes, instances of full rhymes, though some distance apart ('apart'/'heart', 'stone'/'stone', a sense of disjointed cohesion: not the regularity imposed by humanity, but the last conveying the mirroring of geological and biological structure that is the poem, such as 'Inheritance' and 'Liable to Floods'.

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Ultimately, the 'history' that Sheers is referring to here is one that is both of the landscape (the 'story of stone') and within people ('the marrow of' is conscious and emotionally based ('heart') and more fundamental ('the the dry record of a book, and that is not simply about individuals, those Fort').

## Commentary cont.

**AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.

- ♦ Interconnectedness of nature and humankind
- ♦ Potentially destructive power of humanity
- ♦ Interrogation of accepted notions of 'history'
- ♦ Sense of humanity as naturally situated and shaped by environment

**AO2:** Analyse ways in which literary texts.

- ♦ Use of quatrain
- ♦ Occasional rhyme
- ♦ Running sibilant
- ♦ Occasional alliteration of monosyllables
- ♦ Use of imperative perspective

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sense of geographical specificity conveyed by geographical location offered
- ♦ Poem written as part of the Dolwyddelan Project (both Lleder Valley and Moel Siabod located in North Wales)
- ♦ Disused quarry (link to late twentieth century industrial decline)
- ♦ Juxtaposition of formally recorded written history with 'natural' and oral histories

**AO4: Explore content**

- ♦ Nature and moorland in 'Swans', 'Bord', 'Hedge School', 'Gaer', 'The Hill', 'Steelworks', 'The'
- ♦ Past and present in 'Flag', 'The Stone', 'Liable to Flood'
- ♦ Industrial decline

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ In his idea that it is in the natural world that human history is best recorded, falling into the trap of self-indulgent Romanticism?
- ♦ From a post-modern perspective, is Sheers presenting 'history' as somewhat subjective, and is this limited by his own subjective perspective?
- ♦ Is nature here something symbiotically linked with human society, or something separate?
- ♦ Is Sheers using the poem to offer a solution to the post-industrial malaise of society as suffering?

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# ‘Amazon’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

The title allows for several different interpretations. How would each line you think?

- ♦ the Amazon river, the second longest river in the world, and with
- ♦ the Amazon rainforest, the largest rainforest in the world, despite exploitation
- ♦ the Amazons, a semi-mythical race of female warriors in Greek mythology



### TASK TWO: Form

- The poem is written in four distinct sections. What is the function of each, and why has Sheers divided the poem this way?
- The first, third and final sections of the poem are all written in tercets. Why might this be, in the context of the poem?
- The second section of the poem is written in non-rhyming couplets. Why might this fit the content of the section?
- The second and fourth sections also use a single-line final stanza. As made this choice for these sections?
- The syllabic count varies dramatically within each section, from three from five to 14 in section two, from five to 13 in section three, and from Why might this be? What might it show?
- There are points where a regular syllabic count is used (such as the of section three). Why might this be?

### TASK THREE: Structure

- Why does Sheers offer three different methods of the character discov
- Does Sheers' choice of these four moments (discovering the cancer, afterward the operation, after the process of healing) work, in the co think?
- What shifts take place within the four sections, do you think?
- Why does Sheers end the poem with the woman's dreams, of the fu to develop? Is it only in the last two stanzas that the idea of her as a

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#### TASK FOUR: Language

- i. The whole poem is written from a third-person perspective. Why might this be?
- ii. Is the perspective an uncomfortable fit between a relatively young, male figure in the poem?
- iii. Throughout the poem, 'cancer' is treated euphemistically: 'it' begins with a 'hard C of cruelty / and soft c of uncertainty', it is a 'bump / bump'. How might this be? How effectively do the various replacement terms work?
- iv. Line lengths and breaks, caesuras and end-stopping are used to divide the poem. How does Sheers do this?
- v. Occasional longer lines and enjambment are also used: what impact does this have?
- vi. Harsh consonants and plosive alliteration are used regularly throughout the poem, with frequent sibilance. Why? What effect does this have?

#### TASK FIVE: Imagery

- i. How is the cancer itself represented in the poem, particularly in the first section?
- ii. In the second section, why is there so much focus on 'the dustbins full of shoes for sale' and the 'buses / redding past'?
- iii. What is the relevance of the fireworks and champagne cork used as metaphors in the third section?
- iv. The fourth section uses a number of images. What is the function of these?
  - ♦ 'her mind is still faceted'
  - ♦ 'the invisible twin [...] only to find skin over bone'
  - ♦ 'sun-curled photos of the past'
  - ♦ 'the nudist night [...] where she will [...] enter the water an American'

#### TASK SIX: Interpretation

- ♦ Lisa Gee (2005) has observed that 'Sheers may elegise, but he doesn't romanticise. He is a close familiarity rather than arm's-length observation'. To what extent is this an autobiographical perspective adopted in *this* poem?

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## Commentary

The title of the poem links together three related references. The first and mythical race of warrior women in Greek mythology who reputedly severally draw their bows more effectively. The second is to the river: huge, life-giving and unifying. The third is the rainforest: fertile, varied, dramatically deforested. The poem's affirmation of life and the dignified strength that the unnamed female arguably, acquires through the experience, all three make sense: the severing of water and continuity (including as an image of rebirth), the partial destruction and ongoing process of life.

The poem begins with the trisyllabic 'it begins', the brevity offering a series of moments in which to reflect on the euphemistic 'it' (mirrored in the doctor's diagnosis 'keeping 'the end of what he has to say / always at arm's length'), used to describe breast cancer rather than the condition, something we see throughout the poem. The different possibilities for the discovery of the cancer: 'when she's dressing in the mirror'. This relates to Sheers' choice of perspective: with a subject as experienced with cancer, something that, arguably, goes to the core of female self-definition. In terms of femininity in maternal, sexualised and aesthetic terms, any attempt to veil the condition or understanding of the female experience of such a condition would run the risk of being questionably authentic, at worst crass and grossly presumptuous. Instead, the observational perspective, allowing for moments of reflection by the patient and the doctor, adopting their viewpoints, ensuring in this first section that the readers share in the experience, rather than the assertion of reality.

The breasts themselves are described as 'familiar', 'made light of', appearing as if cancer is 'a mote', something tiny, something sharing the body of the woman. The 'beginning', an ironic contrast with the status of the woman as a mother and childrearing. The fourth stanza of the first section also contains the repeated 'hard' (clarified in the fifth and sixth stanzas of the second section as the 'hard C' suggesting importance, and alliterated throughout the fifth stanza) and 'seems' (mirrored in 'seems so fitted to the task'), with the phonemes contained within 'uncertainty' corresponding with the sounds contained within 'cancer', offering a sense of the pervasiveness of the awareness of such an illness.

The second section, the medical confirmation, is written in non-rhyming tercets, diminished from the tercets of the first section and furthered by the final caesuras in lines such as 'he tells her kindly enough, and anyway' and 'by the way he offers the seat'. The image of her 'leav[ing] the surgery / a world', mirrors the exit of the mare in 'The Farrier', with the reference to 'rubbish' representing both familiarity and a juxtaposition between the positive and the overflowing of the negative. However, it is the normality of the world, 'shoes for sale', the 'buses / redding past', the sense that the world goes on.

The third section focusses on the aftermath, allowing the actual procedure to be the focus. Here, the 'night' is 'behind her', the tercets returning to the first section of transience ('tic-tac sparks', 'fire streaming away', 'writing with sparklers' return. The bottle is a celebration of 'her coming back', an opportunity for the patient, also perhaps the release of tension, despite their inability to avoid consideration of the night', suggesting an interruption before the resumption of 'life'.

In the final section, there is a sense of the physical loss as a reflection of the loss, but also of the strengthening of the mind in the wake of a psychological 'going', both literally and metaphorically apt. The final three tercets repeat of the first section, 'sometimes', 'or', 'when', juxtaposing the familiar past with the present. The final image, of choosing 'the nudist night to visit the pool', 'deep end', entering 'the water an Amazon', clearly conveys not a lack, but a dignity, strength, a sense that she has not become less of a woman, but not bow further and deeper than other women'.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Impersonal, but intimate perspective?
- ♦ Represented perspective, rather than autobiographical
- ♦ Strengthening of gender identity, rather than loss, and division
- ♦ Sense of personal development through experience
- ♦ Definitions of gender

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Divided into
- ♦ Hard and soft
- ♦ Erratic syllabi
- ♦ Widespread u
- ♦ Imagined thir

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Poem apparently autobiographical: does this impact on our understanding of it?
- ♦ Amazons: semi-mythical race of warrior women who apparently severed one of their breasts in order to draw their bows. Men either slain or kept as slaves.
- ♦ Amazon: largest river in the world, closely linked to fertility and impact of humanity on environment and lives of those who rely on it. Image of strength, continuity, flow.

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Female gende 'Inheritance', 'Going'
- ♦ Power of lang Movements in 'Skirrid Fawr'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, is Sheers' attempt to engage with a female emotive as breast cancer actually deeply sexist?
- ♦ Again, from a Feminist perspective, does the poem fail to engage meaningfully with the reliance on the female body as defining womanhood?
- ♦ Sheers presents the subject of the poem as having been somehow empowering true, or does this perhaps feel like an oversimplification?

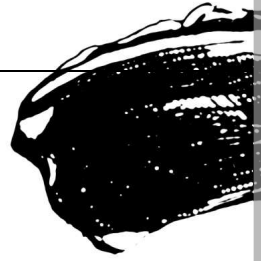
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# 'Shadow Man'

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## Tasks



### TASK ONE: The Title and Dedication

- Who is 'Mac Adams', and how are shadows relevant to him?
- Adams was born in 1943, in Brynmawr, in the south of Wales, though now resident in the United States. Why might Sheers have chosen to write about him, dedicated to him?
- What might the title mean? That the 'man' is only a 'shadow'? That shadows are important? That he is someone who deals with the representational value of shadows and reflections? That he functions within a darker part of society?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- The poem is in tercets. Why might this be? What effect does this have?
- Why is the final stanza simply a single line?
- Why has this poem been placed here within the collection as a whole? Before 'Amazon' and 'Under the Superstition Mountains' after it?
- While there is no regular rhyme scheme, there are a range of rhymes: 'dead'/'head'), half-rhymes and slant rhymes ('shades'/'makes', 'grass'/'spread' throughout the poem and across the stanzas. What effect does this have?
- Is the ending of the poem another example of a redundant final stanza?

### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- The poem is constructed from three sentences. What effect does this have?
- The poem is written in the third person. What effect does this have?
- The poem uses a range of sibilance ('spilt across glass', for example) and assonance ('it's not matter that matters, / or our thoughts they throw'). Why?
- Sheers repeats the words 'light' and 'shadow' in the poem. Where? What might the images of light and shade have in the poem?
- The poem offers a range of contrasts between action ('makes', 'conjures', 'resting', 'moment in the second before flight'). How might this be achieved?
- The poem includes a range of images linked to Mac Adams' work. Beyond simply linking to one of his artworks?
  - 'holes' made by 'light'
  - 'fruit and a shock of grains / spilt across glass'
  - 'a dog, resting or dead'
  - 'a bird's kinetic moment'
  - 'Karl Marx's head, / born from pebble and stone'
- To what extent might the image of the 'shadows' be intended to also refer to the 'holes'?

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**TASK FOUR: Linking the Poem**

The final two stanzas of the poem present the idea that what matters is 'the lives of others'.

- ♦ In which other poems have we seen a similar idea expressed?

**TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following interpretations of the poem would you consider most valid?
  - a. The poem focusses on the importance of subjective perception.
  - b. The poem explores the links between art and poetry in terms of representation.
  - c. The poem uses the idea of art to represent the awareness of consciousness.
  - d. The poem is simply a celebration of the work of Mac Adams.
- ii. For Phil Brown, 'male magic [*in the collection*] is an instinctive thing, while female magic is more of a contrived way of creating attractiveness'. To what extent could this poem be said to disprove this?

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## Commentary

Mac Adams was born in 1943, in Brynmawr, Wales, though he has spent most of his living and working in the USA, particularly New York. Adams is both a sculptor and a poet, with his sculptures often involving the construction of shadow images from objects. One of his most famous, an apparent shadow of a rabbit, for example, constructed from a tube and a disc, viewed from above.

This is the most logical reference for the title, the 'man who works with shadows'. Other possible interpretations: the idea of working in a medium that is itself a shadow; representative; exploring the boundaries of subjective perception and objective reality; dealing with the darker, more obscure aspects of life; the constructed nature of reality.

On a literal level, in terms of the shadows, his palette is 'light', though as a poet he brings an effortless simplicity to his style (reinforced by the rhyme linking 'light' and 'shades / and all the holes it makes.' The image here is an inversion of the usual idea of light that 'shades' (adding depth and definition, offering a negative image in some aspects, a line emphasised by its relative brevity within the poem), that the darkness that results, with the idea of the 'holes' then suggesting gaps or voids and fragments.

There is something magical about Adams' work, 'conjuring' something out of nothing, of movement ('kinetic'), of spontaneity ('his palette is light') and carelessness juxtaposed with the care and control the work actually requires. In this sense, the nature of perception, of reality, whether to define the dog as 'resting or in motion' (a photographic image) the 'bird's kinetic moment'. Often, the items that come to mind are means of interpretation: Marx's head is 'born from pebble and stone', for example, an inflexibility, a sense of fixity, perhaps of the foundations of Marxist ideology. The placing of Marx and his theories on a pedestal as an object of idolisation, through the rhyming of 'dead' and 'head'.

The 'absence of light' and the 'darkness / behind his eyes' (another brief reference in the poem) suggest the process of translation from thought to sculptural form, the nature of thought: 'darkness' implies ambiguity, doubt, privacy, intimacy. The attempt to express the darker side of human nature, with the idea of 'we are all shadows' suggesting both that darkness is his medium and that darkness is his subject.

The poem is written in tercets, with lines in the range between four and six syllables, of simplicity, of allowing the images constructed to speak for themselves. The line 'that it's not matter that matters', is also the line that offers the audience a moment of reflection, the poem, linked to the final, single, isolated line regarding 'the lives of others' is also a half-rhyme ('matters'/'others') that links the final line into the run of the poem. It is an irony, perhaps, of the poem, that the representative artistry should be itself represented through an artistic medium.

Despite the constructed artistry that is based on the application of objects to create shadows, as focussing not on 'matter', or even on the 'thoughts and words' that become shadows, represented by the sculpted forms. Instead, the shadows constructed are to echo the 'shadows' that 'matter', 'thoughts' and 'words' thrown 'again' at the wall, that Sheers sees as the message of Adams' work: that it is not 'the number of shadows' but, instead, as in 'The Hill Fort', it is the 'depth of their impression', their impact on others.

