

SUBJECT – BRITISH POETRY

CODE – GEN11

UNIT – 5

1. THOMAS GUNN– ON THE MOVE 'MAN, YOU GOTTA GO.'
2. SEAMUS HANEY– BLACKBERRY PICKING
3. R. S. THOMAS – PEASANT
4. CHARLES TOMLINSON – A ROSE FOR JANET

ON THE MOVE BY THOMAS GUNN

Thomas Gunn's 'On the Move' is famous one with five stanzas. He starts it with "On the move man, You gotta go". This is the intended words to describe the lifestyle of motorcycle gangs of 1950s who are byproducts of altering civilization and inventions spurted in the given period. They are infamous with their behavior in United States and Great Britain. Thomas Gunn in his poem describes the lifestyle of these gangs and provides a message through this attempt. This is the main intention of the poem.

ABOUT THE POEM

“On the Move” is one of the famous poems of Thom Gunn. It is included as an opening poem of his poetry collection “The Sense of Movement.” The poem is described as “a sociological footnote of the 1950s.” Motorcyclists have come to represent reckless vitality and aggressive energy in the East. The subtitle also serves as the epigraph, underscoring the urge to keep going while emphasising the hyperactive tension and dynamic energy that they symbolised.

The poem explores the response of the leather jacketed “Boys” astride their motorcycles to existential issues about the meaning of life. The speaker admires bikers who he sees defining or realising themselves while on the road. Human life is contrasted with animal life throughout the poem. Unlike humans, birds appear to be certain of their mission. The poem’s many references to movement may not only allude to physical action, but also to growth, whether intellectual, philosophical, spiritual, or otherwise.

SUMMARY

The bird with flamboyant plumage is a member of the crow family. Its “scuffling movements” represent its restless movements as it seeks some secret goal. Because of their uncontrolled energy and inclination to grow in communities, the birds represent motorcyclist-groups. They look for the instinct that lives within them, or they look for poise, or they look for both. Some people move at an unnecessarily fast or ineffective pace. Some show off their unrestrained animal instincts.

They arrive on motorbikes as quickly as flies in the heat, their steps across the road appearing smooth. The term “the Boy” relates to how the motorcycle gang plagued lonely ladies with their uninhibited attitude, a supreme statement of their manhood. The sound of the bikes travelling in sync is similar to the sound of thunder. The bikes have complete control over their calf and thigh. They wear goggles, so it is difficult to tell them apart – the imitation is obvious. The dust on their jackets is like trophies adorning their ‘don’t-care’ attitude. They have replaced meaning with noise because they can no longer communicate coherently.

Their energy has nowhere to go; it is not being directed in the proper manner. There is no ‘precise conclusion.’ They just keep going where the tyres carry them, with no goal or plan in mind. They frighten the carefree birds on their crazy adventure. According to Gunn, willpower should give way to natural forces (instinct). This is perhaps Gunn’s “voluntary commitment to the irrational,” as Martin Dodsworth put it.

Men manufacture both machine and soul,

And use what they imperfectly control

To dare a future from the taken routes.

Men can be objective (machine) as well as subjective (soul). They use the one they can (at least imperfectly) control to carve out the future based on the ‘taken courses’ (conservative, inherited or the routes of experience). It is only a partial solution to the existential quandary. When one acts according to his impulses, it cannot be labelled conflict. If he is half-animal, he cannot be damned. Only direct instinct is lacking, because as one awakens consciously in his surroundings, he is driven by social ideas and dictums that compel him to proceed along certain lines. Even whether one joins the movements, the end result is the same for all—death or nihilism. The speaker says that as long as one lives, he should strive in the direction he wishes since, most importantly, it is his.

A minute holds them, who have come to go:

The self-denied, astride the created will.

They burst away; the towns they travel through

Are home for neither birds nor holiness,

For birds and saints complete their purposes.

At worse, one is in motion; and at best,

Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,

One is always nearer by not keeping still.

