

Six Poems by Kathleen Jamie

Teaching notes and discussion questions
for Higher English and Literacy

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LIFE AND WORKS

Kathleen Jamie was born in Renfrewshire in 1962 and raised in Currie, a small town seven miles south of Edinburgh city centre. She left school at the end of fifth year not knowing what she wanted to do but subsequently attended night school and qualified for a place at the University of Edinburgh where she studied philosophy. An intrepid traveller, she explored regions of North Pakistan and Tibet, distilling her impressions into poetry. Her first collection, *Black Spiders*, was published by Salamander Press in 1982 when she was still an undergraduate. It was followed by seven collections of poetry and three collections of essays. She has worked as a creative writing tutor in the Universities of St Andrews and Stirling and is currently freelance. She was appointed Scottish Makar in 2021, writing the 'The Morrow Bird' for the opening of the Scottish Parliament and 'What the Clyde said' for the COP 26 conference in Glasgow in 2021. Commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland for the National Monument at Bannockburn, her poem 'Here lies our Land' does not trumpet battlefield victory but pays tribute to the 'small folk' who from time immemorial have played their part in sustaining communities and building nations. Kathleen Jamie has won many awards including Forward Prizes; the Eric Gregory Award and the Saltire Society Book of the Year Award in 2016.

RANGE:

- Higher English

POETRY COLLECTIONS:

- *Kathleen Jamie: Selected Poems* (Picador 2018); *Black Spiders* (Salamander Press 1982); *The Way We Live* (Bloodaxe Books 1987); *The Autonomous Region* (Bloodaxe Books 1993); *The Queen of Sheba* (Bloodaxe Books 1994); *Mr and Mrs Scotland are Dead* (Bloodaxe Books 2002); *The Tree House* (Picador 2004); *Jizzen* (Picador 2011); *The Overhaul* (Picador 2012); *The Bonniest Companie* (Picador 2015).

ESSAY COLLECTIONS:

- *Findings* (Sort of Books 2005); *Sightlines* (Sort of Books 2012); *Surfacing* (Sort of Books 2019)

KEY THEMES:

- Nature, landscape, human interaction with the animal world, archaeology, history, travel, the place of women in society, communities, culture

KEY THEMES IN HER WORK

Kathleen Jamie is a perceptive observer of human and animal behaviour. Much of her work is grounded in Scottish landscape, communities and culture, which she describes and reflects on without sentimentality and with a deep sense of connection. She writes evocatively of the natural world, of humankind's relationship with the landscape, birds and animals. Her poems and essays demonstrate the importance of archaeology and research in rediscovering, retrieving and interpreting the cultures of diverse communities in different parts of the world. She is a keen observer of the experiences of women and girls and in many of her poems describes and questions, often with caustic humour, the social realities they face. Reflecting 'a constellation of interests', her poetry and essays encompass powerful evocations of the natural world; the exploration of diverse communities and cultures and a critical but compassionate examination of people's lives in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Scotland.

THE SIX POEMS

The six poems discussed in this teaching note are all contained in *Kathleen Jamie: Selected Poems*, published by Picador in 2018. They are:

- 'Crossing the Loch' (pp. 95–96);
- 'Hackit' (pp. 16–17);
- 'Ospreys' (p. 165);
- 'Ben Lomond' (p. 218);
- 'The Glen' (p. 213)
- 'The Queen of Sheba' (pp. 57–60).

CRITICAL SUMMARIES OF THE SIX POEMS

CROSSING THE LOCH

In this poem Kathleen Jamie recounts a memorable experience which had a powerful effect on her feelings and imagination. In the company of friends after a convivial evening in a local pub, they had launched their boat in the darkness and rowed home across a loch. She knew they were taking a risk in the dark waters and was fearful of the ever present threat posed by the nuclear submarines which patrolled below, but relieved when they arrived safely at their cottage on the other side of the loch. Her fears, however, were briefly overcome by the beauty of the loch's phosphorescence. In the final stanza she reflects on the risks they took; that their lives could have been cut short before they had lived fully and experienced the responsibilities of maturity. The poem ends with an evocative description of their crossing and an expression of heartfelt relief that they had arrived safely at the cottage.

The poem is structured to suggest it is part of a conversation with her companions some years after the event in which she addresses them, asking if they remembered 'how we rowed towards the cottage / on the sickle-shaped bay'. Her questions and reflective statements include her companions in her thoughts and feelings. She asks who was first to notice the loch's phosphorescence and states that 'It was surely foolhardy [...] but we live'. Her words suggest a strong need to share the memory of 'that one night' and a mature awareness of the risks taken in life.