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## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Imagery of light and shadows representing perception and reality
- ♦ Focus on gaps, ambiguities
- ♦ Reading interiority through exterior representation

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Range of half- ('light'/'flight' and slant rhyme 'grains'/'glass
- ♦ Syllabic count (longest line '4
- ♦ Use of third p
- ♦ Use of sibilant
- ♦ Consistent jux

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Mac Adams, born in Wales, resident in the USA for most of his professional life
- ♦ Autobiographical links: both Sheers and Adams Welsh, both living outside Wales, both using power of suggestion / implication to construct meaning (gap between reality and illusion)
- ♦ Karl Marx: thinker whose work inspired Communism, Socialism, Maoism and others. Perhaps a suggestion of shift from reality and fluid concepts into a concrete artefact, an owned object.

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Reality and re Wood', 'Show Singing Men'
- ♦ Actions and o 'Marking Tim 'Landmark'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ By describing Adams' work, could Sheers be viewed as drawing attention to implication and suggestion rather than the construction of any kind of c
- ♦ From a Marxist perspective, could the art works and the poem itself be attempts to distract from the realities of commercialism and the exploita
- ♦ Sheers draws a broader conclusion from Adams' work, that 'it's not mat and words, / but the shadows they throw / against the lives of others'. T as a summary of Sheers' approach to poetry?

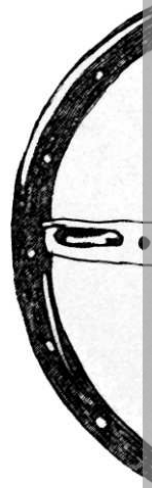
# 'Under the Superstition M

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Quotation

- i. The 'Superstition Mountains' are a real mountain range in Arizona, and there are a number of local myths and traditions regarding them. What are these, and which might be relevant to the poem?
- ii. 'Under' could suggest 'living in the shadow of', or 'buried beneath'. How might these impact on our reading of the poem?
- iii. What might the symbolic relevance of the 'Superstition Mountains' be?
- iv. Listen to the song 'Susan's House' by Eels: how do the themes and references in the lyrics link to or impact on a reading of this poem, do you think?



### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. The poem is written in tercets, though written in, and inspired by, e might he have made this choice of stanza for this poem?
- ii. The poem is written in nine stanzas, relatively longer than the major collection. How does this impact on the mood it evokes?
- iii. Although Sheers has, as always in the collection, written in free verse syllabic counts in stanzas one, four, five, seven and eight. What is it,
- iv. The two longest lines in the poem, listed below, each contain 13 syll intended to convey?
- v. 'and a single bird hits a piano wire mid flight'
- vi. 'the Superstition Mountains tear an edge off the sky'
- vii. The shortest line in the poem, 'his lower lip dropped', only contains Sheers have made this choice?
- viii. Throughout the poem, the photographer remains asleep: is there an the course of it?

### TASK THREE: Context

- i. The description of 'Sun City West' as being somewhere 'only the old true: all residents must be aged 65 or over. To what extent is this rel structure of the poem?
- ii. David Hearn, the photographer in question, was exploring ageing in society when Sheers accompanied him to Sun City West. To what ex same focus?
- iii. The poem is one of only a few in the collection that explore alternati exploring America. How is it represented here?

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#### TASK FOUR: Language and Imagery

- i. What might the 'Mustang' at the start of the poem be intended to represent in terms of the constructedness of human society? The juxtaposition of humanity and nature in a society that Sheers is examining?
- ii. The poem uses a wide range of enjambment and some relatively long lines. What do these have? What mood do they create?
- iii. The poem is written from an observational first-person perspective. What is the effect of this?
- iv. What might the description of the photographer in the sixth and seventh lines represent, do you think? Is the 'perfect still' relevant?
- v. Sheers offers a number of images linked to the social environment. What do the images of America / ageing might each offer?
  - ◆ the 'Mustang', 'idle' and 'out to grass', 'absorbing the heat'
  - ◆ the 'man in a track-suit' taking 'his oxygen tanks for a walk'
  - ◆ the 'single bird' hitting a 'piano wire mid flight'
  - ◆ the 'Superstition Mountains' which are 'above' them, 'tear[ing]'
  - ◆ the 'rattlesnake' which 'uncoils from Winter'

#### TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem

- i. Which of the following interpretations of the poem would you consider most valid?
  - a. The poem explores the futility and emptiness of ageing.
  - b. The poem offers a glimpse of American culture.
  - c. The poem juxtaposes the temporary, self-obsessed nature of human existence with the natural world.
- ii. Carrie Etter (2006) believes that '*Skirrid Hill* engages most when the poem uses metaphor only in touches'. To what extent do you agree with this view of the Superstition Mountains'?

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## Commentary

The 'Superstition Mountains' act as an effective framing device within the poem physically. In a literal sense, they offer a sense of the enormity of the world, thus of the relative unimportance of the characters depicted in the poem. The mountains represent (through the name) a sense of the fear of the future, of the unknown that comes afterwards. There is a resonance, perhaps, between the mountain image from 'The Old Fools' by Philip Larkin, a writer who has influenced the collection. Larkin, interrogating the ageing process, describes the 'old fools' as 'below / Extinction's alp', with death as a 'peak that stays in view', and the 'ground' (Larkin, 1974).

Two local stories regarding the mountains may also be relevant here: an entrance to the underworld can be found below the mountains; a more secret entrance to a (never confirmed) gold mine can be found somewhere in the area. This is an extension to an interpretation of the image: the lurking awareness of mortality, or negative, but also a sense of the unfulfilled potential of life.

The quotation from 'Susan's House' by Eels is intentionally ironic: the lyrics of the 'picket fence', just as Sheers' poem does, expose the dark underbelly of life beneath a veneer of civility and the mutual respecting of representative boundaries. The reason for the choice of Lowell's poem 'To speak of the woe that is in man' is the second stanza. Sheers' aim in this poem is similar, though not identical. The poem is the theme of ageing and the alienating society that has been constructed. The poem interrogate and evaluate, reflected perhaps in the relative length of the poem chosen to use, as well as the slow pace and calm tone created from the long lines, enjambment, and sense of the conjectural self-enclosure offered by a narrative.

The 'Mustang' that begins the poem represents both the idea of human progress (technologically advanced than a horse), but also continuity, the cars have been moving on for years, onwards, the year offering a pleasing echo of the context of the location. The Mustang to be seen as the triumph of humankind over nature, its position being 'out to grass' and 'absorbing the heat', present it as sidelined, irrelevant.

The photographer is used as a framing device at the beginning and end of the poem. His role is to capture a frozen image, but the stasis that pervades the poem, the time offered, perhaps makes his role irrelevant. Society itself is 'the perfect stillness', 'the photographer sleeps' and 'doesn't move', the old are 'allowed to live'. This is also, potentially either metaphorically apt (they can actually live here and not move) or the continuing awareness of mortality). If the latter, there is a logical link between the associations of exercise (and thus the valuing of, or attempt to control) and the presence of the 'oxygen tanks' that he is taking 'for a walk'.

The bird offers a point of contrast. As something ongoing (caught 'mid flight'), it is a momentary example of dynamism, of life, but it is 'single', isolated here, 'what kind of bird it is'. Instead, it is simply allowed to stand as another example of 'knowing', just as Sheers (and we, as his audience), can describe the sense of perspective without knowing as an insider, just as the 'rattlesnake' in the poem.

The final two stanzas offer three key points of comparison: the photographer contrasts with the image of him having 'died'; the mountains are a large, enduring presence and rituals associated with, living; the 'rattlesnake' represents not only the danger but the ineluctable unknowability of, life.

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**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Examination of American society, particularly self-enclosure and the gap between representation and reality
- ♦ Exploration of ageing and fear of death among elderly
- ♦ Contrasting individual lives and the broader world
- ♦ Capturing of a static moment within a broader process

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ 10 stanzas?
- ♦ Lacks narrative moment?
- ♦ Pattern of enjambement and syllabic count
- ♦ Begins with co-unknownable

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Sun City West age-limited community (only over-65s allowed to own property)
- ♦ Local myths regarding mountains (treasure located somewhere, opening to underworld, links to Native American culture)
- ♦ Sheers' road trip with photographer David Hearn (project on ageing, inspiration for poem)
- ♦ Mustang and picket fence both symbolise ideal of suburban American society, though undermined by use in Eels' song 'Susan's House' to represent hypocrisy and seedy underbelly of American society
- ♦ 'Lowell on marriage' refers to Robert Lowell's 'To speak of the woe that is in marriage', a poem about a wife's description of her abusive, drunken, potentially murderous husband

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Representation of 'Night Window Man'
- ♦ Mortality: 'Ma', 'Farther', 'Sw', 'Hill Fort', 'L'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ To what extent could this poem be said to be another example of anti-A
- ♦ Although Sheers is, in theory, writing about ageing, is his real focus the American society?
- ♦ By focusing on the ageing population of Sun City West, is Sheers perhaps past and interrogating hope for the future?
- ♦ Sheers is, again, representing the poem as having an autobiographical a this impact on our understanding of the poem?

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# ‘Service’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- i. The title could suggest either ‘service’ in the sense of a sitting in a restaurant or the broader process and concept of ‘serving the public’. Which is more relevant here? Do both fit?
- ii. The poem was inspired by a residency at Heston Blumenthal’s ‘The Duck’ in Bray. Research Blumenthal’s reputation and style as a chef – could these be relevant to the style and content of the poem?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. The poem is by far the longest in the collection. Is this dictated by the form, or does it serve a different purpose?
- ii. While most (if not, arguably, all) of the poems in the collection are in iambic pentameter, this poem is varied in terms of stanza lengths, syllabic counts, rhythm and pace.
- iii. To what extent can the poem be divided into the following sections, and how does this differ from the rest?
  - ♦ pre-preparation
  - ♦ preparation
  - ♦ the service itself (from several perspectives)
  - ♦ the aftermath
- iv. What do the occasional (and often single-line) narrative interjections contribute to the poem?
- v. Sheers appears, in the poem, fascinated by the continuity, the story of the service, from the gathering of the basic ingredients through to the experience of the dish. How does this affect the form and structure of the poem?
- vi. Unusually, this is a poem that, while arguably relatively jumbled or non-linear, appears to be intended as a performance piece. How might this impact the reader’s experience?

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**TASK THREE: Language**

- i. Line lengths in the poem seem to be deliberately chosen to suit atmosphere. To what extent is this particularly evident in the first stanza ('imagine a theatre kitchen...')?
- ii. Sheers uses alliteration (particularly of plosive sounds) and sibilance. What function might it serve in the following examples, do you think?
  - ♦ 'a bucket, / a slab of pink salted pork / being taken out back / to the kitchen'
  - ♦ 'a solitary Scottish diver came, / swaying in the night time North Sea / in the giant's mind'
- iii. Caesuras and end-stopping are used frequently in the poem, such as 'mat, plastic pin, the tuile mix / rolled flat' and 'heat up, / meat glue / all the way to 11.30'. What effect do these have?
- iv. The choices of verbs are often key to deciphering the array of images. What might be the significance of the following, for example?
  - ♦ 'a sea bass' is 'laid out', 'opened', 'unstitched'
  - ♦ the 'onion puree' 'pops' and 'spits'

**TASK FOUR: Imagery**

For each of the following, how do the images attached to the items impact on the poem?

- ♦ the restaurant: 'a theatre'
- ♦ the sommelier: 'a boxer', 'a carver', 'a dart player', 'a gardener'
- ♦ the kitchen: 'a submarine'
- ♦ the chefs: 'lovers', 'matadors', 'an author'
- ♦ the waiters: 'sharks'
- ♦ the customers: 'a suit', 'the globe of his stomach', 'a sail tacking to the wind', 'a page'
- ♦ the food: 'a regular Houdini', 'unstitched', 'a pink blank page', 'a Zeeland mud pit', 'presents for the tree', 'the deckle-edged leaves', 'book marks of mackerel'
- ♦ a wine: 'a new-born baby', 'text', 'conversation'

**TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. To what extent is the poem successful, do you think, in representing the complexity of a service in a restaurant? Does it achieve anything more?
- ii. Carrie Etter (2006) believes that 'Sheers' poems succeed when they succeed on a spare narrative, lush description and a strong sense of rhythm. To what extent could 'Service' be said to be an effective example of this?

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## Commentary

To some extent, it is difficult to read the poem as anything other than the restaurant, though offering a perspective that travels through all aspects of the 'stage' where 'the tables are given skirts' and 'The Sommelier spits', we are 'prep', shifting with 'the first cover' into the actual service itself, moving briefly to view the customers, and then winding down afterwards in the

Aspects are likely to be unfamiliar to the audience, presented with deliberate staff are 'instinctive as matadors', 'crossing and re-crossing each other /' images evoking both the ingrained habituation of workers in the busy kitchen and the submarine-like professional intimacy of the environment; the waiters circling the 'reef', predatory and, arguably, threatening; one of the diners is simply 'a globe', compared to a 'globe', the napkin a 'sail tacking tight above his belt'.

Instead, it is the food that is described most vividly: the 'slab of pink salt hung' like 'a regular Houdini'; the 'sea bass' that is 'unstitched with a plating knife' like a 'blank page'; the mackerel that are 'powdered', then 'blown down their sides in ballotines'. In each case, we are offered the process of the food, the broad narrative. Sheers appears to find most appealing, tracing, for example, the 'story' of the salmon from harvesting by a 'solitary Scottish diver' in the 'night time North Sea' through the 'plate, / white as snow, smooth as marble / hard as bone', a sanitised, almost clinical process that disguises the distance, the depth, the complexity of the preparation, and the activity and rigid discipline of the kitchen.

