

Joseph P. Clancy

'Anniversary'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Joseph P. Clancy was born in New York in 1928 to working-class parents. As a ‘poor boy bursting with language’, he gained a Ph.D. in Literature and taught at Marymount Manhattan College for the majority of his academic career, becoming Professor of English Literature and Theatre Arts.¹ Clancy was a devout Roman Catholic and Marymount Manhattan College was originally founded as a Catholic institution.

Reading Gwyn Williams’s *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century* (1953) sparked Clancy’s lifelong passion for Welsh poetry, and he decided to learn Welsh so he could improve on the English-language translations that were available in the 1960s.² Two of his books from the 1960s and 1970s were combined in 2003 to produce *Medieval Welsh Poems*, which remains one of the best-regarded translations of Welsh medieval poetry into English today. Clancy also translated twentieth-century Welsh poetry into English, including the work of Saunders Lewis, Bobi Jones, and Gwyn Thomas.

Clancy also wrote his own poetry. This was in English, but heavily influenced by his knowledge of Welsh poetic forms, especially the *cywydd*. This is poetry written in lines of seven syllables, with rhyming couplets (two successive lines that rhyme with each other) that alternate between a stressed and unstressed line end. Clancy’s collections of poems include *The Significance of Flesh* (1984), *Here and There: 1984–1993* (1994), and *Ordinary Time* (2000).

In 1990, Clancy retired from Marymount Manhattan College, and he and his wife moved to Aberystwyth, where they lived for more than twenty years. In recognition of his contributions to Welsh literature, particularly in making Welsh-language poetry accessible to speakers of English, Clancy was made a Fellow of the English Language Section of *Yr Academi Gymreig* (The Welsh Academy), and an Honorary Fellow of Aberystwyth University. Clancy died in 2017, just short of his eighty-ninth birthday.

(1) James W. Thomas, ‘Poet Joseph Clancy Would Have Been 90’, St. David’s Society of The State of New York stdavidsony.org/poet-joseph-clancy-would-have-been-90 [Accessed 12 May 2020].

(2) ‘Joseph Clancy, translator of Welsh literature – obituary’, *The Telegraph* (13 May 2017) telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2017/05/13/joseph-clancy-translator-welsh-literature-obituary [Accessed 12 May 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Anniversary' comes from Joseph P. Clancy's 1984 poetry collection *The Significance of Flesh*. Many of the poems in this book combine the two great passions of Clancy's life: Catholicism and Welsh poetic forms. The book's title suggests the importance of the Eucharist in the Catholic tradition, when the congregation eat wafers or biscuits as a literal realisation of Christ's body, and there are poems in the collection that directly refer to Welsh-language poetry terms, such as 'A Cywydd for Madame'. 'Anniversary' indicates a yearly celebration will be the subject of the poem, but the type of event being commemorated is left unspecified. The reader quickly comes to realise that the speaker is describing their wedding anniversary, but it is interesting to think why the poem is not called 'Wedding Anniversary'. It is always a good idea to separate the speaker of a poem from the poet themselves, as poems are literary constructions and often not directly autobiographical records. However, in this poem many of the things the speaker talks about – for example, the number of children they have, the length of their marriage – reflect the details of Clancy's own life.

Form.

The form of the poem is one six-line stanza (a sixain), followed by a stanza of twenty lines and a final stanza of twenty-four lines, with each stanza ending in a full stop. The lines are all seven syllables long, showing Clancy's interest in the Welsh poetic form of the *cywydd*, but the poem does not follow every aspect of this form. There are no rhyming couplets and the lines do not always alternate between having stressed and unstressed words at their end, but the repeated use of exactly seven syllables per line shows it is a deliberate attempt to emulate a Welsh poetic form in an English-language poem. 'Anniversary' is unrhymed and the syllable-counting approach takes precedence over other features commonly found in English poetry, such as regular iambic or trochaic metre. 'Anniversary' is addressed to the speaker's wife and a poem addressed to someone is an ode. In classical Latin poetry, which Clancy also translated, odes were often divided in three parts, like this poem. It is worth noting that as a teacher also of theatre and drama, Clancy has formed the poem like a three-act play in miniature through the use of these stanzas. The short first stanza acts as a brief introduction to set the scene, the second stanza lists good and bad experiences the couple have faced, and the third stanza reveals the conclusion of the speaker's emotional journey.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-6.