Everyone is united for a brief moment in that they accept the fact that they ‘have come to go.’ In such an attitude, the ‘self-denied’ and ‘manufactured will’ are rendered ineffective; they just burst. The towns they pass through are ultimately neither a home for the bird (which represents

striving for a goal) or 'holiness' (religious dictums). Birds and saints both achieve their goals in the end. When the urge to achieve the goal is satisfied, individuals lose their joy because there is nothing to look forward to. The one in perpetual motion, on the other hand, never reaches an absolute. He is neither static nor has he arrived at any destination: the journey itself becomes the destination.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS OF ON THE MOVE – THOM GUNN:

FIRST STANZA

Thomas Gunn in this stanza compares human beings particularly gangs with the birds. The blue jay which scuffles in the bushes has some hidden need in doing so. The group of birds those are flying across the fields has some intention. The swallows have their nests in trees and low level bushes. Every bird has been guided by instinct or according to their need and purpose. Now he brings these gangs into the poem saying 'One moves with an uncertain violence' which says one is going very speed on ones bike raging violence as it may lead to accidents. The motorist is driving crazy as he is totally confused and the dust is raised and fallen on him itself. Like this first stanza provides contrasting nature of human beings with the birds and the craziness for speed are described.

SECOND STANZA

In this stanza, Thomas Gunn wants to project a picture of long shot to close shot of motorcycle gangs coming from a long and top of the road to nearer. He describes it very well as if he is closely monitoring them. He sees gangs coming. He compares them with flies. When he sees them in a long distance they appear as small creatures like flies in black color as they have worn the black jackets hanging in heat. This is what he assumes when he see

gangs in distance. Then the distance throws them to come further, (means as they come near) the distance sound of humming turns into thunder sound with the razing sounds emanated from vehicles. He says they are driving them 'held by calf and thigh'. He is also explaining how the gangs look like. They wear goggles not be disturbed by the dust emanated from their vehicles. He is saying them impersonalities. The shining jackets are turned into dusty and he is saying that the jackets are trophied with the dust. Their sound is unbearable but they can hear meaning in the created noise.

THIRD STANZA

In this stanza, Thomas Gunn is explaining how they are disturbing and the repercussions of the scientific inventions. He says that there is no fatigue to them in their journeys. They do not know where they are going. They do not know where they will stay. The swallows have nests but these motorists do not have shelter at least like them. They travel in the way. They travel in ways where their vehicles can go. They travel without purpose and at the same time they fear the birds which are flying across the fields. These birds follow their instincts and needs but these gangs are against it. Their destination is not known to them. Thomas Gunn is referring scientific inventions especially machines. He says that men made machines as well as their personalities. He says men are using what they cannot use perfectly and they control it imperfectly. They only consider their present, leaving the future to the fate.

FOURTH STANZA

Thomas Gunn is referring the state of the bike men. He uses the word 'half animal'. He says that they lack the instinct and without any purpose they move on without any destination and target. They only love present going speed. It is violent speed disturbs the flight of birds and

the human beings who are with destination. The speed attracts accidents and a loss respectively. He says that no one sleep as he is saying ' one wakes afloat on movement'. One(Motorbike gang) lives in this world without values. There is no need of destination for them. It is always travelling towards.

FIFTH STANZA

Thomas Gunn is explaining how these bike men travel and where they would leave to. They sit astride and speed up their vehicles to unknown destiny. He used 'self denied' in this stanza to refer the gangs. They travel through towns where there no nests for birds and homes of holiness. It is because saints and birds have purposes. They travel in that direction. But, these speedy motor gangs do not have purpose, Hence they are travelling away from them. They say they should be on the move always. They want to enjoy the speed without any intention. They are marred with dust. These do not bother them. They are at their worst while they are on the move. They are in continuous motion. Thus they are always nearer to the final rest (death).

FIGHTING TERMS

Gunn began his poetic career while still at Cambridge, with the publication of *Fighting Terms*. The image of the soldier is first of all, Gunn has written, “myself, the national serviceman, the ‘clumsy brute in uniform,’ the soldier who never goes to war, whose role has no function, whose battledress is a joke,” but it is also the “attractive and repellent” real soldier, who kills but also quests, like Achilles and Odysseus. Above all, the soldier is the poet, “an existential conqueror, excited and aggressive,” trying to make sense of his absurd situation.