Much of the preparation of the food involves recreation: the salmon becomes 'a medieval manuscript'; the sea bass is 'unstitched [...] until its flesh is a vehicle of sensory communication between the chef and the diner, a 'poem' in the text of the 'heat and the tongue', though also conveying, perhaps, a sense of the process. Both of these emphasise the skill of the chef, the 'author' who is 'editing the text', with a subtle semantic field of illusory, performative metaphor created through references to the 'theatre', the pork as a 'regular Houdini', the 'veal' as 'Performance' itself. Performance itself is also a recurrent image within the poem, from the 'first corridors of a theatre' in the first stanza, the covering up of the tables, the 'boxer', the 'matadors', even the waiter's presentation of the bottle 'like a

On a first reading, it is possible that the blizzard of images, forms and settings seem too fragmentary, too varied to offer any sense of cohesion: after all, the first lines of the first stanza ('imagine a theatre...') to the abrupt listing of statistics, the calm consideration of the 'Autumn morning' in the eighth stanza and the 'boxer' shortly after, and back to the relative calmness of the final few stanzas of the poem. At various points, a theatre, a boxing ring, a submarine, a bull-ring, an underground, from single lines up to 11 lines, divided by the regular single-line interjections of the narrator ('this is what it's like', 'and so it goes', 'so what's the story here'). The piece cohesion is the sense of narrative direction conveyed by the walking through the restaurant within the first 25 stanzas, and the more in-depth narrative of the 'boxer' Sheers has also managed, skilfully, to ensure that the stanza lengths, syllable counts, techniques, imagery and phrasing all fit the literal content that he is con-

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The poem is certainly entertaining in its own terms, a social performance piece, a performance piece. However, it also conveys some deeper connotations with consumption: a respect for the products and participants in the process involved in the preparation; the impossibility of knowing; the intrinsic self-personalisation of artistic expression; the self-enclosure in each aspect of the poem to the extent to which life itself can be viewed as a text.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Sense of broader 'story' of the food
- ♦ Multiplicity, isolation and overlap in terms of individuals and groups
- ♦ Cycle of consumption
- ♦ Intrinsic subjectivity of experiences
- ♦ The personalisation of artistic expression

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Varied stanza structure (e.g. segmented sections)
- ♦ Use of first-person (e.g. single lines)
- ♦ Cyclical structure
- ♦ Focus on description of individuals
- ♦ Phonological play
- ♦ Performance piece

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Written during residency at 'The Fat Duck', Heston Blumenthal's restaurant in Bray (renowned for experimental cuisine, high staffing levels, and earning Michelin stars in 1995, 2002 and 2004, regularly appearing on lists of 'World's Best Restaurants')
- ♦ Increasing commercialisation of the media and popular culture in mid to late twentieth century
- ♦ Potentially representing the elitism of high culture in the twentieth century, the self-indulgence of the middle and upper classes at the turn of the century, and made partially ironic by the collapse into recession in the first decade of the twentieth century
- ♦ Written as a commission for National Poetry Day 2004 and intended as, essentially, a performance poem

**AO4: Explore context of literary texts.**

- ♦ Skilled performance (e.g. 'Show', 'Late September Man', 'The Fish', 'The Singing Man')
- ♦ Objectification (e.g. 'Show', 'Joseph Steelworks', 'The Singing Man')

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Does the poem represent commercialism and the indulgence in a modern world, or is it intended to expose the reality of the experience for the diner?
- ♦ From a Marxist perspective, is Sheers' representation of both the customer and the restaurant a representation of capitalism as a self-enclosed and self-propagating system?
- ♦ Is the poem varied and busy in order to reflect the topic, or is this simply a fragmented text?

# 'The Fishmonger'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- i. Based on your experience of poems such as 'The Farrier', 'The Steel', might a figure such as a 'fishmonger' represent for Sheers?
- ii. What might Sheers' use of the definite article suggest? That this is a 'Fishmonger', rather than 'A Fishmonger'? That this figure is intended broadly, to act, perhaps, as an archetype?
- iii. Although Sheers has referenced other poems, this is the first time he has used the word 'fishmonger'. To what extent might this be appropriate in terms of the role of a 'fishmonger'?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. As previously, Sheers has chosen to write this poem in tercets. Is this choice significant? What, perhaps, is Sheers placing his own poetic stamp on his work?
- ii. How would we describe the overall structure of the poem?
  - ♦ as alternating between the narrative of preparing fish and moments of reflection
  - ♦ as the presentation of a central image that Sheers then deconstructs
  - ♦ as the fishmonger's stream of consciousness
- iii. Lines in the poem vary dramatically in terms of their syllabic length. The two longest are each 16 syllables long. To what extent are these lines significant?
  - ♦ 'feels for the fish, his ingrown nail smarting in the salty water'
  - ♦ 'understanding as only he can, the spot between the knuckles'
- iv. The shortest lines in the poem are between seven and nine syllables long. To what extent is the length of these lines significant?
  - ♦ 'how to pare his speech as he might men'
  - ♦ 'Were he hurt and pushed to fight'
  - ♦ 'pulses and gasps for growth like a fish'



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### TASK THREE: Language, Imagery and Representation

- i. The title suggests another man figure defined by his role/function rather than his name. To what extent is this reflected in the poem?
- ii. What is the significance of the contrast between the 'fishmonger' and 'carp' in line 1?
- iii. The poem is written from a third-person perspective, as with many of the collection. Why has Sheers made this choice?
- iv. The poem contains a few internal rhymes and half-rhymes, as with 'where a nail might enter as if through butter' and 'centre' and 'water'. Which have been used, do you think?
  - ♦ internal rhyme: 'where a nail might enter as if through butter'
  - ♦ half-rhyme: 'centre' and 'water'
- v. Sheers offers the reader a semantic field of violence in the poem. Which words?
  - ♦ 'sergeant', 'blade', 'cruel', 'slice', 'cut', 'hurt', 'fight', 'struggling'
- vi. What then might be the function of the references to the 'weight of the kindness'?
- vii. The poem also contains a smaller semantic field of food: 'carp', 'apple', 'bark'. Which words?
- viii. The phrase 'as only he can' is repeated. Why might this be?
- ix. The fishmonger is described as 'siz[ing] up punters, measuring their pockets'. What does this imply?
- x. The 'carp' is presented in far more detail than people in the poem. Why?
- xi. What is the symbolic relevance of the 'foil disc of the silver eye'?
- xii. The penultimate and final stanzas use the image of the fishmonger's 'lightning' with 'no healing bark'. What is this intended to convey, do you think?
- xiii. The poem ends by drawing a comparison between the fishmonger's 'struggling for its last breath as if biting the air for water'. Why?

### TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem

- i. Which of the following interpretations of the poem are relevant, do you think?
  - a. The poem explores the shift in society from production to process.
  - b. The poem analyses and interprets an image of the dehumanising effect of modern life.
  - c. The poem represents the isolation of role-defined men in modern society.
- ii. Luke McBratney (2011) has described the poem as being 'a comment on the way in which the producer is no longer the controlling force, but the seller'. To what extent does the poem, or is there any other thematic level?

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## Commentary

While other poems in the collection have referenced the work of other poets, in 'Inheritance' and Seamus Heaney's poem 'Blackberrying' in 'Hedge School', it is the first to adapt an existing poem. The original poem, 'Fishmonger', by Istvan E. Sheers, in free verse contained within a single stanza. Sheers, in contrast, has divided the poem between six equal tercets, perhaps placing his own, Welsh, 'stamp' on it, varying the syllabic count dramatically across the lines.

The poem begins by offering a sense of realisation, perhaps of causation, juxtaposing the roles of the 'fishmonger' (the processor and seller) and the 'fish' (the produce), two men defined, as in 'The Farrier', by their roles. There is a clear display in the description of the 'cap tipped as a sergeant's' and his 'quite conscious, self-constructed show of something predatory as he 'sizes up' the movements', viewing potential customers as no different from the 'carp' in the second stanza.

The fishmonger's view of the fish is compared to the reader's view of 'a piece of meat' in reference to how he 'feels for the fish' ironic in light of the dual meaning of 'feel' in emotional senses. The 'ingrown nail smarting in the salty water' offers a metaphor for the death and deconstruction of the fish, suggesting the painful interiority of the fish, possibly a lurking discomfort with his own actions, the dehumanising effect of the fish to an 'engine-stroke'.

It is, after all, only the fishmonger, the man who kills/carves the fish who is responsible for the beauty of its 'silver eye' and thus the responsibility, the 'weight of the blade' that sees the fish lose its life to provide sustenance for others. However, the fishmonger is mirrored in his attitude towards people, in his ability to 'slice flesh' or 'pierce' as seen in the shorter first two lines of the penultimate stanza of the poem, and in the image of 'where a nail might enter as if through butter'.

The image of the 'tree hit by lightning' is an evocative one, the lack of 'heart' a sense of being wounded or dead inside, the necessity but difficulty of 'marking' that links with that in 'Marking Time', though presented more negatively as the permanent marking of the fishmonger, or, perhaps, an exposure of his inner desperation to connect with others, and reinforced by the final image, of the 'fish', 'struggling for its last breath', suffocating, desperate.

The poem appears to examine, primarily, the changing structure of society from an agrarian, productive 'fisherman' to the secondary and tertiary functions of the modern world could be intended to represent the middleman, the processor of the product, the means of production, and thus only partially aware of its true value, the customer. He appears dangerously desensitised to and dehumanised by his job, suggesting that his job, his work with the fish, despite a nagging reminder of the fish, turned into something mechanical ('the engine-stroke of his heart'), leading him to not connect on a personal level with those around him. He is, then, a figure of the age of consumerism, the distancing of the customer from the means of production, the devaluing of life.

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It is logical for Sheers to examine this broader idea in the poem: it is a to explored in poems such as 'The Farrier', 'Late Spring', 'The Equation' and represented as dependent on craftsmanship, skill, but also the assertion choice of the poem is itself an act of translation from the original to a new that mimics the fishmonger's own efforts in the poem. Rather than prod perhaps the femininity of the creative spark, Sheers has acted as a middle a form for a new and distanced consumer (us).

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Focus on processer of product, not originator
- ♦ Poem an extended metaphor for the distancing of the consumer from the origins of the product
- ♦ Dehumanising effect of modern capitalism
- ♦ Increasing social isolation of individuals

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of tercets
- ♦ Dramatically ('were he hurt
- ♦ Some half-rhy internal rhyme
- ♦ Semantic field
- ♦ Metaphorical

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Original poem 'Fishmonger' by István László, 22 lines, free verse, one stanza. Adapted into new form by Sheers.
- ♦ Poem result of 'Converging Lines', a British Council project coinciding with Hungary joining the EU in 2004
- ♦ Hungary's economy growing massively in late twentieth century, largely built around production and processing (contrast with declines in Welsh economy)

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Dehumanising 'Joseph Jones' 'Service', 'The
- ♦ Healing and r Time', 'Border 'The Steelwor

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ By editing and rewriting an original poem, is Sheers attempting to act o heart of the poem?
- ♦ From a Marxist perspective, is the poem critiquing the shift in society fr processor/salesperson as the locus of power?
- ♦ To what extent should we interpret the fishmonger as a figure of patriar

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# ‘Stitch in Time’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- i. The title is taken from the proverb ‘a stitch in time saves nine’, the idea that a small effort now saves greater effort later. To what extent is this message relevant to the narrative of the poem, do you think?
- ii. It is unclear from the title whether ‘stitch’ should be understood as a verb or a noun. How might this impact on our understanding of its meaning?
- iii. The title connects the ideas of cloth-work (‘stitch’) and time. To what extent could these be described as the dominant motifs in the poem?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. The poem is written as a series of rhyming (‘more’/‘floor’, ‘stitch’/‘p  
rhyming (‘Gujarat’/‘back’, ‘baste’/‘bass’, ‘chief’/‘wife’) couplets.
  - ◆ To what extent might this reflect the narrative and themes of the
  - ◆ Is there any pattern to which stanzas end with rhymes or half-rhymes?
  - ◆ Is it significant that the poem ends with three perfectly rhyming couplets?
- ii. There are twenty couplets in total. Why might Sheers have chosen this number?
- iii. The second and third lines are the shortest in the poem, and contrast with the first and fourth lines that frame them. Why?
  - ◆ ‘and travelled back’
  - ◆ ‘across three seas’
- iv. Two longest lines in the poem are those that address the meridian line. Why might their length within the poem be significant, do you think?
  - ◆ ‘and when they told him where it lay – about the 180 degrees’
  - ◆ ‘the invisible meridian that came over the hill through the coconut grove’
- v. The poem is divided into sections by the phrases ‘and so’, ‘and when’, ‘and why’.
  - ◆ What is the focus of each section? What do they represent?
  - ◆ What do these phrases suggest about how the sections relate to each other?

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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. The subject of the poem is only ever referred to by the pronouns 'he'. What effect does it have?
- ii. The poem is riddled with references to joinings and boundaries, from cloth that spills 'from the bench onto the floor' through to the line 'the present died'. What do these add to our understanding of the poem?
- iii. The poem features repetition ('again and again'), paired items ('Fiji and pad stitch') and lists ('longitude, the balance, the symmetry'). What do they convey, do you think? Does this link back to the title?
- iv. The language reflects the continuity of the poem, with the sections linked and alternating between enjambment (with and between stanzas) and caesuras. To what extent does this reflect the content of the poem?
- v. The poem contains nine sentences in total, with the first two significant (each stretches across four stanzas), and the fourth ('the pin-stripe... immediately') contained within a single stanza. What impact does this have on the poem?
- vi. The poem is dominated by the images of cloth, time and the meridian. What do these symbolise in the poem, do you think?

**TASK FOUR: Context**

- i. What is the significance of the cloth-worker's journey from Gujarat to London? What contextual relevance to this?
- ii. Bearing in mind the cloth-worker's origins in India and eventual residence in London, in what broader sense in which 'London' could be viewed as 'where it all starts'?
- iii. To what extent is it possible that Sheers' own relationship with Fiji and London might be relevant to the content of the poem?

**TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. To what extent might each of the following be viewed as a valid reading of the poem?
  - a. The poem is simply a detailed, individual character study.
  - b. The poem is an exploration of the lives of the millions of workers from different countries to make better lives for themselves and their families.
  - c. The poem is about the interconnectedness of the world.
- ii. Olivia Cole (2005) has described the poems as being based around a 'strongly rooted "unrootedness" [...] a locale in which [Sheers] is deeply rooted but not rooted'. To what extent is 'A Stitch in Time' an attempt to convey this metaphorical location?