The very first word of the poem is **'Lost'**, and it is not a particularly positive term to use when thinking of a wedding anniversary. This immediately indicates that this poem is unlikely to be full of idealised romantic sentiment. The 'I' of the speaker in the present thinks about his wedding day many years earlier, but he feels so distant from the person he was then that he refers to his younger self in the third person, wondering **'What he was like, that boy'**. What is lost is ambiguous: is it the memory of the day that has faded, or does the speaker believe that this person no longer exists? The nineteen **'long summers'** since the wedding can be interpreted two ways: that the years have passed slowly; or that each year has been like one long summer, in which the coldness of winter has never had a chance to appear. Another character is introduced, **'you at the altar'**, who stands with the **'boy'**, showing this poem is written to the speaker's wife. The stanza ends with the seeming contradiction of the **'boy'** making his vows seriously, even though he was not able to understand what they would actually entail. The lines themselves are rhythmically hesitant here: the lyrical, dactylic rhythms (one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed) of the first three lines give way to a tripping, uneven metre in line 4, indicating perhaps a sense of faltering or uncertainty.

Lines 7-10.

The second stanza opens with a list of the words used in the Anglican Christian marriage vows. Without the expected prepositions of 'for' and 'in', the vows are boiled down to their bare essentials, as if these were the core memories of that day, or perhaps these lines provide a summary of the couple's life since their wedding. Looking back, the speaker feels the words spoken on that day were **'abstract'**, concepts that could not be understood at the time and which required nineteen years of marriage to become concrete. The conversion of these vows into **'body and blood'** uses the language of the transformation of bread and wine into Jesus's body in the Catholic tradition to suggest that a divine miracle has taken place, and words have turned into something living.

Lines 11-16.

It is not only the vows that have become physical; the speaker alludes to the sexual **'flesh-sharing'** between him and his wife that has led to eight children, although the speaker confesses to some form of **'neglect'** which his wife has borne (**'bearing'** in line 11 refers both to putting up with something unpleasant and being pregnant and giving birth to a child), whether that be emotional or physical. **'The easy quiet evenings / Together'** offer the first example of good aspects of the marriage, but these are quickly undercut by **'the nights you turned / Away with dreadful stillness'**, the reason for which the wife is unable or unwilling to explain to the speaker. However, he shortly asserts that his wife's **'[I]anguage'** (l. 18) is **'silence'** (l. 19), so this **'stillness'** may in fact be articulate.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-22.

The speaker lists some similarities and differences between himself and his wife, such as his **'harsh words'** and her **'weeping'**. Certain gender roles seem to be performed in this relationship with the man shouting, displaying anger and power, and the woman crying, signalling suffering. While the speaker appears to suggest an equivalence between the **'harsh words'** and the **'weeping'** by having them on the same line, the reader may decide that the speaker's hurtful behaviour is the cause of his wife's sorrow. It seems that perhaps they have language in common (**'Language is my world and yours'**), but the next line shows this to be an incomplete sentence that reads more negatively in full: **'Language is my world and yours / Is silence'**. However, some things that join the couple are then described in a burst of alliteration that reminds the reader this is not just prose divided into seven-syllable lines: **'Daily delights', 'Pride and pain, children changing'**. But this record of happy events is not long, and that poor health (**'My illnesses, your fatigue -'**) is another factor that binds the couple shows how the 'in sickness and in health' part of their vows has had to be lived through. Placing illness and fatigue next to each other again suggests parity, that **'fatigue'** is an illness, but there is also the possibility that the wife is worn out by or, less generously, bored and/or intolerant of, the speaker's **'illnesses'**. It is perhaps of significance here that her voice and approach to the 'vows' are in the main identified only through negativity, and in relation to the speaker.

Lines 13-26.

The dash at the previous line end (**'fatigue -'**) shows the speaker impatiently interrupting his own narrative, perhaps shying from or reacting to difficult emotions or truths, such as what his wife's **'fatigue'** really signifies. The exclamation mark at the end of line 23, and the rare use of an adjective in the poem - in this case **'foolish'** to describe his own efforts so far at summing up the marriage - indicate the depth of feeling behind this outburst. For the first time the poem moves into the plural first person (**'We'**) as the speaker now talks for himself and his wife together. She is given shared agency, suggested by the plural verb, **'vowed'**. This shared perspective is the turning point in the poem as it moves toward the understanding and awareness depicted in the final stanza. The speaker declares the couple who married on that day nineteen years ago are, metaphorically, dead and have been replaced by the present-day husband and wife, who have been built out of their enduring relationship: **'We are these years of marriage'** (emphasis added). The couple's identity has been gradually and irrevocably shaped - even created - by their shared vows, even as their shared actions and experiences over many years have endowed these vows with new meaning and reality.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 27–33.