These poems show Gunn's propensity to try, not always successfully, to make meaning of action in the intervals between action. "The Wound" is a good example. While recuperating, a soldier remembers the engagement of battle. As "the huge wound in my head began to heal," he remembers the Trojan War, but it is unclear whether this was his actual experience or only a hallucination. It could be that he is a contemporary soldier reverting to myth in the damaged and "darkened" valleys of his mind. When he rises to act again, his wound "breaks open wide," and he must again wait for "those storm-lit valleys to heal." His identity is thus never resolved.

Similarly, in "Looking Glass," the narrator is a kind of gardener who observes his life under glass. He compares it to a Garden of Eden in which "a fine callous fickleness" sent him in search of pleasure, "gratification being all." Yet there is no God present in this world to give the world an a priori meaning: "I am the gardener now myself. . . . I am responsible for order here." In the absence of God, "risks are authorized"—a theme that imbues Gunn's later poems of experience. He is also alienated from society and does not "care if villagers suspect" that his life is going "to seed." He takes a kind of pride in his status as outsider: "How well it goes to seed." The act of observing the wild garden of his life is a pleasure in itself, even though he is an outcast, "damp-booted, unemployed."

In "The Beach Head," the narrator is a would-be conqueror planning a campaign into his own society: "I seek a pathway to the country's heart." Again the alienated outsider ("I, hare-brained stranger") is heard making sense of his life, wondering whether to enter history through a fine gesture, "With little object other than panache/ And showing what great odds may be defied." His alternative to action is to watch and "wait and calculate my chances/ Consolidating this my inch-square base." This conflict is at the heart of Gunn's poetry, early and late: whether to risk the heroic act or succumb to the passivity of contemplation. Yet the

latter too has its risk—namely, that his failure to act may cause society’s “mild liking to turn to loathing.”

THE SENSE OF MOVEMENT

The Sense of Movement continues Gunn’s exploration of the active versus the contemplative existential hero. Here the pose, poise, or panache of the hero is more important than the goal of the action, the movement constituting its own meaning. The volume introduces Gunn’s idealized “American myth of the motorcyclist, then in its infancy, of the wild man part free spirit and part hoodlum”; his motorcyclist series is based on Andrew Marvell’s mower poems. Gunn admits that the book is largely derivative (“a second work of apprenticeship”), partaking of Yvor Winters’s formalism, William Butler Yeats’s theory of the mask, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy of engaged action.

The opening poem of the volume, “On the Move,” explores the conflict between “instinct” and “poise.” This is a key dichotomy in Gunn’s work. The natural world of instinct is largely unavailable to thinking human beings, who, unlike birds, must create a kind of surrogate impetus for the meaningful movement. The motorcyclists become the focus for this conflict because of their assumed pose of wildness; yet it is a pose, a posture that is only “a part solution, after all,” to the problem. Riding “astride the created will,” they appear “robust” only because they “strap in doubt . . . hiding it.” The doubt has to do with their destination, as they “dare a future from the taken routes.” The absurdity of action (a notion central to existential thought) is emphasized in that the person can appeal neither to natural instinct nor to metaphysics for the meaning he must himself create: “Men manufacture both machine and soul.” Unlike “birds and saints,” the motorcyclists do not “complete their purposes” by

reaching a destination. The movement is its own excuse: "Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,/ One is always nearer by not keeping still."

"In Praise of Cities" affirms the disorderly evolution of human attempts to create meaning in the cityscape, which is personified as a woman, "indifferent to the indifference which conceived her." She withholds and offers herself to the one who wants to discover her secrets. "She wanders lewdly, whispering her given name,/ Charing Cross Road, or Forty-Second Street." Yet the city is really a mirror in which the narrator sees his "own designs, peeling and unachieved" on her walls, for she is, finally, "extreme, material, and the work of man." As in "On the Move," however, the narrator does not so much comprehend as simply embrace the city, with "a passion without understanding." His movement is its own excuse, but the communion with humankind, through his created cityscape, is real.