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While there are images of movement and distance throughout the poem 'bench', the line 'over the hill through the coconut trees', the headlights 'across the bay'), it is the final journey to Greenwich towards the end of his oldest scissors') that concludes the poem, providing a starting ('the still point after the strife'), beneath the sky where the 'swallows dance from earlier in the collection). The last couplet of the poem, rhythmic, rhyming motifs of time and cloth once more together and to a satisfying conclusion the 'first stitch' (the connection) in the pattern (the structure, the plan) 'to

## Commentary cont.

**AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.

- ♦ Motifs of cloth and time
- ♦ Poem incorporating references to proverb
- ♦ Idea of human construction of passage of life
- ♦ Meridian acting as conceptual, descriptive and structural core

**AO2:** Analyse ways in which literary texts.

- ♦ Use of rhyme
- ♦ 20 stanzas
- ♦ Free verse, but in ninth stanza
- ♦ Tailor reference representative
- ♦ Continuation (enjambment)

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Around a third of Fijian population of Indian ancestry, and a source of cultural tensions on the island.
- ♦ Gujarat poverty level of 17%, but success story within India due to commercial and industrial diversification. Textiles industry a major part of that success story, but coupled with a twentieth-century diaspora that saw Gujarati cultural influences spread across the world.
- ♦ Sheers born on Fiji, sense of divided heritage and thus of cultural multiplicity.
- ♦ The anti-meridian is the line 180° East or West of the meridian, forming a complete circle of the globe with it. The anti-meridian passes mostly through the Pacific: the only point it is crossed by roads or where there are buildings close to it is Fiji.

**AO4: Explore context**

- ♦ Definition by 'The Equation Fishmonger'
- ♦ Joinings and 'Farther', 'Trees', 'Amazon', 'The'
- ♦ Cultural, geographical 'Mametz Wood', 'Flag', 'The St'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ To what extent is this another example of Sheers exploring his own identity?
- ♦ To what extent is Sheers least successful in the collection when, as here, autobiography to inhabiting the lives or minds of others?
- ♦ Is this another example of the distance between object and desire, as in 'Song', or of delayed gratification, as in 'Mametz Wood', 'Trees' and 'The St'?
- ♦ Is Sheers simply imposing a biased Western perspective on a foreign culture of deprivation, suffering and exploitation faced by many workers in developing countries?

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# ‘L. A. Evening’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Quotation

- Los Angeles is one of the most iconic American cities, and is the centre of the entertainment industry. What might L. A. symbolise for Sheers in terms of his recurring themes, perspectives, and the distances between individuals and society?
- What might the ‘evening’ convey? A sense of glamour and the mysterious, the truth, falseness and performance? The decline of a career? Old age?
- The subject of the poem, presumably Jean Simmons (1929–2010), is a famous actress. Why not?
- Despite his fame during his own lifetime, Booth is little remembered today. What might have actually been ‘Edwin’ rather than ‘Edward’, adding an additional layer of mystery? To what extent does the quotation add to our understanding of the poem?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- The poem consists of two quintuplets (stanzas one and four), surrounded by stanzas. How have Sheers made the central stanzas longer?
- While the syllabic count varies, there are patterns: short-ish first lines to the stanzas, a number of decasyllabic or nearly decasyllabic lines, frequent alternation of long and short lines. Why might this be?
- The longest line in the poem is the final line of the penultimate stanza. To what extent does this fit the content of it?
- The poem begins with the broader society in which she lives (stanza one), moving on to her life as a popular actress (stanza two), and examining her feelings about her former career (stanza three), before describing the final parts of her night-time routine. Why has Sheers chosen this structure?



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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. Once again, the poem only refers to the subject through pronouns. Why?
- ii. The first stanza includes the images of ‘rollerbladers pass[ing] her w somewhere’. What does this suggest about how she relates to society?
- iii. Sentences are neatly contained within stanzas: the first stanza is a single line, the second contains two (the second only a single line), the third stanza also contains two, and the fourth contains only one. What impact does this have?
- iv. There’s a high proportion of sibilance in the poem (‘sirens start some scenes from every stage’). What effect does this have?
- v. The sun is described as ‘leak[ing] into the ocean’ and then as ‘turn[ing] and she sets the ‘intruder light’. What might this signify?
- vi. The references to her former career are largely focussed on still images ‘freeze frames’. What do these suggest?
- vii. The actors are described as wearing ‘the faces of her friends’, and speaking ‘of those who have left her’. What do these phrases convey?
- viii. The reference to being ‘left [...] alone with the audience’ could be interpreted in two ways. Which is correct, do you think?
  - ♦ she is now alone and has become one of the audience
  - ♦ she is now alone with her audience
  - ♦ she is now alone because her audience has left her
- ix. The references to her ‘sitting to the screening’ and leaving ‘as always’ suggest a routine. How else is this reinforced?

**TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following interpretations of the poem would you consider most valid?
  - a. The poem explores the temporary nature of fame and the difficulties of fame.
  - b. The poem offers a perspective of the shallow fickleness of the film industry and media in a broader sense.
  - c. The poem describes old age through the examination of a particular character.
  - d. The poem acts as a character study of the aged Jean Simmons.
- ii. Jack Clothier (2005) has expressed the opinion that, ‘with Sheer’s poem, the reader is the reader and the full and life-affirming meaning one can get from the poem is impossible to find anything life-affirming in this poem, or could this be a counterargument to Clothier?’

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## Commentary

As the city most closely associated with the American film industry, Los Angeles carries connotations of the golden age of cinema. Evenings, in this sense, are times of film premieres, parties, socialising. However, instead the 'evening' in the poem is the decline of an ageing actress in terms of both her life and her career.

The quotation offers an additional level of poignancy: the actor-manager who has actually been called Edwin Booth (1833–1893) rather than Edward, represents the speed with which even the most successful media figures are forgotten. The subject of the poem is obvious: fame, as it does in the poem, involves 'beauty and satisfaction'. However, the 'heavenly life' of which 'glimpse' is achieved, is only temporary, and leaves without any sense of being 'forever'.

The subject here appears to be Jean Simmons (1929–2010), a British actress who was opposite Laurence Olivier, holding her Ophelia, with Marlon Brando in *On the Beach*, 'Salvation Army Sarah', and opposite Olivier again in *Spartacus* (1960) and *Julius and Caesar*. However, Sheers has chosen for her to remain nameless, a reflection, perhaps, of her anonymity, the way in which the world has forgotten her while her male counterparts have remained famous, and a link to the misnaming of E. Booth, his fame overshadowed by his brother's.

The first stanza begins with a sense of (perhaps ironic) immediacy, at 'the window' suggesting that this is part of a daily ritual. The world outside is distant, seen through a 'window', a framing device echoing the shape of a television or cinema screen. The window is indeterminate and non-specific, the sirens (both alluring and warning) 'sirens' are distancing factors linked by a rhyme), a sense of all that is significant not being on the screen.

The 'photographs' in the second and third stanzas, name-checking 'Brandon' and 'Olivier', 'frames', 'scenes' that are fixed and unchanging, effectively records of memory. The sense of vitality. However, this is ironic, with the memories actually recording 'actors wear[ing] the faces', 'speak[ing] in the off-screen voices / or the faces'. Every 'stage of her life' has been, here, a representation rather than a reality. The poem contains more substance than the reality in the first and final stanzas ('true' and 'ever be'), suggested by the use of quintains for stanzas two and three and a sestet for the fourth.

This sense of represented reality has leaked into her actual life: the sun 'sets' suggesting the blurring of fiction and reality, and this is further conveyed in the penultimate stanza. The caesura in the line reinforces her separation from the world, watches, leaving her 'alone with the audience': either abandoned by those who once loved her (Olivier in 1989, Brandon in 2004) and left her with only the audience for company, or acting community to the point of becoming one of the audience, or alone and forgotten by the audience.

The final stanza of the poem continues the routine with her leaving, 'as a shadow' in the credits', representing both the avoidance of a list of those who have loved her and the ending, of the moment of death itself. Instead, there is the tuning of 'the radio' (either a futile light against the impending darkness or a decline that might be avoided) 'the dog' and putting out of 'the cats' (her own only living source of comfort). The poem is a check of 'the sensitivity of the intruder light', carrying both a sense of a light from the outside world into her self-enclosed routine and also of light itself being 'the light' in which she finds some degree of comfort, linked by the rhyming of 'light'.

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**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Depiction of later life of an actress (Jean Simmons?)
- ♦ Observational depiction of subject (impersonal/representational?)
- ♦ Sense of distance/isolation from outside world
- ♦ Blurring of lines between fiction and reality

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts are constructed.**

- ♦ Two quatrains with greater substance
- ♦ Free verse with no regular pattern/regularity
- ♦ Occasional rhyme
- ♦ Frequent sibilance
- ♦ Sentences suggest a narrative

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Jean Simmons, famous British actress, successful in Hollywood throughout 1950s and 1960s, though less well-known in her later life. Married twice and divorced twice. Struggled with addiction throughout her life, and died from lung cancer in 2010.
- ♦ Los Angeles home to Hollywood and seen as centre of American entertainment industry. However, Hollywood as a cultural centre was viewed by many as in decline from the late 1980s onwards, despite recent attempts to revitalise the city.
- ♦ Modern obsession with celebrity culture, but also gap between fantasy and reality.
- ♦ Quotation regarding *Edwin Booth*, though listed as *Edward Booth*: suggests forgotten or misremembered?

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts and other texts.**

- ♦ Represented in 'Joseph Jones Accidents', 'The Fishmonger', 'The Steelworker', 'Under the Street Light'
- ♦ Relationship between 'Inheritance', 'The Steelworker', 'Under the Street Light'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ Is the poem intended as an examination of the emptiness of celebrity and the decline and isolation of an individual life?
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, is it possible to read the poem as suggesting the power of their relationships with men and by the male gaze?
- ♦ Is it possible that Sheers is intending the poem to act as a kind of protest?

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# 'The Singing Men

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- What connotations might 'singing' have, do you think?
- To what extent might it be relevant that the title defines the men as singers?
- Does the title suggest that these are men who have chosen to sing, or are they defined by the singing?
- Could this be relevant in terms of Sheers' Welsh heritage, in terms of male voice choirs?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- The poem is written in non-rhyming couplets. Bearing in mind the context of the collection, what might Sheers intend to be signified by this stanza choice?
- The syllabic count varies dramatically within the poem, from seven to 31.
  - The shortest line in the poem is 'and the songs from memory'. To what extent might the brevity of this reflect the content?
  - The sixth stanza is the shortest in the collection, containing only 31 in the eighth stanza). To what extent might this be effective in terms of the poem's content?
  - The longest line in the poem is 'the world's greatest group, totalling 1000 men on the Island ferry'. To what extent might the relative length of this be effective in terms of the poem's content?
- The structure of the poem is unusual, in the sense of offering a broad contextualisation and finishing with a specific image. How does this structure of Sheers' poems, and why has he chosen to end the poem with this image?

### TASK THREE: Language

- The subjects of the poem, as with the majority in the collection, are represented through the common noun 'men' or through third-person pronouns. What effect does this have on Sheers' representation of them?
- Why do the pronouns change (from 'they', 'them', 'their' to 'his', 'he') in the final two stanzas?
- The poem incorporates effective use of caesuras and end-stopping contrasted with enjambment. To what are these linked?
- The fifth stanza contains a high proportion of caesuras created by the short phrases, commas and monosyllabic lexis. How does this reflect the content?
- What effect does the noticeable length and flow of the line 'his solos resounding down to the ticket barriers' greyhound stalls' have, do you think?
- The 'singing men' are represented through a semantic field of animals.



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**TASK FOUR: Imagery**

- i. To what extent are the men in the poem associated with borders and boundaries?
- ii. Could we argue that the men in the poem are made to sound animalistic and just unkempt?
- iii. The 'songs' are described as keeping the men 'threaded to the earth'. What image, do you think?
- iv. Sheers offers a broad range of geographical locations: 'the Staten Island', 'Moscow', 'Leeds'. What impact is this intended to have?
- v. The final image in the poem is of the 'singing man' who is 'singing on a tube'. How is he represented? What is he intended to represent?

**TASK FIVE: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following would you see as being acceptable interpretations of the poem?
  - a. The poem, like 'The Steelworks', explores the emasculation of men in the industrial society in which they live.
  - b. The poem, unusually for Sheers, analyses the sub-cultures of people in industrial society.
  - c. The poem discusses the tragic decline and downfall of a particular industrial area.
- ii. Jack Clothier (2005) sees 'no speculative self-indulgence' in the collection, but 'powerful emotions'. To what extent could this poem be seen as engaging with 'powerful feelings and powerful emotions' or in self-indulgent speculation?

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## Commentary

The title could be interpreted in two different ways: either these are men for the hell of it') and are thus defined by their masculinity, or these are role, to sing ('for their supper'). In either sense, they are referred to as a greatest group'), and are thus lacking any specificity. This is reinforced by pronouns ('them', 'they', 'their') used to refer to them throughout the poem.

The poem begins with a series of assertions, each defining or limiting the feature of the urban landscape: 'they are the singing men', and 'every citizen an archetype, one found 'on the edges of things', living on boundaries, p doorways'). Their lack of individuation extends into a lack of individual 'humming, humming', a wordless background noise, or they are 'full-th ornithological or animalistic, linked to nature through the reference to 's the landscape through the 'valleys in their stubble', suggesting both their malnourished appearance and their reduction from a person to something more primitive.

The songs are 'from memory' (at seven syllables the shortest line in the poem, lack, an incompleteness), a link to a more complete past, to the 'lives' in 'kids', 'wives', the long sentence and the range of caesuras supporting the fulfilment, of multiplicity, instead of having only 'the songs', their final 'threaded to the earth', connected, fixed in place.

The range of locations offered, from 'the Staten Island ferry' (another poem from 'Moscow' and 'Leeds' to 'Balham tube', are reflected in the range of 'slave songs', 'folk', 'blues', offering a sense, of a universal dislocation of syllable line that begins this seventh stanza, the longest in the poem.

This might, of course, link to the use of non-rhyming couplets throughout to' stanza type for Sheers in the collection, used to describe moments (of connection between people, the couplets used here, as in 'Four Movements', 'Amazon' Part II, and 'Stitch in Time', could then suggest a failure to connect, isolation, mirrored in the lack of even half-rhymes in the poem.

The final three stanzas focus on an individual busker, a man 'on the edge on the verge of going below/beneath the rest of society, descending 'the audience a link between their own lives and those of the social underclass opera', in this sense, seems incongruous, high culture (a link perhaps to being more to him than is immediately visible) mixed in with the 'beard Extra', the 'ticket barriers', but reinforced by the metre of the line, trochaic pentameter: ten syllables with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables ending (masculine ending: an additional stressed syllable on the end of the line).

The busker's appearance is significant: his beard is 'scribbled', something fictive human construction; his 'costume' is a 'gold can of Extra', the incongruous choice reflected in the juxtaposition of the precious 'gold' and the inexpensive described as 'like grain in the wood', is a record of their experiences, of the 'legs open' implies vulnerability, perhaps provocative availability, making commuters home' ironic.

