

Stephen Knight

'Daedalus'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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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.)

Stephen Knight was born in Swansea in 1960. His collections of poetry include *Flowering Limbs* (1993), *Dream City Cinema* (1996, both Bloodaxe) and *The Prince of Wails* (CB Editions, 2012). A novel, *Mr Schnitzel*, appeared from Penguin in 2000 which, in its exploration of the relationship between a son and his parents, provides useful context for reading ‘Daedalus.’ Alongside his more mainstream poetry, an interesting vein in Knight’s work is his vernacular poetry – a type of poetry which is surprisingly rare in the canon of English-language poetry from Wales, and is represented in *Poetry 1900–2000* by ‘The Heart of Saturday Night’. These idiomatic poems are collected in *The Sandfields Baudelaire* (1996) and *A Swansea Love Song* (2017, both Smith Doorstop). *Sardines and Other Poems*, a collection for children, appeared from Picador in 2004.

Knight’s work has been distinguished from the outset by the extent of its formal refinement; its formal sophistication and ambition seems to work with the inheritance of Dylan Thomas, yet his language is accessible, natural, his poems are pop-culture literate and often funny. The largely syllabic forms of his first collection, *Flowering Limbs*, gave way to the more rhythmic forms of *Dream City Cinema*, in which highly complex stanza forms are used, best exemplified by ‘The Mermaid Tank’, winner of the National Poetry Competition in 1992. ‘**Daedalus**’, with its complex and controlled rhythmic form, its sequence of three matching terza rima sonnets, should be understood within this context of Knight’s formal ambition and achievement.

Another important part of Knight’s writing is his use of the surreal. This has been there since his first poems of growing up in *Flowering Limbs*, including ‘The Gift’, in which a four-sleeved pullover is sent to a son away at college who, wearing it, finds that two extra arms begin to push their way out of his body to fill the sleeves. ‘The Big Parade’, included in *Poetry 1900–2000*, imagines a carnival-style parade through Swansea of ‘everyone I’ve ever known / and some I’ve only seen on television’.

Knight has also, from the outset, written about his father in a range of styles, and ‘Daedalus’ should be understood in the context of this group of poems. ‘The Cinemas My Father Knew’, from *Dream City Cinema*, re-visits his father courting in cinemas as a young man and explores the changes in his father and the city over time. *The Prince of Wails* includes a number of poems, including ‘99 Poems’ and ‘Butterfly’, which memorialise or imagine the re-appearance of the author’s father.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Another context which it is important to be aware of in terms of this poem is the Classical Icarus and Daedalus myth. Daedalus was a skilled craftsman and artist who invented the labyrinth for King Minos of Crete, only to be imprisoned in the labyrinth himself. He and Icarus escape on wings Daedalus has invented, made of wax. As he doesn't heed his father's warnings not to fly too close to the sun, Icarus falls into the sea and dies. Knight's '**Daedalus**' draws on this myth as a way of praising a creative, hard-working father, lost in his work to the extent that the domestic environment around him is chaotic. The poem's closing image of '**Feathers falling**' may remind us of the ultimate fate of Icarus.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem's title, '**Daedalus**', and its dedication, '**for my father**', indicate the poet's intention to use the Daedalus myth as a way of celebrating and elevating his father. It is the creativity and inventiveness of Daedalus that Knight is most interested in, describing a father who ignores the way '**The sink is choked with dirty plates**', so lost is he in his vision, his work, in '**build[ing] his dream.**' Most re-tellings of the Icarus and Daedalus myth tend to focus on Icarus, seeing the story as a cautionary tale about human over-reaching, but here the references to Icarus – the way '**the watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' and the concluding '**Feathers falling**' – are subtle. The focus, instead, is on celebrating a creative father, lost in his work.

Form.

As is so often the case with Knight's poems, this poem has a complex form. It is constructed as a sequence of three matching terza rima sonnets (a form consisting of tercets with interwoven rhymes): the rhyme scheme of each is ababc bcdcd edee. In addition, Knight alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter: 'The **watery autumnal sun / Is cold** and **yet he sings...**' The penultimate line of each stanza has two stresses, and the final line four stresses: 'He **sings along** – / **Every other word is wrong!**' The complexity and music of this form, the desire of the poet to make something ornate and beautiful, together with the use of mythological reference, can be considered part of the poet's desire to elevate and celebrate his father, beyond his immediate world of bits of '**string / & strips of Sellotape**'.

Lines 1-14.