BLACKBERRY-PICKING BY SEAMUS HEANEY

In 'Blackberry-Picking' the speaker is recalling a recurring scene from his youth: each August, he would pick blackberries and relish in their sweet taste.

Heaney, a prolific poet from Northern Ireland, won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his poetry in 1995. Heaney published his first book of poetry in the 1960s, and it was the start of a very productive and successful writing career. In addition to his writing, Heaney was also an accomplished professor and speaker, often traveling the globe to give talks about life and literature. His poems often included glimpses into rural life, and *'Blackberry-Picking'* is one of his finest examples of this. Heaney died in 2013.

SUMMARY

'Blackberry-Picking' by Seamus Heaney is a beautiful poem about the speaker's childhood and the times he spent picking blackberries.

In this poem, which you can read in full [here](#), the speaker recalls a recurring scene from his youth: each August, he would pick blackberries and relish in their sweet taste. The week would start with just one ripe blackberry, but soon, all of the other berries would be ripe for the picking. Blackberry picking was a fleeting activity, however; the fruits would only last about a week before they turned sour and died. Every year, the speaker confesses, he would hope that they would stay longer, even though he always knew that they would not.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The speaker of the poem is taking a nostalgic look back at the summers of his childhood, when each August, depending on the weather, he and his friends or family members would spend one week picking blackberries and delighting in their beautiful colors and delicious taste.

The speaker wastes no time setting up the scene for the reader. Heaney writes,

Late August, given heavy rain and sun

For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.

From these first two lines, the reader can glean that *'Blackberry-Picking'* takes place in late summer, probably in the countryside, since blackberries do not normally grow in a city setting. The speaker also informs the reader that conditions had to be just so in order for this to happen. If the summer brought heavy rain and sun, the blackberries would ripen. The experience would not happen if the conditions were not just so.

Additionally, the reader can also assume this event takes place in the past with the verb phrase "would ripen." The passage of time has not tempered the images the speaker remembers, and the rest of the poem is full of beautiful pictures of the natural world. The speaker then informs the reader that the process started out slowly each year.

LINES 3-4

At first, just one, a glossy purple clot

(...)

Heaney's diction is also important to note. Instead of calling the blackberry fruit or berry, he uses the metaphor of a clot, which not only discloses the color of the berry but also the texture and feel of it. What does a clot do when pressure is applied? It bursts, much like the first blackberry of the season would.

LINES 5-8

You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet

(...)

Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for

In lines five through seven, the speaker draws the reader into the memory. Heaney uses personification here. While summer does not actually have blood, the blackberry juice represents the vitality of the season. The speaker's experience with eating the first blackberry of the season is almost sexual: it leaves him lusting for more.

Not long after the first ripened blackberry, the others would need picking, and it would send the speaker and his friends to pick as many as possible:

LINES 8-10

Then red ones inked up and that hunge

Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots

Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.

The speaker and his friends would endure the scratches of briars and the discomfort of wet boots in order to make their way to the blackberry patches, but it did not bother them. They were not discerning when it came to the type of container they would take with them; so long as the containers could fit a fair share of blackberries, they would carry it with them.

LINES 11-13

Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills

(...)

Until the tinkling bottom had been covered

The speaker discloses that the blackberry patches are out of the way, and the task of picking could be laborious. Heaney uses a simile to describe how the blackberries looked in the speaker's pails.

LINES 14-16

With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned

(...)

With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

Line fourteen also contains alliteration; Heaney repeats the letter b in neighboring words, emphasizing the image of the blackberries that looked like eyes in a bucket. Heaney was known for his use of literary devices, and this poem is no exception. The next line of *'Blackberry-Picking'* contains an allusion to one of the most famous and deadliest pirates in history: Bluebeard. Heaney extends the metaphor of summer's blood into this line. After the speaker and his friends have picked the blackberries in the patch, they have the blood of the fruit on their hands, much like Bluebeard after one of his famous battles. This pirate image continues into the next line. The speaker says,

LINES 17-24

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.