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What the poem ultimately focuses on is, arguably, the destruction or deconstruction of a model of masculinity, examining what happens when the anchors in reality that we are connected to the world in which we live are taken away from us. As such, the singing figures, the music simply a symbol of their lost lives and lost sense of self, broken.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ◆ Depiction of modern masculinity?
- ◆ Focus on existence on boundaries, points of transition or motion
- ◆ Impersonal treatment / group identity
- ◆ Reduction of individuals (and complexities of life) to simply singing

**AO2: Analyse ways in which language is used in literary texts.**

- ◆ Use of non-rhymed stanzas
- ◆ Split between stanzas and lines
- ◆ Varied syllabic patterns, significant
- ◆ Semantic field of masculinity
- ◆ Impersonality

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ◆ Crisis in modern masculinity linked to questions of utility and self-definition
- ◆ Issue of homelessness increasing (112,070 self-declared homeless in England in 2013), with majority male, links to mental health, addiction and economic downturn
- ◆ Autobiographical links for Sheers (art forms as expression, geographical dislocation, focus on masculinity)
- ◆ Geographical locations crossing continents (America, Russia, England), but linked either by transition or by cultural hub
- ◆ Cultural reference frames: opera seen as 'high culture', 'greyhound' and 'gold can of Extra' seen as 'low culture'

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts and their contexts.**

- ◆ Masculinity: 'Border Country', 'Spring', 'The Edge of the World', 'The Steelworker'
- ◆ Social, cultural context: 'Mametz Wood', 'Time', 'L. A. E'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ◆ Is Sheers intending the poem to prompt sympathy on the part of the reader? 'Singing Men'?
- ◆ By describing the 'Singing Men' in the style of a nature documentary, is he challenging the prejudices associated with homelessness?
- ◆ Is Sheers attempting to engage with a broader social issue here, or is this an autobiography on the part of Sheers?
- ◆ From a gender perspective, to what extent does Sheers manage to define masculinity successfully than in the rest of the collection?

# 'The Wake'

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title and Context

- i. 'Wake' can mean a number of things: which are relevant here, do you think?
  - ♦ the disturbed waters behind a moving ship
  - ♦ a social memorialisation of a dead person
  - ♦ an awakening
- ii. Owen Sheers' grandfather was a World War II naval veteran and the poem is about him. To what extent might this be relevant?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- i. The poem consists of 10 stanzas, including nine tercets. Why might this be significant?
- ii. The final stanza consists of a single, shorter line. What impact does this have?
- iii. The two shortest lines in the poem each consist of four syllables. Consider the impact of this.
  - ♦ 'ninety years old'
  - ♦ 'and somehow new'
- iv. The longest line in the poem consists of 13 syllables. To what extent does this fit the content of the line?
  - ♦ 'into a coastal wind long after the ship has sailed'
- v. The majority of the stanzas in the poem (two, four, five, six, seven) build from a shorter first line through longer second and third lines. What might this represent?
- vi. The eighth stanza is the most regular of the poem, with the lines consisting of 12, 10 and 11 syllables. How might this fit the content, do you think?
- vii. To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function



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**TASK THREE: Language and Imagery**

- i. Once again, the figure in the poem is referred to almost entirely through metaphor. How might this have?
- ii. The only collective pronoun in the poem comes in the seventh stanza: 'we'. What knowledge that 'there has already been a passing'. How should we interpret this?
- iii. The subject of the poem is described as being 'folded into his favour' and 'having the doctor 'plumb [...] in the depths of his soul'. How might his passivity here be significant?
- iv. The poem includes a semantic field of the sea and sailing. Which words are viewed as part of this, do you think?
- v. The narrator describes himself as saying 'what I can', but with his wife 'long after the ship has sailed'. What can we interpret from this about the narrator and the subject at this point?
- vi. The final vision the narrator has of the subject is of him standing in 'the away'. Obviously this could be interpreted in more than one way. How do we view the narrator's departure?
- vii. The figure in the poem, his relationship to the speaker never specifically defined, 'that disturbs the sea for miles either side'. What does this suggest about the subject?
- viii. Despite the apparent negativity of the poem, it ends in a moment of 'directly' at the 'stern' of the ship 'strangely settled, turned, fresh'. Rather than expect, there is a cleansed, calm feel to the final four lines. Why might this be?

**TASK FOUR: Interpreting the Poem**

- i. Which of the following would you see as being acceptable interpretations of the poem?
  - a. The poem memorialises Owen Sheers' grandfather, a sailor and a poet.
  - b. The poem explores the impact of the passing of male authority figures.
  - c. The poem examines the male response to death from two perspectives.
- ii. Carrie Etter (2006) has criticised Sheers' reliance on 'elaborate phrasal verbs and end rhyme' in terms of their being foregrounded in these poems in a way that undermines 'emotional power'. To what extent is this a reasonable criticism to level at the poem?

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## Commentary

This poem offers, in a sense, a parallel to 'On Going', from earlier in the collection, in the passing of an aged male authority figure. It is possible that the poem describes the narrator's own final memories of his grandfather, a World War II naval veteran and a poet. It is also noticeable that Sheers has not labelled the poem as 'in memoriam' as he has in 'On Going', even included a cryptic dedication as he did in 'Intermission'. As such, the poem is intended, as are the majority in the collection, to offer a representative rather than a biographically based subject might be.

The title, again, as with the majority of titles in the collection, allows for multiple interpretations: the aftermath of the subject's passing and the influence of the subject on the memorialisation of the subject's decline towards death; a cleansing, a sense of renewal, the decline and death of one subject leading to the birth and growth of another.

The poem begins with a description of the subject, de-personalised and using impersonal person pronouns used to describe him ('he'), his passivity and age reflected in 'folded into his favourite chair', in his declaration that 'he doesn't want to watch himself die'. This last statement, the cutting short of his life suggests a sense of his age and illness ('the depths of his scarred lungs', the scarred lungs, a range of his experiences) creating a distance between his decaying body and the world, also a sense of both irony and circularity offered by the illness from which he has to all, spend 'so many years' examining the bodies of others, and yet could not prevent that would gather within his own body.

The doctor 'plumb[ing]' the 'pale oceans' in the 'rib cage's hull' offers an attempt, perhaps, to 'measure, record and monitor' ('On Going'), but rejects the concomitant loss of privacy and individuality. The references are also parallel to the sea and the sea that stretches throughout the poem, from the almost druidic 'to the light', through the 'driftwood' of experience and to the disturbed 'sea' of the great ship that has passed. In this sense, the sea represents something of the experiences of the narrator and subject; perhaps life or human society.

The fifth stanza contains the volta, the shift from the reflection in stanzas five to 'action' of stanzas six to eight. Here, once again, speech is futile, emptied of meaning / into a coastal wind long after the ship has sailed', presenting a barrier to communication, an opportunity, as in 'On Going', and suggesting that any decisions have already been 'settle[d]' just as the subject is.

The understanding of this 'passing' (both the image of the ship sailing and the reference to death), is mutual, though unspoken, reflected in the single stanza of the 10 lines of the final four stanzas, the narrator's departure through the 'frame' representing the closing off the relationship between the narrator and the continuation of the 'great ship' of his physical form.

The final image in the poem links back to the title: if the subject is a 'great life', the disruption left by his passing is the 'disturbed sea'. However, it could then be the 'water directly at its stern' which is left 'strangely settled' as the two participants offering a sense of peace, of resolution, a return to a state 'as it ever was', with the past then directly linked into a smooth continuation ('the future will be'), implying the universality of life and the interconnectedness of the world. The rhyme between 'sea' and 'be' offering a sense of conclusion, despite an end viewed as detracting from the poignancy of the final image.

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**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Representation of masculinity and loss of authority figures
- ♦ Extended nautical metaphor / semantic field of the sea and sailing
- ♦ Impersonal/distanced depiction of subject
- ♦ Exploration of loss and masculine responses to it
- ♦ Sense of interconnectedness of humanity/life

**AO2: Analyse way literary texts.**

- ♦ Tercets
- ♦ Single-line fin
- ♦ Free verse, bu and penultima
- ♦ Use of interna
- ♦ Semantic field
- ♦ Single sentenc poem to concl

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Possible depiction of Sheers' grandfather, a naval veteran from World War II and chest consultant. Linked to passing of World War II generation and sense of loss of history.
- ♦ Suggestion of druidic culture / use of human body for divination, with links between druidism and preservation/continuation of culture/religion/tradition. Wales widely associated with druidism, more so than remainder of UK.
- ♦ Lung cancer (?) generally condition associated with over-40s, with over 41,000 diagnoses each year. Linked to shortness of breath (wind and sailing image?).

**AO4: Explore con**

- ♦ Sense of loss, 'Border Coun Amazon'
- ♦ Masculinity: 'Inheritance', 'Farther', 'Jose Fort', 'The Ste
- ♦ Use of water a 'Show', 'Valer Movements in Floods'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ To what extent does the poem simply retread the same ground already effectively? Or does the poem offer a male-gendered perspective to bala former poem?
- ♦ Is this an example of Sheers detracting from the overall effectiveness of especially at the end of the poem?
- ♦ In focusing not on the feelings of his grandfather but his own emotional autobiographical authenticity or struggling to overcome his own egocer

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# ‘Skirrid Fawr’

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## Tasks

### TASK ONE: The Title

- The title of the poem links to the title of the collection as a whole, the ‘Fawr’ rather than the English ‘Hill’. What might the function of this be?
- In light of the other poems within the collection and the introductory material, including the personal significance to Sheers, what might Ysgyrid Fawr do you think?

### TASK TWO: Form and Structure

- The poem is written in non-rhyming couplets. In light of the fact that the collection, the earlier couplet-based poems, and Sheers’ more frequent use of couplets have chosen this form?
- The poem contains eight stanzas. Could the ending of the poem on an even number of lines in each be significant, do you think?
- A number of the lines are either decasyllabic or nonasyllabic. In terms of pentameter, might this be significant?
- The third line of the poem is the longest in the collection (12 syllables) and the shortest, each consisting of four syllables. To what extent might this be significant, do you think?
- The poem begins with a sense of the hill’s historical relevance. What is it, and why cover this in the first stanza?
- To what extent does this poem fit the usual Sheers pattern, do you think?
  - ♦ contextualising moment
  - ♦ experience
  - ♦ development of experience
  - ♦ deconstruction, reflection and symbolic function



### TASK THREE: Language and Imagery

- The majority of stanzas in the poem do not contain a caesura, and the first line into the second. What impact might this be intended to have, do you think?
- What effect does the alliterating of ‘scoop’ and ‘scar’ have within the poem?
- Why does Sheers refer to ‘her back’ providing ‘the answers / to ever’ particularly in light of the alliterating of ‘never’ and ‘known’?
- The hill is depicted as female, with a particular focus on paralleling a body (‘her holy scar’, ‘her back’, ‘her slopes’, ‘her withers’, ‘her broken body’). What does this suggest about Sheers’ view of the hill and of women?
- The poem also contains a semantic field of language and speech (‘ar’, ‘palate’, ‘vernacular’, ‘unspoken words’, ‘unlearned tongue’). What does this suggest about the poem as a whole, do you think?

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- vi. There is a recurring motif of gaps and divisions within the poem ('so hill, part field', 'one dark, one sunlit', 'borders'). To what extent might this also reflect Sheers' poetry, do you think?
- vii. The hill is also presented as something isolated, 'a lonely hulk / adrift'. Why might this also reflect Sheers' poetry, do you think?
- viii. To what extent might the reference to 'the unspoken words / of an unspoken life' also reflect Sheers' poetry, do you think?

## TASK FOUR: Interpretations

Which of the following could be viewed as reasonable interpretations of the poem?

- ♦ The poem explores the inescapability of our geographical and cultural dependency on them for meaning.
- ♦ The poem represents the timelessness of the landscape and its significance to those who live around it.
- ♦ The poem describes Sheers' own relationship with nature and his place within it.

## TASK FIVE: Finishing the Collection

- i. As the last poem in the collection, we might expect 'Skirrid Fawr' to be autobiographical and biographical, cultural and geographical aspects. To what extent does the poem actually do this, do you think?
- ii. Sarah Crown has argued that the 'ruptured terrain' of the mountain is a 'fractured emotional landscape'. Is this, perhaps, Sheers' justification for the metaphor woven throughout *Skirrid Hill*?

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## Commentary

As the final poem in the collection, we might expect 'Skirrid Fawr' to draw the collection together, weaving them into a final cohesive conclusion. To a certain extent, that is what it does. As previously discussed, the hill in question has symbolic, cultural and personal relevance to Sheers: it is situated near his parents' home on the Welsh border (the poem perhaps reflecting the journey from England to Wales), stands more or less on the crest of its length, and has a rich set of local associations of religion and fertility. The poem is the equivalent of the English *Skirrid Hill*, the anglicised title of the collection, and the connection are at the heart of both, but also that the poem here represents a geographically and personally situated perspective, reflected in the use of a collective 'we' and the personal, revelatory tone adopted.

The poem is written in non-rhyming couplets, suggesting a lack, a sense of incompleteness, perhaps, the intimacy of the experience shared between Sheers and the lover. The poem is in free verse, the lines are often nonasyllabic or decasyllabic, perverting the traditional English metre, present as 'a low mist' from which the poem is born.

Sheers, as the narrator, compares himself to 'the farmers who once came to her holy scar', providing a sense of continuity with older traditions, though the scar is 'scoop' not 'soil' but 'answers'. The scar links the audience back to poem, the wound representing the permanence of shared experience, reinforced by collating the images of the hill and the lover. It is possible that the body is viewed as human, though the reference to 'withers' (and, arguably, 'her' motif from 'Inheritance', 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort'. While the collection is concerned with femininity and animals, here the image appears broader, linking femininity to a more general sense, rather than being pejorative.

The hill is a place of epiphany (with high places often associated with divine revelation in the Bible or the Qur'an), providing 'the answers / to every question I have been able to meet the narrator's needs on a deeper and more fundamental level, unable to comprehend or articulate. The language associated with the hill is then 'the sentence' and her borders as a 'vernacular'. While the hill itself may be the place where the narrator stands, a blurred boundary of 'hill' and 'field' that also suggests a general flow of the poem contrasts with this, created from predominantly iambic pentameter lines (occasional caesuras clarifying gaps between 'mist' and 'hulk', 'dark' and 'light', frequent enjambment from the first to second lines within stanzas. The poem follows the order, of a stately progression from beginning to end. This is perhaps also reflected in an even number of stanzas, each containing an even number of lines, contributing to a sense of resolution, completion and balance.