The poem presents the father as happily lost in his work in the face of chaos. '**The sink is choked with dirty plates, / Dead leaves, twigs – the tree / Outside the house disintegrates**'. The combination of domestic and natural images here gives us the sense of chaos as does that verb '**disintegrates**'. But Daedalus's work, his pursuit of his vision, makes him happy: '**Daedalus could be / No happier now he's begun / To build his dream.**' He is lost in his work so much that he loses connection with the reality of what's around him: '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold and yet he sings / Out loud he's having so much fun.**' The impression is of an eccentric father lost in his work who cannot see the domestic chaos: '**Obscured by coffee rings / & marmalade, his drawings flap / Among the breakfast things**'. The phrase '**breezes lap**' seems to combine wind and water (we tend to think of waves lapping), and this combination, together with the combination of domestic and natural imagery elsewhere, deepens the sense of chaos accumulating around the father. The fact that the '**breezes lap**' may be a subtle nod to Icarus's fate in the original myth. The '**dripping tap**' here – the image of something falling – may be echoed in the '**clouds of sawdust**' which '**fall like gold**' in section two of the poem, and the '**Feathers falling everywhere**' which conclude section three of the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The fact that **'To me / The watery autumnal sun / Is cold'** may be seen as another subtle reference to the role of Icarus in the original myth. If the father is a version of Daedalus, the son becomes a version of Icarus, but the dark ending of Icarus is not really drawn attention to in a poem which has celebration as its primary focus. The fact that **'to me'** is used as a rhyme may cause us to reflect on the nature of the speaker's identity; if we do read him as a version of Icarus, it is ironic, given the story of the original myth, that he views the sun as **'watery'** and **'cold'**.

Lines 15-28.

This section sustains the poem's celebration of a father lost in his work in the midst of chaos. The focus here is on the tools the father uses, their connection with tradition and their poor quality: they are **'antiques'**, tools **'His father owned'**. The saw, in a wonderful image for rust, is **'Flaked with liver spots'**. Knight uses a number of sonic devices to place emphasis on the word **'squeaks'**, to make us hear it: it is a rhyme, and there is also the alliteration of **'spots, stalls & squeaks'**. The nails, meanwhile, in a memorable image, **'snap or fold'** like paper or cardboard.

Even with tools like this, the father creates beauty – **'clouds of sawdust fall like gold'** – in a way which increases the domestic chaos: **'drifts grow / In saucepans.'** The line break is effective here, as the poem moves across it from the enormous **'drifts'**, making us think of drifts of snow, to the bathetic **'saucepans.'** There's an overall sense here of the father being slightly out of time: the tools he uses are **'antiques'**, while **'that old / Paint-speckled radio'** (note how rhyme is used to emphasise the key word, **'old'**) **'plays a song / He used to know'** and when **'He sings along - / Every other word is wrong!'** The father's joy is represented throughout the poem by the noises he makes: he **'sings / Out loud'** in section one, **'sings along'** in section two and, in section three, is **'whistling / Without a care.'** He is happy, creative, and out of touch with the world around him, and the exclamation mark at the end of section two deepens that celebratory tone.

Lines 29-42.

The celebration of a father lost in his work and keeping going in the face of chaos is sustained here: **'He works all day, intent, absurd, / Narrowing his eyes / Because his pencil marks have blurred / And nothing's cut to size.'** One thing to be aware of in terms of this poem is that, when it was initially published in Knight's collection *Dream City Cinema*, the **'And'** in the phrase **'And nothing's cut to size'** was printed with a line slashed through it, as though the word were crossed out. While this feature is not replicated in the *Poetry 1900-2000* anthology, it is a nice touch: it seems to enact the father's pencil marks, his cutting, and perhaps even suggests that the son's drafting and re-drafting of poems mimics his father's way of working. It is also typical of Knight's textual experiments; one poem in *The Prince of Wales*, 'A Tick-Box Life', is formed as a series of tick-box questions.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

As **'Daedalus'** nears its ending, there is a sense of the father facing a greater and greater sense of chaos, forcing him to take more and more drastic measures: **'At sunset, when a sudden wind pours / Through every room then dies / Away, he's there still, on all fours / To improvise with string / & strips of Sellotape.'** In the face of this gathering chaos, the father retains the disconnection with his environment that he's had throughout the poem: **'he's whistling / Without a care.'** One important thing to say about the poem is that, although the domestic scene is one of substantial chaos, this is never really seen as threatening: 'The sink is choked with dirty plates' and the world of nature breezes through: **'breezes lap / Doors and walls'** and **'doors / Slam shut'**. Each section is bound together by the way that Knight sets big, elemental forces – the wind, drifts of snow – against the detritus of everyday life. If there is a sense of threat in the poem, it seems to come from these big forces, but Daedalus is happily ignorant of them. There is no real sense of anything substantially dangerous or neglectful on the father's part; rather, the ignorance of what's around him seems primarily a way of celebrating the extent to which he is lost in his work.