But when the bath was filled we found a fur,

A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.

(...)

That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.

Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Just as a pirate would hoard his treasure, the speaker hoards his, too.

Lines eighteen through twenty-four juxtapose the first seventeen lines of the poem. The first half of the work is filled with life; however, the last section details the inevitable: the fruits cannot stay ripe forever. This change in tone is interpreted in one single word: but. After picking as many berries as possible, the berries would begin to rot and ferment.

The speaker and his friends could not only see the fruit turn bad, but they could also smell it: "The juice was stinking too." Heaney ends the poem on a particular melancholy note. Nature is

cyclical, as these final lines show. While the speaker always had hope that the berries would not go so quickly, he knew that every year would be the same as the previous.

THEMES

Throughout this piece, Heaney engages with themes of youth and nature. The poet brings these two themes together as he describes and emphasizes moments from his youth. He recalls what it was like when the blackberries would ripen, and he'd spend time outside picking them. There is a great deal of nostalgia in this poem for lost youth. It also alludes to the unstoppable progression of time. The blackberries can't stay forever, just as one's youth will always end.

STRUCTURE AND FORM

Depending on the edition, *'Blackberry-Picking'* is either in one long stanza that contains twenty-four lines or in two stanzas. When structured in stanzas, the first stanza contains sixteen lines, and the second contains only eight, making it an octave. Heaney wrote the poem in iambic pentameter, which means each line contains five feet with two syllables each. The syllables are unstressed, followed by a stressed one. *'Blackberry-Picking'* follows a set rhyme scheme of aa bb cc, etc.

LITERARY DEVICES

Throughout *'Blackberry-Picking'*, the poet makes use of several literary devices. These include but are not limited to:

- **Alliteration:** occurs when the poet repeats the same consonant sound at the beginning of words. For example, “blobs burned” and “first” and “flesh.”
- **Caesura:** can be seen when the poet inserts a pause into the middle of a line. For example, “Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger” and “I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair.”
- **Enjambment:** occurs when the poet cuts off a line before its natural stopping point— for example, the transition between lines one and two as well as lines three and four.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Seamus Heaney filled his poetry with images of the natural world, and this poem is no exception. One can even assume that the speaker in this poem is Heaney himself. The son of farmers, Heaney spent much of his time roaming the fields and pastures on his family’s land.

R. S. THOMAS – PEASANT

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET

One of the best-known poets to emerge from Wales, Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913 and educated at Bangor University, before publishing his first collection of poems, *The Stones of the Field*, in 1946. By the time this collection was published, Thomas had been ordained as an Anglican priest and installed at a parish in Manafon, Montgomeryshire. It was within this rural location that Thomas began to pen the pastoral-themed poetry which marked the early part of his writing, including 'A Peasant'. As his career in the church continued, Thomas developed a keen interest in science and a more questioning nature, reflected in his poetry which had taken on a metaphysical tone by the early 1970s. Thomas also became a fluent Welsh speaker at the age of 30. While he expressed regret at his inability to write poetry in Welsh, Thomas explored issues of language and identity in his work and opted to use the Welsh language for much of his prose writing. The complex relationship between spirituality, science, the landscape and nationality continued to manifest itself in Thomas' writing until his death in 2000, becoming a prominent feature of collections such as *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) and *No Truce with the Furies* (1995). He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. In his personal life, Thomas was married to artist Mildred 'Elsi' Eldridge for fifty one years, until her death in 1991. The loss of his beloved wife hit Thomas hard and it was a blow from which he never fully recovered, in spite of marrying second wife Elizabeth Vernon in 1996. In addition to his poetry, Thomas published a range of other writing, including his seminal lecture 'Abercuawg' (1976) and his autobiography *Neb* (1985). Almost two decades after his death, Thomas remains a towering figure of Anglophone Welsh writing, leaving behind a rich and varied body of work which reflects the changing landscape of Wales throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM:

TITLE

The title is as provocative as it is simple. The poem both draws on this rural archetype and asks the reader to question what they understand it to mean. Despite introducing us to the emblematic figure of Iago Prytherch, who would become a recurring figure used by Thomas as a symbol of the Welsh farmer and his struggle with the land, the poem's title is carefully anonymous and does not identify the 'peasant' by name. The simplicity of the title foreshadows the poet's focus on Prytherch, placing him, and not the natural world, as foremost in the poem. The fact that there is nothing personal or specific about the term 'a peasant' supports the idea that the figure created by the poet is generic figure who may be used to represent all those who work on the land in this kind of environment.