This is not to suggest that the hill is necessarily a place of simplicity or ease, though she provides a 'split view' on the journey from 'her broken spine' through the landscape with 'gaps like missing teeth', as in 'Last Act'), an image perhaps, as in 'The Hill Fort' of intimacy leading to emotional or linguistic connection, but riven with a sense of division. Perhaps the significance of the hill is more that the division within a cohesive whole (one hill) offers a reflection not only of the modern conception of identity (the narrator's own experience, and of both his and the hill's context: Fijian by birth, English by language, brought up on the borders and 'adrift through Wales'.

As such, the poem stands alone as a representation of the inescapability of our geographical and cultural origins. However, it also offers a sense of wisdom gained by a Romantic engagement with nature, acting as the collection's themes, image patterns and key concerns within the collection. Finally, it is seen as acting as a poetic representation of Sheers himself: a poet who can occasionally, collision of his origins, constructed identity and gender; with a profundity that transcends language; who acknowledges human sexuality, promoting an intimacy that goes beyond the physical; who focusses on time and boundary transgressions that serve to define us throughout our lives.

## Commentary cont.

**AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.**

- ♦ Interrelation of humanity/individual with landscape
- ♦ Inescapability of autobiographical self-representation within poem
- ♦ Hill as symbol of Welsh identity, cultural heritage, etc.

**AO2: Analyse ways in which literary texts.**

- ♦ Use of eight lines
- ♦ Hints of metrical structure
- ♦ Relatively few images
- ♦ Semantic field of landscape
- ♦ Poem acts as a whole, collation

**AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.**

- ♦ Autobiographical links (Ysgyryd Fawr situated near Sheers' parents' house, near the English/Welsh border)
- ♦ Cultural associations with the Skirrid (crucifixion of Christ, fertility and growth, older structures, division and separation), including etymology of name ('divorce hill')
- ♦ Skirrid embodying Welsh history in the area (ice-age damage creating shape, Roman fort, medieval church)

**AO4: Explore connections between literary texts.**

- ♦ Humanity and nature in 'Inheritance', 'The Gaer', 'The Hill'
- ♦ Female body / 'Swans', 'Night'

**AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.**

- ♦ To what extent does the poem offer a collation or overview of the collection as a whole?
- ♦ From a Feminist perspective, is Sheers reinforcing gender stereotypes with fertility, (sexual?) injury, animals, the naked body and an inability to act?
- ♦ Is it possible to read 'Skirrid Fawr' as an admission that Sheers is unable to act, leaving them still as the 'gaps' mentioned in 'Last Act'?
- ♦ To what extent is this final poem in the collection still simply egocentric exploration of the association of the self with geographical origins?

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# AOL: Key Points of Inte

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## Gender, Love and Sexuality

As a relatively young, male poet, it is no surprise that consideration of gender occupy a great deal of the thematic space within *Skirrid Hill*.

Masculinity and femininity are often contrasted or directly opposed with 'Farrier', for example, masculine definition is achieved through skill and and asserted dominance, artificiality and (arguably) destructiveness; in 'aggressive destructiveness in the creation of the 'scar, the 'brand-burn' and of ownership, conquest; 'Show' views the women described almost voyeur predatory male 'crocodile pit'; in 'Keyways', the woman is, in a sense, and by her apartment and the image of the lock; in 'Joseph Jones', the woman objectified to the point of only partial existence, simply a 'skirt', 'white tie the female magpie is something seductive, dangerous, an ornithological 'others' to 'their doom'. In the majority of the poems, women, when present metaphorically below the male participant: the farrier 'leans into her flank the 'brand-burn' is on the woman's back in 'Marking Time', making their obvious.

'Night Windows' is a noticeable exception to this, with the woman having rising 'from me / and walk[ing] into the lit hallway', a perspective echoed in 'Scale of Two', where the woman cracks her 'consonants over her tongue This suggestion of female dominance / control is also present in poems such the artful hocus-pocus' allows the lover to dictate the behaviour of the narrator second section of 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two', where it is the narrator who is 'a canvas' on which she paints.

However, the genders are also defined in non-romantic or simply isolated masculinity is destructive, negative, fragmentary (though offering a slight fraternal relationships implied in the text), a representation echoed in 'B masculinity is linked to sterility, structure, order (as it is in 'Farther', 'La while femininity is linked to emotional depth, the creative shaping of nature connectivity, as in 'Amazon'.

Sexual intimacy is one of the most fundamental and successful means of collection: it is an aspect of the 'red hot [...] core' that survives the 'years it creates a permanent memorial intimacy between the lovers in 'Marking successfully, in 'Landmark'; it offers the tantalising prospect of a reunion measurement of the broader success of the relationship in poems such as in the 'Scale of Two', where an unsuccessful intimacy reflects the breakdown

Love is both intertwined with the treatment of gender and sex in the collection moments, something that transcends the physical: it is something revealing deeper, more fundamental passion in 'Inheritance'; an experiential connection 'Keyways'. However, there is often a sense of bewilderment or an incomprehensible emotional aspects of the relationships, as in the indeterminacy of the 'bre Movements', or the evanescent treatment of connections in poems such as 'Landmark', once again.

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## Family, History, Culture and Welshness

References to family, whether biographically specific ('On Going') or simply representational ('Amazon', 'The Wake'), abound in *Skirrid Hill*, beginning the developmental structure of 'Inheritance' that sees the collation of the details of the first two stanzas into the relationship in the third that engenders the narrative.

Here, family is something constructive, foundational: it allows (if present) the maturation, normative development ('Border Country'); it offers a prediction of the future ('Farther'); a continuous and continuing process ('Trees' and 'Swallows'); and also a supportive framework within which the family groups in the collection operate.

We also see moments of startling intimacy in terms of the treatment of loved ones. The personal 'On Going' is labelled as 'i.m. Jean Sheers', and describes family history, a generation giving way to the younger (an idea also presented in 'Swallows' and the latter's lack of specificity); 'Border Country', 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort' all deal with the loss of a loved one, the severing of the usual line of progression within a family, and the connection with the natural environment that symbolises familial continuity.

There is some disparity between the relative emotional intimacy with maternal figures in the collection. In 'Inheritance', for example, the acquisition of the 'stammer' as a model for masculine maturation, for imitated or acquired characteristics, is linked to their bones 'near the hill's bare stone', or, alternatively, as a source of new life. In 'Border Country', the father is the owner of the shotgun whose 'kick' the boys learn from in the transition to adult responsibility and the understanding of consequence, mechanical and, potentially, the violent or destructive (a link also to the 'stammer' where the narrator is made to 'feel like a man' through helping his grandfather 'tend the lambs').

In both poems, there is an implicit or explicit distance between the narrator and the subject, similarly in 'Farther', where life is leading to 'step[s] apart', and the 'tipping point' (a link to 'Swallows'), the emotional separation represented by the physical distance, the observation when they are 'half way up and I turned to look at you', needing to 'rest my cheek against the stone' and 'find you in its frame' (literally the camera, metaphorically the stone), though even this only allows a 'shallow handhold' on the idea of connection.

'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort' also offer an educative, protective role for the narrator, 'point[ing] out all the places lived in / by the fathers and sons before them', suggesting continuity, linearity, but also the overview and perspective of the landscape, 'grains', a link to the point of view offered at the end of 'Farther'.

There is far less focus on maternal figures in the poems, with two poems focusing on maternal figures ('Inheritance' and 'Amazon'), and a third linked, it appears, to a maternal figure. In 'Inheritance', the mother contrasts with the father, demonstrating emotional distance, a lack of physical proximity, a human and living contrast with the structurally distant figure of breast cancer also detracts from the maternal role of the subject during the narrator's treatment. However, the mother-role itself is based not simply on physical proximity, but on a reference to 'her coming back to us' (the return from an emotional distance, a link to the perspective of the family. 'On Going' offers less in terms of maternal figures, but could, perhaps, represent another 'tipping in the scales', with the grandfather's role as 'the child'. That said, it does, as with 'Inheritance' and 'Amazon' link to the grandfather, with the 'measurement / I needed' only achieved by 'the connection' and the 'paper temple.'

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Family is also linked throughout the collection to a sense of national identity clearly connected to landscapes in poems such as 'Inheritance' ('the hill's Country' (the 'father found at dawn – / a poppy sown in the unripe corn Landscapes in general and the Welsh landscape in particular are motifs in poems: the 'hill's bare stone' and 'bad weather' in 'Inheritance'; the 'quadrant' in 'Border Country'; the 'Skirrid' described in detail in 'Farther' and in 'Skirrid Hill').

Welshness is implicitly present throughout the collection in terms of the frequent use of tercets, general avoidance (or reference to) decasyllabic lines (or references to) group male singing or sheep. Sheers also demonstrates Welsh poetic influences on his own writing in terms of the identification with R. S. Thomas', his modelling of aspects of his writing on the style of Dylan Thomas (image saturation and free associating 'stream of consciousness style'), his setting in terms of the Welsh troops who fought there and the work of Dylan Thomas and David Jones.

However, it is only addressed explicitly in the poem 'Flag', where it is described as false and oppositional rather than constructive, though the poem appears as an access point for the broader theme of national identity and nationalism. 'The Steelworks', 'Liable to Floods', 'History' do also specify particular aspects of humanity as deeply rooted in the landscape, dependent on the anchors in a geographically situated culture provides.

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## Nature, Humankind, Conflict

The relationship between nature and mankind in the collection is a complex one. It is something protective ('Mametz Wood', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Singing M') caused by humankind ('Landmark', 'The Steelworks', 'Liable to Floods') processes of human life ('Inheritance', 'Show', 'The Hill Fort', once again models through natural interactions ('Winter Swans', 'The Equation', 'Y

However, the human impact on the natural environment is often destructive. 'Mametz Wood'; the 'steel, biting' in 'The Farrier'; the 'scar' under the 'b pumpkins in 'Border Country'; the split hillside in 'Farther'; the destroyed School'; the castrated lambs in 'Late Spring'; the 'sarcophagus' of their in 'backbone of the rock' into which the 'GI's tapped the steel' in 'Liable to

War (and conflict in a broader sense) is a subject and theme that occurs throughout the collection, evidenced by his recent collaborations with army veterans in verse and in 'Resistance'. As a topic, it collates many of the other themes of Sheers' work: generational succession ('Farther'), male identity ('The Farrier'), the testis ('Border Country'), physical suffering ('The Farrier', 'Marking Time'), group identity ('Accidents').

Specific conflicts are also explicitly addressed within the collection: World War II in 'Liable to Floods' and 'Happy Accidents'. However, Sheers appears to be based on the human and natural aspects of their historical context within which they take place, leaning towards deconstructing the aftermath motif, within a number of the poems, in testing social boundaries in 'Border Country', semantic field of warfare, in the sense of historical rootedness in 'History', transgressions referenced in 'Drinking with Hitler'.

As discussed earlier, conflict is also a key aspect of relationships within the collection, the friction between masculinity and femininity: the assertive dominance in 'Marking Time' and 'Joseph Jones', with the literal or metaphorical wounding of the

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## Appearance and Reality

From the first poem the reader comes across in the collection, 'Last Act', of poems which address the gap between seeming and being: in 'Last Act' the image of theatricality to convey a sense of the revelation of truth, of the fundamental truth; in 'Keyways', it is the musical performance that inspires; in 'The Singing Men', it is only the performance that allows the subjects to reach reality; in 'Night Windows', the sexual experience becomes an almost art through its representation; in 'Happy Accidents', the fiction provides a glimpse of reality, while 'Shadow Man' encourages the audience to interrogate the objects and interpretation itself.

However, performance is also treated negatively: in 'Show', the falsity of reality that accompanies it, arguably detracting from the relationship depicted; in 'Hitler', the performance disguises a far more disturbing set of truths than the rumours within the text; in 'The Fishmonger' and 'The Farrier', the performance tasks acts as a dehumanising activity; in 'L. A. Evening', the lines between the real and the fictional are blurred to the point of distancing the subject from the wider world.

Reality is generally described through moments of revelation or epiphany towards the end of final stanzas, as in the understanding that 'it is [...] the end' in 'Intermission', that 'bodies, like souls, / only exist when touched' ('Four Part II'), or the value of the 'shadows' thrown by 'our thoughts and words' ('Shadow Man').

Of course, it must be remembered that, in a sense, every poem in the collection is an artistic construct by the poet in order to convey an idea, a moment, an impression, subjective, however apparently objective they may seem.

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## Gaps, Transitions and Boundaries

Gaps are present throughout each poem in the collection, from the 'mou Act' through the 'black holes' in 'Border Country' and the 'invisible twin' 'broken spine' and 'cleft palate' in 'Skirrid Fawr'.

This is not surprising: the collection, after all, is called *Skirrid Hill*, 'divor bridging the gap between English and Welsh, but also referencing the sp 'Skirrid Fawr') and thus its symbolic relevance in terms of the divisions ('Mametz Wood', 'The Fishmonger'), between people and the wider world ('Men') within human relationships ('Winter Swans', 'Song'), or even with 'School').

A number of the empty spaces in the collection are filled, of course: in 'L 'gaps like missing teeth'; 'empty spaces' in 'Keyways' are filled by the 't precisely to give and roll'; the 'hard orange O-rings' are stretched across then over the 'soaped beans' of the lambs' testicles; in 'The Hill Fort', the to 'make the circle complete', in 'Landmark', the bodies of the couple in created. These gaps are often achieved through physical ('On Going') or 'Windows', 'Valentine', 'Calendar').

The majority of the of the poems in the collection involve some kind of v from one physical, social or emotional space to another. In 'Mametz Woo 'skeletons paused mid dance-macabre'; in 'Trees', it is the realisation of t 'finger-thick sapling', paralleled by a comparable realisation regarding 's in 'The Equation', it is the shift from the professional to the private lives geographical motion that is reflected in an exploration of Welshness.

Boundaries are often part of this process: some are physical, as in the 'ea the 'meridian' in 'Stitch in Time', the 'ditches' and 'streams' in 'Liable to personal: the 'caesura' in 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two'; the 'sho 'Intermission'; the emotional disconnection and reconnection in 'Farther also potentially transgressive, from the 'impressionist' view of the couple destruction of the blackberries in 'Hedge School' through to the 'red wir castration process in 'Late Spring', and the 'headlong' fall 'through the t Accidents'.