After the brief appearance of **'We'**, the poem quickly returns to the speaker's perspective only, with **'I'** used three times in two lines (ll. 27–8). The speaker confidently asserts that he now understands the meaning of their vows, while this wisdom extends to an acceptance that he will never fully understand his wife's innermost thoughts and feelings: **'I shall never / Know you wholly'**. This could well be a pun on 'holy', but it also arguably expresses an almost controlling desire for total knowledge of his wife, which she resists. The speaker acknowledges **'three separations / In nineteen years'** and it is uncertain whether he means they broke up three times or just spent three nights apart. In any case, he believes he is not a **'single self'** without her; that is, he feels he is an incomplete person when he is not with her. Perhaps the **'single self'**, rather like the **'boy'** of stanza one, is now dead; the self that remains is one formed socially and collectively, through the undertaking of a shared life.

Lines 34–47.

The next sentence is fourteen lines long, as words and thoughts pour out of the speaker. The poem stops looking backwards and describes the present situation; following the declaration that he is incomplete without his wife, it now turns out that husband and wife are apart on their wedding anniversary for the first time. This prompts the speaker into emotional and heartfelt statements, and the future is considered for the first time as he looks forward to returning to his wife the next day. Again there is an increase in the poetic nature of the language used in these more emotionally charged lines, with the near-rhyme of the line ends (**'For a late celebration, / A long-delayed conjunction'**) and the repetition of **'and'** to strengthen the links between **'bodies and hearts and minds'**. Words are shared again, suggesting an increase in communication, which had seemed lacking or diminished between the couple up until now. The anniversary celebration will be a day late, but **'long-delayed'** seems an excessive way of describing their reunion, unless the speaker is referring to a love that has been absent from their relationship for some time. He reconfirms his vows via this poem, which now takes in the last nineteen years of marriage in addition to future occurrences, to affirm he will overcome **'all surprises / And trials of love between us'**.

Lines 48–50.

The poem concludes in the frank and open tone the speaker has carried throughout, with a focus on his opinion that self-awareness is key to a successful relationship. The speaker admits he was a **'brash boy'** who has become a **'flawed man'**, but he thanks his wife for the contribution their wedding has made to his life and promises to keep loving her. However, the woman's role in the marriage is described as a 'gift' of self. 'Gift' recalls the marriage ceremony (where the woman is traditionally 'given away' to the groom by her father, though here the woman seems to bestow the gift). It also echoes the gendered euphemism for sex, where a woman gives herself to a male recipient, extending the theme of physical intimacy running through the poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Anniversary' maintains a frank and confessional tone throughout. This is understandable as it is a direct message from husband to wife, but as a published poem, the reader is drawn, sometimes uncomfortably, into the personal details of the marriage. There is only one real outburst of passion – **'Enough of this foolish list!'** – but even this should be considered in relation to the poem's form. Unlike prose, the shape of a poem is another way that meaning can be conveyed, and as an English-language version of the *cywydd* form, the discipline and control behind the syllable counting in this poem reflects the considered and deliberate reasoning of the speaker. This is not an idealised love poem with extravagant metaphors like, for instance, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'. The love described here is one based in reality, with all the ups and downs a long relationship encounters. Only using seven syllables per line produces a terse style in places, such as the list of the wedding vows without their prepositions, and there is a near absence of adjectives throughout; words are not wasted here and neither is the speaker's love expressed through romantic or flowery cliché. But the struggle between the restricted form and the speaker's depth of feeling is revealed by the long sentence from lines 34 to 47. What the speaker wants to say is too much for such short lines, and the run-on sentence grows from line to line, as their relationship has grown from year to year. The absence of metaphor, simile, and other poetic devices adds credibility and realism to the poem's conclusion of continuing love. Other important themes in the poem include sexuality and voice. The poem engages the traditional Christian, Catholic identification of physical sexuality with reproduction, evidenced by the eight children the woman has borne. The wife's **'stillness'** and **'silence'** at night possibly suggest the withholding of sex, which is perhaps one of the few ways she has of asserting some power in the relationship. The wife never speaks directly in the poem as everything is filtered through the speaker, but even so, he gives her little to say beyond their vows. Her lack of voice is not untypical of love poetry written from a male perspective, but perhaps the couple achieve a certain mutual understanding by the time they **'shar[e] once more of words / And silence'**, as if they had at last learned each other's language.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

How reliable do you find the speaker's assessment of himself then and now?

What do you think his wife's reaction to this poem would be?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5 (links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

Here is a photograph of Clancy in Wales towards the end of his life:

aber.ac.uk/en/development/alumni/obituaries/obituary-profiles/joseph-clancy

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Profile of Clancy on the Aberystwyth University website:

aber.ac.uk/en/development/alumni/obituaries/obituary-profiles/joseph-clancy

A website dedicated to Clancy's work:

profjosephclancy.weebly.com

Obituary in *The Daily Telegraph*:

telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2017/05/13/joseph-clancy-translator-welsh-literature-obituary

FURTHER READING

Thomas, M. Wynn, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

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