FORM

The poem is constructed using one single stanza, with an irregular form and a varied rhythmic pattern. The poem's fluid form invokes a sense of instability and hints at the volatile nature of the landscape on which the central character works, while line breaks challenge the reader's evolving perceptions of Prytherch himself. The poem ends with a rhyming couplet lending a sense of order and completion to the poem, affording the closing lines a soothing tone as they reassure the reader that Prytherch will not be forgotten and presenting him as a warrior, emerging from a chaotic struggle. Thomas uses this form frequently in his poetry.

Lines 1–7

In contrast to the anonymity of the poem's title, the opening lines of the poem start by identifying the character of Iago Prytherch. The name itself is hybrid. Iago is a common Welsh name, (a version of Jacob) though one which may be more familiar to English readers from Shakespeare's Othello. Prytherch anglicises the Welsh sound 'dd' in Prydderch to 'th'. The poet is at pains to stress that Prytherch is just 'an ordinary man' (line 2), suggesting that there is nothing special about this man. The poet goes on to firmly locate Prytherch within a harsh Welsh landscape, describing him as a figure of the 'bald Welsh hills' (line 2). While the initial image of a man who 'pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud' (line 3) may seem gentle and appealing, there is nothing romanticised about rest of this scene. Indeed the paucity of the living suggested by this line should not be overlooked. The description of the hills as 'bald' lends them a cold and unfriendly nature. There is a gothic or monstrous slant to the descriptions of the 'yellow bones' (line 5) and 'green skin' (line 4) of the mangels (a root vegetable similar to a swede and grown as animal fodder). The corporeal imagery connects the man to the land, inviting one to reread the assertion that he is a 'man of the bald Welsh hills'.

The language also reminds the reader that this is not an idyllic, pastoral landscape, but one which is challenging to Prytherch. Likewise, the verbs used by the poet in this section of the poem reinforce these challenges and reveal how hard Prytherch is working on the land, 'docking mangels' (line 4), 'chipping' (line 5) and 'churning the crude earth' (line 6) as he labours.

However difficult his toil may be, Prytherch appears to take some satisfaction in his work and permits himself a 'half-witted grin Of satisfaction' (lines 5-6) while he struggles with the land. Like the use of 'peasant' to describe the farmer, 'half-witted' is troublingly dismissive. The reader may feel a sense of unease in the way the poet describes Prytherch. Similarly, there is a

hint of menace in the landscape itself: the clouds 'glint in the wind' (line 7) foreshadowing the struggle between man and nature which unfolds throughout the rest of the poem.

Lines 8–12

In these lines the poetic voice reaffirms the image of Prytherch as an uncultured figure, preoccupied with his struggle with the land. Prytherch spends every day labouring in this way, moments of happiness being 'rarer than the sun' (line 9) across the 'gaunt sky' (line 10). His bleak emotional life is a mirror of the bleak upland landscape. Even when Prytherch does have cause to smile it is with 'spittled mirth' (line 8), a description which suggests an uncouth, possibly mentally or physically impaired man. This is developed by the crude language used as he 'leans to gob in the fire' (line 12) and his lack of mental animation as he remains 'motionless' (line 12) and 'fixed in his chair' (line 11). Perhaps he is exhausted by his ongoing struggle to work this unforgiving landscape, but the poem is deliberately building the reader's sense of distance and perhaps distaste from and for this man.