However, boundaries can also be meeting points within the connection, of geographical and physical boundaries allows a moment of emotional where the divisions within the individual sense of identity are bridged b walk around the lake's edge and the observation of the swans leads to a emotional gaps between the couple; in 'Stitch in Time', also, the geograp of transition but also connection.

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## Language and Communication

Language is a motif that recurs throughout the collection, explored both as the subject of the poems. In 'Last Act', the poems are 'gaps [...] in the face of' reference to a stutter (possibly an autobiographical reference) in the 'stutter' 'zero of the word / failing to catch' (potentially for both the speaker and the language is both a means of communication and a metaphor for connection). The lack of speech similarly referenced in 'Mametz Wood' in the 'absent tongue' 'stick in the spokes of my speech'.

The failure of language is also present in 'Winter Swans', where the couple is juxtaposed with the physical connection that successfully bridges the gap 'the shoulder and hip' in 'Keyways' juxtaposes the 'blade break[ing]' in the poem 'your breasts / against the sentence of my spine' in 'Four Movements in the same poem, can also lead to disconnection, as in the reference to the 'corner over her tongue', and the words that have 'caught her', echoed in 'The Voice spoken / into a coastal wind'.

Nature is also an image juxtaposed with the constructedness and ineffectiveness in the 'book of slate' in 'History' in which 'you can read / a story of stone on this valley'. 'Amazon' reveals a similar concern, that while the 'hard C of uncertainty' may seem 'fitted to the task', it is still surprising how 'language carry so much chaos'. It is, here, the impact of the language that is most felt by 'our thoughts and words' ('Shadow Man'), though in 'L. A. Evening' the 'silent films' and the 'off-screen voices' that, at least partially, serves to contrast the reality with the fiction.

Sheers appears highly conscious of his construction of experience as text in 'Country', tiring 'of catching / the commas and apostrophes / of minnows' to 'test[...] our voices', before the final image of the 'ink-dot cows' and the 'wheels', perhaps an image of the generative friction between life and text in the texts, just as in 'Swallows', the birds 'dip[...] their ink to sign their sky'. The idea of self-expression through the 'text' of the broader environment is also present in 'Movements in the Scale of Two', with the 'open book / with blank pages'.

Perhaps the most effective image of language in the collection is that in 'answers' are to questions that the narrator has 'never known', and her 'voice' accompanying a 'vernacular of borders'. Arguably the strongest indication of Sheers places on the treatment of language in the collection is his choice of reference to the 'unspoken words / of an unlearned' tongue, an epithet that is used for those covered at the beginning of the collection, and also to Sheers himself.

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# AO2: Form, Structure and

## Form

The habitual form that Sheers adopts in the collection is free verse, though he does make some use of particular stanza types, perhaps treading the tightrope between traditional forms/culture and the self-expressive demands of modernity.

The most common stanza type adopted in the collection is the tercet, appearing in 12 of the 42 poems contained within *Skirrid Hill*. This is a form that does appear to reinforce personal identity (in poems such as 'Valentine', 'Winter Swans' and 'Intimations') and specificity in relation to Welshness (in 'Mametz Wood' and 'Flag').

Sheers also uses non-rhyming couplets ('Trees', 'Four Movements in the Mountains', 'In Time', 'The Singing Men' and 'Skirrid Fawr'), a form that seems to suggest a sense of closure. In other poems, he uses quatrains ('Night Windows', 'Joseph Jones', 'On the Mountain', 'Evening', 'Keyways'), sestets (the final stanza of 'Inheritance', 'Hedge School') and even septets ('Hedge School') and nonets ('Border Country').

Lengthier stanza lengths are often linked to more developed narratives, such as 'The Singing Men' used to reflect their content: the inadequate couplets of 'The Singing Men' and the overflowing quintains of 'Keyways' rounded off by a non-rhyming couplet, reflecting both the dominance of the father figure and the mountain in 'The Singing Men'.

At other points, Sheers appears to reference particular poetic forms: 'Mametz Wood' and 'The Wake', for example, both seem to echo or mimic the form of the sonnet, both in terms of structure (sestets) and in terms of content. 'Calendar' adopts and adapts many of the elements of the haiku in terms, once again, of both form and content. There are also tones of the elegiac while avoiding the form itself, particularly in terms of the elegiac feeling in 'Border Country' or 'The Wake'.

Other poems reflect Sheers' own experimentation, with the gap-toothed tercet reinforcing the content, once again, or the fist-shaped, gradually slipping stanza in the performance poem 'Service'.

One other trend in the poems, in terms of form, is for Sheers to include a stanza that offers a conclusion or summation of the poem's content, as in 'The Fawr' which offers a more negative depiction of the consequence of the interaction, or 'The Fawr' which reinforces the ambiguity of the image. It is noticeable that many of the poems that took issue with Sheers' tendency to over-conclude his poems.

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## Structure

Individual poems in the collection, as one would expect, follow individual patterns, but there are some general trends that are identifiable.

Sheers has a tendency to begin his poems with a frozen image or context, then moves on to deconstruct. In 'Keyways', for example, the poem begins with a specific image ('strange then, that this should be our last time together') and a particular context (the locksmith's) that is then explored and considered in more depth, from the personal ('back all that's mine') and the broader environment (the 'hot day outside').

From this initial prompt, Sheers then moves on to record an event, a process, or a transition between two states, whether geographical, physical, social or emotional. An implicatory reference to its significance. In 'Liable to Floods', for example, a specific moment and image, we are then offered the training process undergone by the river's envelopment of their camp, with the images incorporated in the context of a perspective on it ('bleeding', 'ghosts').

Many of the poems then end with a stanza or pair of stanzas that summarise the experience and reflect on its significance in a more general sense. So, for example, the reader is offered a final stanza in which, much as with 'The Farrier', a more general conclusion is given; here the flag as 'a tourniquet', which is 'staunching the dreams of the future'.

There are poems, of course, that do not follow this structure: 'Inheritance', 'The Parental Relationship', or 'Show', 'Calendar', 'Four Movements in the First Half' and 'Four Movements in the Second Half' are used to build a broader impression, though separate sections do not follow the structure above.

It is, however, important to consider the structure of the poems within the collection in a general sense, after the introduction provided (ironically) by 'Last Act', the first half, separated by the central poem 'Intermission' (an appropriately titled poem of reflection): the first half, from 'Mametz Wood' (beginning with delving into the past) to 'The Farrier' (the completion of the circle) is often more personal, more intimate, focusing on the individual, connection, families and childhood; the second half, from 'Calendar' (the beginning of the circle) to 'Skirrid Fawr' (the conclusion), is more concerned with the broader context, the sweep of society and history.

However, while this is accurate as a general trend, it is not a neat division. 'Mametz Wood' and 'The Farrier' in the first half of the collection deal with social and historical context; 'Swallows' a poem about nature in a broader sense (despite its possible focus on the individual Sheers); in the second half, 'Song' and 'Landmark' are both poems about the individual; 'Amazon' and 'The Wake' are both about familial concerns.

Just as both 'Last Act' and 'Mametz Wood' can lay claim to being the first poem in the collection, it is possible to debate whether 'Intermission' or the diptych consisting of 'Yr Ynion' and 'The Farrier' actually be viewed as straddling the divide between the two, linking as it does the Welsh and Englishness, the geographical context, and the shift from imagined to real content. What is all but unarguable, however, is that 'Skirrid Fawr' is the poem that brings the collection together as it does the key concerns, images, relationships and themes of the collection.

## Language

Sheers adopts a number of perspectives in his poetry: some overtly personal, some suggestively personal ('Last Act', 'Winter Swans'), some offering a first-person perspective ('Drinking With Hitler', 'Amazon'), and some offering a second-person perspective ('Happy Accidents', 'Stitch in Time', 'L. A. Evening'). There are also poems offering a more direct second-person perspective ('Trees', 'History').

The perspective adopted in the poems is also reflected in the register that is used. In the personal poems (of all three perspectives), Sheers often uses a conversational (though never 'chatty') register. In 'Keyways', for example, the poem begins in a straightforward style, referring to 'visit[ing] your flat when you're out' in the first line, deploying semantically unambiguous, monosyllabic and often intransitive verbs ('mine', 'back'), along with contractions ('you're', 'that's'), and few adjectives or adverbs.

After the initial simplicity of the opening, as the poems become more complex, the language follows suit, slipping into a less personal, often more formal register. In 'Trees', where they are described as 'dressing, reclaiming their clothes' early in the poem, the language becomes 'double shadow of green pressed grass, weight imprinted' at the end.

The more conversational style is also evident in the use of continuity, between poems with conjunctions, as in the opening of 'Happy Accidents' with 'and so he left his wife' in 'Stitch in Time'.

However, there are also poems evidencing a more self-consciously poetic style, such as in 'Shadow Man' where the poem begins by referring to the artist's 'shades / and the holes it makes', or in the haiku of 'Calendar', where 'Swiss telephone wires'. At times, particularly at the end of poems, this style can become to the point of intrusive, such as in the final couplet of 'Keyways', in the cutting of keys, just when we're changing all the locks') which could be seen as a clarity that has already been achieved in the poem. Another example of this is the vaguely trite-seeming 'the first sea that ever was / or that ever will be' in 'Amazon', the nebulosity of the statement, rather than providing a suggestive prompt, actually, again results in a rather saccharine conclusion.

There is, unsurprisingly, some evidence of linguistic interplay between the poems of *Skirrid Hill* as a whole, 'Y Gaer'/'The Hill Fort', and 'Skirrid Fawr'. However, the stream-of-consciousness description that we see in poems such as 'Hedge' is more influenced by the work of other Welsh writers such as R S Thomas or Dylan Thomas.

Imagery in the collection is often constructed from semantic fields that are used in stanzas, such as in the references to stops and joining in 'Stitch in Time', or the litter that litters 'Border Country'. In addition to these more general and more specific systems, there is also a recurring pattern in the collection of literal items, similes or metaphors. This is particularly evident in poems such as 'The Repetitive Structure: he 'runs his hand the length of her neck', which becomes 'a lintel'; he 'leans into her flank', a 'man putting his shoulder to a knacker's cart', 'bends', becoming a 'romantic lead dropping to the lips of his lover'.

Throughout the poems, Sheers uses phonological techniques to reflect the tone of the poems. The gentle, unthreatening consonance in 'for years afterwards the farmer in the Wood', and the connective alliteration of 'white-washed, / wiped', 'waited', 'the sibilant 'soft c of uncertainty' that 'seems so fitted' in 'Amazon'. One

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alliteration evidenced throughout the collection is the use of plosives, again 'b', 'k', such as 'piling in the palm' the 'black pearl necklace' in 'Hedge S' hands were 'bloodied as a butcher's'.

Rhyme occurs frequently within the collection, whether the comfortably endings of poems such as 'Liable to Floods' ('without any say' / 'being sv' ('after the strife' / 'he'd cut his life'), or the suggestive, connective slant- 'Keyways', for example). At times, these are also a structuring device, su 'Show', where the quatrains begin unrhymed ('mirror' / 'piano' / 'brush' or envelope rhyme ('pocus' / 'there' / 'bare' / 'focus').

Rhythm also occurs frequently within the collection, often linked to Shee the flow, the continuity of the subject matter, as in the first two lines of ' like a stick in the spokes of my speech' drives the undisrupted rhythm fo Sheers uses caesuras to reflect the separation and division he is describi in the first two lines of 'On Going', contrasted with the continuous lines stanza.

While Sheers writes his poetry in free verse, the variability of the line len (whether hyposyllabic or simply shorter than in other poems) often repr stoppage, shifts in content or breaks, such as 'and of course with this flag 'Intermission'. Longer lines often feature more detailed, more in-depth c tone. There are also poems that seem to reference the decasyllabic regula such as in 'Mametz Wood'.

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# AO3: Context

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## A Brief History of Industrial and Post-industrial Wales

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Wales played a crucial role in the industrialisation within the UK: ironmaking, copper smelting, and the mining of coal were all well established by the end of the eighteenth century, with cotton mills following by the beginning of the nineteenth. Welsh industry was integrated into the rail network within the UK during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and steel used for construction, as well as the coal by which the engines were powered.

The industrialised Wales of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was characterised by the establishment and development of new communities in previously unpopulated areas, peopled predominantly by low-income migrants (large numbers of whom were women), and following the contours of the surrounding mountain ranges. There was a widespread gender imbalance in both rural and urban areas along with overcrowding. Industrialisation across the country led to increasing centralisation of the economy and to increases in both rural and urban impoverishment, the effects of which were felt throughout the country.

Wales did not, however, completely lose its traditional farming focus, despite the shift from agriculture to industry: the Welsh wool industry and the sheep farming industry continued to account for a significant part of the Welsh economy, though with fewer people employed in factory methods.

Religious participation has a long-standing tradition in Wales, particularly in the form of Christian denominations, with relatively evangelical forms of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism all successfully establishing themselves across the country. There was a widespread nonconformism in terms of both religious and political life, and a resistance to perceived 'English' cultural influences. However, the association of Wales with religion has become, over time, more of a cultural perception rather than a reality, with many citizens formally linking themselves to a religious denomination.

As with the rest of the UK, Wales suffered hugely as a result of the world wars. Many died during the First World War and 15,000 in the Second, and the demand for resources for immediate post-war reconstruction boom afterwards placed on coal and steel production was ultimately unsustainable, having a huge impact across the Welsh landscape. This led to the mid-twentieth-century collapse of Welsh industry.

Unemployment among coal miners rose to around 29% by the mid-1920s, and many people left Wales between 1925 and 1939, from a relatively stable population. In addition, the collapse of coal mining directly impacted on all the other industries that were dependent, with even agricultural areas hit by the broader depression with no post Second World War boom, for much of the mid-twentieth century saw a lack of running water and access to electricity. In addition, widespread unemployment, substandard housing, poor health, malnutrition, exploitation of the working class, and social malaise.

By the end of the twentieth century, the Welsh economy had shifted almost entirely to tertiary industries, with the major coal mines and steel plants (including those in the south) closed and agricultural employment halved. Strikes by coal miners in the 1970s led to a decline, and by the 1990s, employment in mining had fallen to under 1,000.

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small Welsh communities and subsistence farmers who had survived the periods became increasingly alienated from the mainstream society with pace.

Throughout the late twentieth century, there was an increasingly politicised governance in Wales, with the rise of Plaid Cymru and decentralisation. The twentieth century also saw a gradual loss of Welsh cultural distinctiveness. 5 inhabitants of Wales spoke Welsh, and there was widespread migration as a huge upspring in second-home ownership by English residents in Wales.