The connection between the father described in the poem and the mythological Daedalus is most explicit at the end of this section, as the imagery of the feathers begins to emerge. The mythological father's craft and guile in creating the wings for him and his son seems to be the aspect of the myth that Knight wants to draw on in order to present his father. By comparing him to a mythological figure, there is a sense of Knight elevating his father, but also a sense that Knight has his tongue in his cheek when doing so, aware that his father's world is less mythological than it is one of **'Sellotape'**, a saw **'Flaked with liver spots'**, **'dirty plates'** and **'dead leaves'**. The fact that the poem ends with **'Feathers falling everywhere'** can be read in several ways. This is principally an image of beauty in chaos, linking with the image of **'clouds of sawdust'** which **'fall like gold'** in section two of the poem. It can also be read as a subtle allusion to Icarus's fall, suggesting that the father lost in his work as the plates accumulate in the sink may not be without his tragic as well as his beautiful dimension.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Daedalus**' is recognisably a Stephen Knight poem in its complex form and sense of music, an interest which permeates his work in *Dream City Cinema*. In this case, the complexities of the form can be seen as part of a desire to celebrate and elevate the father, which may also explain the fact that Knight chooses to draw on myth.

The darker aspects of the Icarus and Daedalus myth are only very subtly referred to in the poem, through the way that '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' for the speaker and through the poem's concluding image of feathers falling. The poem remains primarily a celebration of a father lost in his creativity, who '**could be / No happier now he's begun / To build his dream.**' As a result, the poem can be read as a celebration not just of a creative father but of creativity itself.

The fact that this poem gives us a Daedalus adrift in a world of '**dirty plates**', '**coffee rings**', a '**dripping tap**', is typical of Knight's work in *Dream City Cinema*, which often seeks to elevate the everyday. 'The Music of the Spheres', for example, asks readers to 'Sing a song of crow's feet, / of spectacles and Steradent / of blistered paint, of brittle leaves / while rattling a light bulb...'

Because of its highly ornate form and its use of mythical allusion, this is inevitably a poem which is aware of itself as literary performance: consider, for example, the opening sentence of section two, in which a very complex sentence is strung very naturally across a complex musical form. Yet there is also a childish joy in the presentation of the father which really makes us feel quite affectionate towards him. In section one, '**he's having so much fun**', in section two, when '**He sings along - / Every other word is wrong!**' (note again that exclamation mark). By the end of section three, the image '**Feathers falling everywhere**' follows hard on the heels of the fact that '**he's whistling / Without a care**', meaning that that final line conveys the sense of celebrating a beautiful father surrounded by chaos. In its sense of celebrating a semi-mythic father in a mundane setting, this poem echoes another poem in *Dream City Cinema*, 'The Cinemas My Father Knew', which ends with an image of the father watching a screen and seeing 'Moses / stepping down to share / his pectorals! / his brilliant skin!'

This celebration of the father is balanced by a certain distance, an inability on the son-speaker's part to share his father's feelings. '**To me,**' we are told, '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold and yet he sings / Out loud he's having so much fun.**' This distance is present in the overall tone of the poem, which remains observational and descriptive, and this tone implies something about the relationship between this father and son, as well as pointing beyond itself to father-son relationships and male gender identity more generally. It is also interesting that the poem is written in the present tense, as details like '**our dripping tap**' suggest that the content of the poem is a recollection of childhood. The poem moves in time - '**The watery autumnal sun / Is cold**' in section one, the father works through '**the afternoon**' in section two and we reach '**sunset**' in section three. Yet its present tense creates the sense of this day being forever ongoing, and the poem can therefore be linked to the attempts to recollect parents in Knight's novel, *Mr Schnitzel*.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What role does the myth of Daedalus play in the poem and how would the poem be different if this frame of reference wasn't there?

How does the speaker feel about his father in this poem?

How does the form and music of the poem contribute to its meaning?

Why is the poem set amidst a scene of domestic chaos and how does this contribute to the presentation of the father?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
 (links active August 2019)
 All links are clickable

Stephen Knight, photograph (1997) © Niall McDiarmid:



There is also a photo of Knight on the Smith Doorstop website:
<http://www.poetrybusiness.co.uk/stephen-knight>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Knight's British Council author page includes a useful critical perspective by Dr Jules Smith, offering an overview of Knight's career to 2005 including brief reference to 'Daedalus', which she reads as exploring the 'mutual incomprehension between fathers and sons', as well as 'The Cinemas My Father Knew'.

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/stephen-knight>

Kate Clanchy's review of *Dream City Cinema* is available here:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/shouting-out-boldly-from-the-back-of-the-bus-1357922.html>

Reviews of some of Knight's other books, *The Prince of Wails*, *A Swansea Love Song* and *Mr Schnitzel*, are available at the following links:

<https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=333>

<https://poetryschool.com/reviews/review-swansealove-song-stephen-knight/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/aug/05/biography>

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