Lines 13-16

The earlier sense of disquiet and even danger returns again in this middle section of the poem as the reader is told that there is 'something frightening' (line 13) about Prytherch. Yet, according to the poet, what makes Prytherch frightening is not his actions or his continual struggle with the natural world, but 'the vacancy of his mind' (line 13). Once again Prytherch is presented as being simplistic and is reduced to an earthy, almost animalistic character whose clothes are 'sour with years of sweat' (line 14) and 'animal contact' (line 15). The rawness of the landscape on which he has toiled for so long has transferred to Prytherch, becoming part of his identity and the

language used here presents these aspects of Prytherch's character and appearance in derogatory terms.

But here the poem begins to turn on the reader. Having carefully constructed a crude and disquieting figure, the poetic voice is arguably ironic in its declaration that these features would 'shock the refined, / But affected sense' (lines 15-16). The enjambment emphasises the critique of the reader's senses as 'affected', here meaning 'artificial' or even false. The contrast within the description of 'stark naturalness' (line 16) could also suggest that Prytherch's rugged appearance and habits are both natural and shocking at the same time, much like the landscape in which he works. At this point in the poem, Prytherch and the natural world are most closely in sync, connected by a sense of earthiness and inherent danger; both landscape and man are creations to be observed and feared.

Lines 17-22

The final five lines of the poem mark a change in tone and rhythm as the poetic voice turns away from the earlier description of Prytherch as a disturbing figure with the blunt announcement 'Yet this is your prototype' (line 17). At this point the description of Prytherch becomes a tribute to the man as an emblematic hero. He is a timeless warrior a 'winner of wars' (line 21), who has stood firm against the 'seige of rain and the wind's attrition' (line 18) – the weather here presented in military terms of siege and attrition, while the span of his endurance is measured in the cyclical time – the 'seasons' of the natural world and agricultural calendar. His survival is linked with that of the nation, or rather in terms of race: 'preserve his stock' (line 19), and the image of him as a successful shepherd evokes a quasi-Christ-like figure. The language used in this section of the poem continues to build, presenting Prytherch in heroic and military terms as 'an impregnable fortress / Not to be stormed' (lines 19 and 20), an image which is in sharp

contrast to the careworn figure we see working the land earlier in the poem. At this point even 'death's confusion' (line 20) is not able to destabilise Prytherch and there are religious overtones to the way in which this one man has become symbolic of the many and stands strong in his aim to protect his flock – Christ is often pictured as a shepherd.

As the poem reaches its conclusion, Prytherch's transition from 'ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills' (line 2) to 'a winner of wars' (line 21) is completed. In one sense, the man who started the poem scraping a meagre living from the hills has become a champion over the same landscape by the poem's close. In the poem's last rhyming couplet Prytherch is further elevated. The poem is a memorial and an enjoinder to 'Remember him' (line 21). His endurance is a tribute to agricultural struggles, but also, arguably, to a wider sense of national endurance. The poem closes with the sudden move away from the Welsh landscape on which the rest of the poem, and Prytherch's life, has centred, with the reference to 'curious stars' reminding readers that this space which Prytherch occupies is just one part of a much larger universe.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Prytherch became a figure through which R S Thomas was able to address some of the internal contradictions he experienced in encountering the hill farmers in his parish of Manafon. He had expected to find in rural mid-Wales the 'real Wales of my imagination' (itself a sentence full of contradiction), but was often disappointed.¹ In 'A Peasant' Prytherch is set up as a figure from which the poetic persona recoils and then reclaims. At no point is he really a fully thinking human and in that sense, this voiceless figure can be compared with the distantly viewed peasants of romantic poetry. Indeed, the 'curious stars' of the final line have been interpreted by some critics as referring to the poet-creator's own god-like gaze.

The poem is rich in its use of striking imagery and multivalent adjectives which repay careful analysis. Meanings are unstable – what does it mean to describe a fortress as ‘impregnable’? It means it cannot be penetrated – but ‘impregnable’ is also an allusion to fertility or lack thereof. In the context of a poem about nation and survival – what is the significance of this choice of adjective?