In 1999 the first election for the Welsh Assembly took place, with the Labour and two most represented parties, reflecting the working class and nationalist sentiment and an ingrained distrust of the Conservative Party. Interestingly, the Welsh even balance of male and female assembly members, despite a clear imbalance much of the rest of the UK.

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## The Crisis in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Masculinity

According to a number of social commentators, towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, there has arisen a perception of a crisis within masculinity and notions of masculinity impacted on by forces such as global economic changes and dynamics within society. According to a number of studies, men are, in comparison to their female counterparts, more likely to become unemployed, to commit crimes, to become substance-dependent, and to underachieve in education (Welford & Powell, 2014).

In large part, this is due to an increasing mismatch between perceptions of masculinity and reality. Traditionally, masculinity has been associated with career success and wealth, and with a dominant role within a household. However, men are now more likely than women (54% to 46%) to have lost a job during their employment history, and more likely to have lost jobs on more than one occasion (25% to 10%). This has, unsurprisingly, led to reported fears among men that a lack of career success can result in a perception of them as less of a man or friends or family of their being 'less of a man'.

On an emotional and psychological level, masculinity has been traditionally associated with characteristics such as physical strength, emotional stability, psychological resilience, and a sense of 'taking charge' in crisis situations. However, while this inherited narrative of masculinity is a cultural norm aimed at both genders, it is also undermined by media portrayals of men as 'a problematic construct' (Levant, 1996), stigmatised for the use of personal or physical strength as a means to achieve success, and for reinforcing the current narrative of men as shallow, violent, childish, sex-driven, and uncontrolled, unhygienic, lazy, disruptive and predatory.

Media portrayals of men and masculinity are, according to the social commentators, having changed dramatically over the last few decades to include satirical and exaggerated masculine characteristics (particularly in advertising and popular culture) and a focus on male consumerism that has resulted in increasingly unrealistic expectations of men both aesthetically and sexually. This is at the same time as a retained focus on the issue of men as a female issue but *caused* by men and notions of masculinity from the discourse except as a historical cause. To quote one social commentator, 'men and men are problems' (Poole, 2013), with those problems simply 'byproduct of the socialization process' (Levant, 1996).

Taken in coordination, the retention of the male stereotype of economic success (in the form of wealth and competitive dominance, coupled with a social context in which success is linked to a wealth of new pressures from consumerism and media portrayals. These have led to a breakdown in traditional male roles, without, necessarily, the kinds of communicative and expressive outlets available to their female counterparts. As evidenced by the gender imbalance in the suicide statistics, with men accounting for 78% of suicides in the UK (Welford & Powell, 2014), men are often silent. As a further result, according to a number of recent surveys, men are more likely to engage in extreme risk-taking behaviour than women (73% to 58%, according to Welford & Powell, 2014).

Male role models are also in short supply, with increasing destabilisation of the family unit, ever-increasing levels of divorce and separation, and media portrayals of men as rebellious or as against normative society. According to Welford and Powell (2014), a much higher proportion of men than women believing themselves to be less of a man than their parents.

# AO4: Points of Comparison

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There are no shortage of ways to group the poems. However, below are some that can be usefully compared or contrasted, grouped by the point of comparison.

<b>Male-dominated intimacy, sterility and structure</b>	'Mametz Wood', 'The Farrier', 'Show', 'Marking Time', 'Joseph Jones', 'On Going', 'Landmark', 'Drinking with Hilary', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Fathers and sons</b>	'Inheritance', 'Border Country', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort'
<b>The pleasure of destruction</b>	'The Farrier', 'Marking Time', 'Border Country', 'Late Spring', 'Landmark', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Gendered interaction / gender dynamics</b>	'The Farrier', 'Inheritance', 'Marking Time', 'Winter Swans', 'Night Windows', 'Keyways', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Romantic/sexual connection</b>	'The Farrier', 'Marking Time', 'Valentines', 'Night Windows', 'Landmark', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Representation of women / female suffering</b>	'The Farrier', 'Show', 'Marking Time', 'Joseph Jones', 'On Going', 'Song', 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two'
<b>Dissolution of intimacy</b>	'Marking Time', 'Show', 'Valentines', 'Night Windows', 'Keyways', 'Landmark', 'The Singing Men', 'Scale of Two'
<b>Moment of connection/reconnection / final connection</b>	'The Farrier', 'Marking Time', 'Border Country', 'Winter Swans', 'Night Windows', 'Keyways', 'Movements in the Scale of Two'
<b>Importance of perception</b>	'Mametz Wood', 'Show', 'Night Windows', 'Shadow Man'
<b>Familial loss/mortality</b>	'Mametz Wood', 'Border Country', 'On Going', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Performance, public and private</b>	'Last Act', 'Inheritance', 'Show', 'School', 'Night Windows', 'Joseph Jones', 'Evening', 'The Singing Men'
<b>Individual characters</b>	'The Farrier', 'Joseph Jones', 'The Amazon', 'Shadow Man', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Wake'

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'Mametz Wood', 'The Farrier', 'Keyways', 'Border Country', 'Hedge School', 'Joseph Jones', 'Farther', 'The Hill Fort', 'Landmark', 'History'
'Farther', 'The Hill Fort', 'Y Gaer', 'Marking Time', 'Amazon'
'The Farrier', 'Joseph Jones', 'Late Spring', 'The Equation', 'Service', 'The Fishmonger', 'The Singing Men'
'Mametz Wood', 'Marking Time', 'Border Country', 'Y Gaer' / 'The Hill Fort', 'The Steelworks', 'Landmark', 'The Fishmonger'
'Inheritance', 'Night Windows', 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two', 'Amazon', 'Skirrid Fawr'
'The Farrier', 'Late Spring', 'The Equation', 'The Steelworks', 'The Fishmonger'
'Mametz Wood', 'The Farrier', 'Winter Swans', 'Hedge School', 'Border Country', 'Trees', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Steelworks', 'Late Spring', 'The Equation', 'Liable to Floods', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'Calendar', 'History', 'The Fishmonger', 'Skirrid Fawr'
'Border Country', 'Farther', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'The Steelworks', 'Flag', 'Liable to Floods', 'History', 'Skirrid Fawr'
'Mametz Wood', 'The Farrier', 'Show', 'Valentine', 'Winter Swans', 'Night Windows', 'Joseph Jones', 'Late Spring', 'Landmark', 'Drinking with Hitler'
'Mametz Wood', 'Liable to Floods', 'Happy Accidents'
'Marking Time', 'Intermission', 'On Going'
'Inheritance', 'Farther', 'Trees', 'Border Country', 'Amazon', 'On Going', 'The Equation', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'Amazon', 'The Wake'
'Inheritance', 'Farther', 'Border Country', 'Trees', 'Hedge School', 'Late Spring', 'Joseph Jones', 'The Hill Fort', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort'
'Show', 'Winter Swans', 'Liable to Floods', 'Amazon', 'The Wake'
'Border Country', 'The Equation', 'Intermission', 'Flag', 'History', 'Service', 'The Fishmonger', 'The Singing Men'

# AO5: Critical Responses to

Since its publication, *Skirrid Hill* has received widespread praise, with St John as 'contemporary literature's Renaissance man' (Crown, 2015) and as poet of the 'new' (Gee, 2005).

While critics and reviewers have praised Sheers for his willingness to 'break the mould' and to confound 'generic expectations' with his often innovative style (McBratney, 2011), Olivia Cole (2005) has questioned the extent to which the collection works. Sheers 'has no discernible narrative', making one 'wonder to what extent the collection is so much as poems written since his last', though Sarah Crown (2006) views the collection positively, arguing that the 'central metaphor provides the collection the coherence it lacked'.

Positive responses to the collection have focused often on Sheers' style and language. For Cole (2005), Sheers' writing, at its best, is 'liltingly sad and true', excelling in 'poems' in which he is 'adept at probing wounds', a sentiment echoed by McBratney (2011) 'no speculative self-indulgence [...] only raw feelings and powerful emotion'. McBratney admired Sheers' ability to 'elegise' without having to 'romanticise'.

For several of the critics, it is this ability to engage the reader emotionally that is impressive, managing to 'convincingly and powerfully evok[e] experience that the reader vicariously shares in it' (Etter, 2006) with 'language [that] doesn't so much describe as it does feel' (Cole, 2005), perhaps supported by the 'dextrous' and 'easy lyricism' (Crown, 2006). McBratney (2011) uses, though for McBratney (2011), Sheers' effectiveness as a writer lies in his ability, from the reader's perspective, 'making the ordinary seem strange' and providing a 'sense of having 'an eye and ear for the surprising' (Cole, 2005) but without losing sight of the 'affirming' (Clothier, 2005).

Several critics have, however, questioned the occasionally rather synthetic quality of the poems, to construct in his poems, with 'Mametz Wood', for example, dismissed as 'artificial' and remaining a 'poet's poem' due to the 'detached perspective' it adopts (McBratney, 2011). Etter (2006) further criticises a number of the poems as focusing on 'the external' rather than 'feeling', as putting 'disproportionate stress on the vehicle of the metaphor' and 'characters' who 'generate little interest or sympathy', leaving some of the poems 'insightful but predictable', though she is quick to also praise the general quality of the collection such as 'Night Windows'. McBratney (2011), while acknowledging Sheers' 'artistic' style, 'an archetype than a specific person', defends his authorial style as focus on 'description rather than a more emotionally engaged 'sentimentalising' of experience'.

McBratney (2011), in addition and while acknowledging Sheers' technical skill, questions some of possible oppositional readings of the poems, including regarding the 'detached perspective' of 'Night Windows' to draw the reader into a voyeuristic objectification of the female figure, the idea of vicarious experience and 'detached perspective' flagged up by Etter (2006).

The majority of criticism levelled at Sheers' work, however, focuses more on his 'extraneous explication' (Cole, 2005), weakening 'already affecting conceits' and 'over-explicate' (Crown, 2006), an 'almost legalistic inclination to sum up the obvious' (Clothier, 2005) in poems such as 'The Wake' or 'Keyways'. McBratney (2011) further, arguing that Sheers falls occasionally not just into overstatement and 'artless hyperbole', needing to trust more 'in his readers' ability' to understand the 'implicatory aspects of the poem'. Clothier (2005), however, feels different, arguing that Sheers falls into 'masking his meaning behind showboating semantics', with *Skirrid Hill* collection seems 'driven by a desire to communicate simple, real emotion'.

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# AO5: Wider Reading

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Listed below, you will find some useful wider reading sources. These should enhance your understanding of the collection.

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# Glossary

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<b>Alliteration (n.)</b>	The repetition of initial consonant s
<b>Antithesis (n.)</b>	The contrasting of opposites for em
<b>Assonance (n.)</b>	The repetition of vowel sounds
<b>Autobiography (n.)</b>	A non-fiction account of the author
<b>Caesura (n.)</b>	A break or pause within a line of ve
<b>Chronology (n.)</b>	The placing of things in the order th
<b>Connotation (n.)</b>	An additional or carried meaning
<b>Consonance (n.)</b>	The repetition of consonant sounds
<b>Couplet (n.)</b>	A two-line stanza, either rhyming o
<b>Decasyllabic (adj.)</b>	A line of verse containing 10 syllabl
<b>Declarative (n.)</b>	A statement
<b>Dialectical (adj.)</b>	Interactive disputation
<b>Diptych (n.)</b>	In art, a work created from two link
<b>Discourse (n.)</b>	Structured text; the structure of som
<b>Elliptical (adj.)</b>	Referring to a written style in which or semantic function are omitted; us almost ungrammatical style
<b>End-stopped (adj.)</b>	A line of verse ending in a punctuat meaning or forcing a stoppage in th
<b>Enjambment (n.)</b>	The continuation of a sentence acro
<b>Epigraph (n.)</b>	An inscription at the head of a chap
<b>Euphemism (n.)</b>	A more acceptable expression subst viewed as insensitive or offensive
<b>Extended metaphor (n.)</b>	An image or symbol continued thro
<b>Free verse (n.)</b>	Lines of verse without a regular me (generally) rhyme scheme
<b>Haiku (n.)</b>	A traditional Japanese poetic form c conveyed through three lines, the fi syllables, the second with seven syl
<b>Homophone (n.)</b>	A word that sounds identical to ano
<b>Hypersyllabic (adj.)</b>	Including more than the usual num hypermetrical)
<b>Hyposyllabic (adj.)</b>	Including fewer than the usual num hypometrical)



Referring to a traditional British verse form consisting of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables
Detailed description to engage the reader's imagination
The contrasting of opposites
Marginal, to do with borders or points of transition
A type of emotionally-focussed verse with song-like qualities
An image in which something is described as something difficult in order to clarify the intended function of it
The description of something by focussing on aspects of it
Regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables within lines of poetry
Words or lines including only a single syllable
A recurring image or symbol within a text
The 'storyline' of a text
The person who tells the story
A point of contrast against which an individual or group define themselves
A self-contradictory image, the use of opposing references applied to a single item
The applying of human qualities to inanimate objects
Whether something is written from the writer's own point of view (first person), addressed to someone (second person) or is written as an observational piece (third person)
Symbolically representing or echoing a penis, a visual symbol of masculine power
The use of sounds in writing (rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, etc.)
A short, explosive speech-sound (phoneme) such as 'b', 'p' or 'k'
Words that stand in for nouns such as 'I', 'your', 'her', 'he', 'she', 'they', 'we' or 'it'
A false or fictional name
A play on words
A stanza within a poem containing four lines
A stanza within a poem containing five lines
A section of text quoted, generally as evidence
RP: the most formal accent, the 'Queen's English'
The repetition of sound combinations at the ends of words, indicating a structural feature, connection or important aspect

A beat or pulse running through a section of text
Vocabulary all linking to the same central topic
A seven-line stanza
A six-line stanza
The repetition of 's' sounds
An image that involves comparing something to another
A type of poem, typically about love, popular during the Renaissance. Generally 14 decasyllabic lines long, and rhyming ababdcdefegg, though this can vary
A section of a poem, a 'verse'
An underlying meaning
An uninterrupted unit of pronunciation, useful for judging the length of a line of verse
The use of textual features, particularly images, to represent other things
The verb form, indicating the time frame of something
A three-line stanza
A topic or issue explored in a text, generally on a partially subtextual level
An outdated Welsh epic verse form, constructed from tercets
Using a metre constructed from stressed syllables followed by unstressed syllables
A word labelling an action
An alternative name for 'free verse'
The style in which poetry is written
A shift within the structure of a poem
World-view
Symbolically representing or echoing female genitalia, a visual symbol of femininity and feminine power

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