

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish Literature and Language

“Remainders that we never see...”

These notes focus on four poems which were first published in the ASLS anthology *Queen of the Sheep: New Writing Scotland 23*, in 2005. Their purpose is to suggest some ways in which the poems may be read and explored by students, and also to draw attention to other related contributions in the anthology. The assignments are not designed as practice examination questions but are aimed approximately at SQA's Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade English courses. Some deal quite generally with matters of theme and style while others look at the effect of key choices of image, vocabulary or grammar. We believe that selectively used they offer interesting and worthwhile ways of getting to grips with the texts. The chosen poems, which in different ways relate to animals, are:

- *Queen of the Sheep*, Jim Carruth, page 8
- *Remainders*, Graham Fulton, page 35
- *Not an Eider Duck*, Lyn Moir, page 110
- *Ewe-Skull*, Chris Powici, page 119

RANGE:

- S5-S6. Higher and Advanced Higher Grade

KEY TEXT:

- *Queen of the Sheep: New Writing Scotland 23*, ed. Thornton, V & Whyte, H (ASLS, 2005)

RECOMMENDED:

- *Language and Scottish Literature*, Corbett, J (Edinburgh University Press, 1997)
- *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Poetry*, ed. Riach, A & Grieve, M (Carcanet, 2004)
- *Penguin Book of Animal Verse*, ed. MacBeth, G (Penguin Books, 1965)
- *RSPB Handbook of British Birds*, Holden, P & Cleeves, T (Christopher Helm, 2002)



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SCHOOLS AND FURTHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE
TEACHING NOTES: SPRING 2005

1: PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

These are focusing assignments which may be undertaken before students respond to the four texts.

1.1 Poets often choose to write about how we respond to the other creatures who share the planet with us. Eleven of the poems in the anthology *Queen of the Sheep* are evidence of that interest. Think about your own contacts with the animal world. Do you, for example, have a pet? Do you fish or ride a pony? Would you like to be a vet? How do you react to spiders and other creepy crawlies? Have you ever come across a dead or injured animal on a roadway? Are you a vegetarian? In the area where you live what animals, wild or tame, do you encounter, perhaps accidentally? In three paragraphs write a personal reflection on the animals in your life. In discussion compare your views with those of others in your group or class.

1.2 Visit the website of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (www.scottishspca.org) and using the *Latest News* section write a 250-word summary of the most recent cases of animal rescue, neglect and cruelty that SSPCA officers have handled.

2: READING ACTIVITIES

You may tackle the four poems in any order that you choose. For each one, we suggest that you read the poem over carefully for yourself, identifying words or phrases that puzzle or intrigue you. Use a good dictionary to help you get at meanings. Preferably someone should then read the poem aloud. Thereafter in group or class discussion try to come to some agreement about the point and effectiveness of each poem.

2.1 *Queen of the Sheep*, Jim Carruth

Here are some questions to open up your discussion of the poem:

- List all the expressions in the poem that refer to a ceremony. What kind of ceremony is it?
- In verse 3, pick out the expressions that convey the physical condition of the sheep. What do these have in common? How do they relate to the imagery of ceremony developed throughout the poem?
- Verse 3 contains an image that seems to point back to a famous old Scottish animal ballad. Trace the ballad and read it.
- In Verse 4, what contrast in the sheep's appearance is suggested?
- In this poem someone is speaking about his own experience. What sort of person do you think he is? (What do the expressions 'Texel', 'blood lines' and 'followers' imply?) Is he sympathetic? callous? amused? sad? disgusted? indifferent? Find evidence to support your conclusion.
- Compare the role and attitude of the speaker to that of the old man who figures in the poem *Antisyzygy* in *Queen of the Sheep*, page 124.
- How effective is the title of the poem?

2.2 *Reminders*, Graham Fulton

Again some questions to help you explore the poem:

- This poem starts with a reference to the action of ‘the Hoover gadget’. How is the image developed and expanded through the text?
- Comment on the effectiveness of these two collocations: ‘tiny whiteness’, ‘thread of thin’. What do they have in common?
- In verse 3, which expression do you think the adverb ‘slightly’ modifies? Give your reason.
- ‘Instinct’: find a phrase later in the poem that echoes this idea.
- Is ‘signals’ (verse 3) a noun or a verb?
- Comment on the tense of the verb ‘held’ (verse 4).
- Again in this poem the speaker is recalling his own experience and feelings. What sort of person do you think he is? What is he reminded of? Why is his love ‘baffling’? Why is the ‘sentimental guff’ also ‘essential’?

2.3 *Not an Eider Duck*, Lyn Moir

Consider these questions:

- Check that you have a clear picture of what an eider duck looks like, what bird-watchers call its ‘jizz’. (Refer for example to the *RSPB Handbook of British Birds*, P Holden and T Cleaves, 2002.)
- Look at the choice of structure and language in the first sentence of the poem. How is the title linked to the first sentence? How do the five present participles contribute to the effectiveness of this sentence?
- Comment on the structure of the second sentence.
- In what sense could the floating object be thought to be ‘too dead’?
- What is a ballcock? Is it another species of bird? Do you think that the image works effectively?
- In this poem the speaker seems to be reflecting on a mistaken first impression. What do you make of her conclusion in the final sentence? Think of the impact of the last two words. Do they recall an earlier expression in the poem?



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2.4 *Ewe-Skull*, Chris Powici

Consider these questions:

- What do the images in lines 1 and 2 have in common? Do you find any contrast between these and the image in line 3?
- Comment on the effectiveness of the collocation 'this small white death'.
- Which noun phrase does the participle 'drifting' qualify?
- Comment on the way in which the poem is punctuated.
- We are told nothing about the observer in this poem. Consider how far the imagery and rhythm of the second verse suggests how he may be feeling.
- *Ewe-Skull* seems to carry echoes of Hugh MacDiarmid's poem, *Perfect*, which you will find in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Poetry* (Riach and Grieve, 2004). Try to identify similarities and differences between these two poems. Find out how MacDiarmid's poem came to be composed (Page 276 of *Selected Poetry*).

3: TAKING THE FOUR TEXTS TOGETHER

The four animal poems selected for this study are very different in structures and styles but they do seem to have some features and concerns in common.

- Working in groups or individually, try to identify their main similarities and differences.
- Write a critical appreciation of any one of the poems that appeals to you (50–100 words).
- You may feel that there is a melancholy tinge to these four texts. For a possible change of mood consider a diverse trio of poems in *Queen of the Sheep* which seem to deal with birds... among other things. They are:
 - *Brent Millar's Love Birds*, page 58
 - *The Camphill Wren*, page 94
 - *Chicken Poem*, page 130.

These are challenging pieces. You will find it helpful, for example, to check on the identity of Brent Millar; on the habits of the wren, and on proverbial expressions involving chickens.

- Try your hand at creating a poem in Scots or English about a bird or other creature for whom you have experienced some kind of sympathy or fellow feeling. Why not offer it for possible inclusion in a future annual volume of *New Writing Scotland*? You will find details of how to submit contributions on page 6 of *Queen of the Sheep*.