This poem is also powerfully connected with the natural world. As is often the case in the Thomas’s poetry, the landscape is presented as unforgiving and the natural world does not appear to provide for, or nurture, Prytherch in any way. Instead, it is presented as a sparse, brutal space which Prytherch must cultivate and work in order to control. The physical demands of this struggle are evident in the way Prytherch appears worn out by his toil and is left soured with sweat from his years of work on the land. There is something faintly repulsive in the description of this man who spends his life locked in a solitary battle with the natural world and by presenting Prytherch in this way, the poet is able to highlight how his engagement with the landscape has isolated him from others.

As much as Prytherch may be depicted as rugged and worn from his experiences, so too is the natural world presented as being unappealing. The landscape the poet evokes is far from idyllic and contributes to what may be read as an anti-pastoral poem which shows the natural world to be a dangerous and unreliable environment. The volatile nature of both the landscape and Prytherch is yet another feature which connects the man and the land on which he works in this poem, with both being shown as strong and somewhat menacing forces. In spite of these images, Matthew Jarvis has suggested that a sense of fertility and hope can still be found in the poem’s description of the natural world. Jarvis notes that the description of Prytherch ‘docking mangles’ (a root crop which can be used to feed animals), is ‘an indicator of a greater fertility in the environment imagined by the poem than its opening rhetoric of “bald Welsh hills” would

imply'.² However brutal the environment depicted in the poem may be, the land still contains the potential for fertility and growth within this harsh environment, although this potential can only be uncovered through the physical toil of Iago Prytherch.

Taking a step back from the bleakness of the landscape in 'A peasant', it is possible to read the poem as a wider evocation of the struggles faced by those working on the land in Wales in the mid twentieth century. Nature is present throughout the poem, but its presence is stale and 'gaunt', perhaps hinting at a need for change and revitalisation. Such themes are explored more overtly in Thomas's later Prytherch poems, but can be seen in early form here in the way in which the struggle between Prytherch and the environment becomes a fight for survival, amid a changing and challenging climate. As a result, we may read 'A Peasant' as being a comment on the complexity and volatility of the environment in Wales and the vulnerability of the lives which are dependent on it.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE POEM:

1. Does Prytherch's life working on the land seem lonely? If so, why?
2. What impression do the adjectives used in the poem create?
3. How do you feel about Prytherch at the start of the poem? Do these feelings change as you read the rest of the poem?
4. Why do you think Thomas chose to depict the landscape as being raw and unwelcoming to Prytherch?

A ROSE FOR JANET BY CHARLES TOMLINSON

Mr. Tomlinson is an eloquent poet of place...whose work combines visual exactitude with an uncommon gracefulness of expression. People enjoyed this poem because, together with a short intro from the author, it formed quite a nice story. The intro talked about a secretary at the University of Bristol where the poet works. He loved his secretary but he never expressed his love to her. One day his secretary tells the poet that she is going to have a baby and the author, Charles Tomnilson says that when she does, he will give her a rose. So the secretary has her baby and when she comes back to work, she asks Charles where her rose is. He tells her to wait a moment and goes into his office and writes a poem called a Rose for Janet.

In the poem, the poet acknowledges that his poem is not a rose but in many ways is better. He says that, while a rose will eventually die, a poem will last forever, and also that a poem, like a rose, grows and grows and changes as you grow and see things differently. There is one expression the poet used everybody likes.. He describes reading a poem as a ceremony of the eyes, which is interesting.

It is quite a short poem but it need not be long to be good, as long as it says what it's trying to say. That's what is striking about this poem. It's very short and to the point. It doesn't rhyme and it isn't filled with personification and all the extra decorative lingos. All of those figurative stuff are not bad but sometimes it can pull a reader away from what the poet is trying to say.

IRONY: Irony describes when a meaning of something is contradicted to reach a completely different significance. It can be used for either comedic or emphatic effect. In this poem, the author is trying to emphasize the importance of the rose, but he also belittles it by saying that it is "only an ink-and-paper rose." This supposedly makes the rose better than any flower if the lesser version is still perfect.