The poem is rich in imagery. The metaphors 'the sickle-shaped bay'; 'the hunched hills'; the hills dark-stained with blaeberrys' and 'the magic dart of the bow wave' vividly describe the surrounding landscape. The phrase, 'the cold shawl of the breeze' captures the chill of the evening on a Scottish loch. The loch's phosphorescence creates the illusion of 'glimmering anklets' as they jumped into 'the shallows' to draw the boat onto the shore. The personification in the expressions 'as though the

loch mouthed “boat” and ‘the wounded hills’ suggests that the landscape is a living thing, not in the anthropomorphic sense but as a living organism which is subject to damage and decay. The phrase ‘the ticking nuclear hull’ powerfully encapsulates the deadly nature of the nuclear submarine’s load. The simile, ‘like a twittering nest/washed from the rushes’ describes the group’s astonishment and sense of wonder as the phosphorescence of the loch shines on their fingers, their oars and the boat’s bow wave. It also reinforces the idea of danger: that their small craft risks being swept away by the currents. The onomatopoeia of the word ‘twittering’ reinforces both their astonishment and fear. The phrase, ‘an astonished small boat of saints’ perhaps compares the phosphorescence which surrounds them to the aura encircling the heads and bodies of saints in paintings or perhaps refers to the men of the early Celtic church who sailed from Ireland to the Western Isles and travelled in the lands of the Picts to convert the inhabitants to Christianity. The comparison suggests that the poet and her friends shared in a small way these early missionaries’ fears but also the moments of wonder which nature gives to those who sail the seas and lochs.

In ‘Crossing the Loch’ Kathleen Jamie skilfully combines a conversational narrative; striking and often lyrical description and more formal reflective statements to create an evocative poem which conveys the intensity of the experience and the powerful effect it had on her creative imagination.

HACKIT

Hackit is a Scots word for white-faced.

This poem was inspired by a photograph of a woman, which the poet had viewed in the museum of Sault Ste-Marie in Ontario. It is most likely that she had emigrated to Canada during the nineteenth century Clearances. The poet imagines her life as a settler in a strange land, creating, with linguistic restraint, unembellished by metaphor or simile, a series of images which capture the stages of her emigration and settlement and mirror the austerity of her life. Kathleen Jamie pictures

her ‘staggering’ as she clears the land ‘stone after stone’, the alliteration and repetition emphasising her struggle to clear the rough ground of her new home in order to build and plant; the shared ritual of the folding of her bridal linen with her sister in preparation for their voyage and her last sight of Scotland. The economy of the poet’s word choice emphasises her struggle to survive. She staggers as she clears stones; stares at the layers of snow and speaks of the empty flour barrels and the ‘last herring’. The final section concentrates on her new life in Canada.

The poet pictures her staring at the layers of snow in the fields and the falling snow which obscures the view from her door. She is wearing a lace mutch, perhaps her best one, for the photograph. She is white-faced, her pallor suggesting ill-health as a result of hard labour and a meagre diet. Kathleen Jamie imagines her in her later years telling her story ‘steadily [...] about surviving / their first winter’, to a new generation of settlers from Scotland. ‘Steadily’ suggests she speaks without obvious emotion, telling, without self-pity the plain truth of her struggle for survival.

This photograph and Kathleen Jamie’s poem are fitting memorials and a tribute to the countless ‘small folk’ who, over the centuries, have built new lives and founded communities in the face of hardship and privation.

OSPREYS

In this engaging poem, Kathleen Jamie welcomes the return of a pair of nesting ospreys to the Central Highlands in early spring. The poem takes the form of an address, a long-established literary device, in which the poet imagines speaking to an animal or inanimate object as if it were human. ‘To a Mouse’ by Robert Burns is one of the best known of such poems. Kathleen Jamie skilfully combines a conversational, often humorous tone with a more formal register to describe the ospreys’ return and reflect on her affinity with them. They are fellow creatures sharing an often hostile environment and are driven by the same primal imperatives: to find shelter and food and to procreate.

The poem begins with the informal remark: 'You'll be wondering why you bothered', a wryly humorous comment on the harsh early spring weather they face when they 'hit a teuchit storm' as they fly towards their Scottish home. It ends with the remark: '*that's them, baith o them. They're in*'. The phrase, 'a few glad whispers' suggests that the local community, pleased to see them return, does not want to disturb them. Aptly chosen descriptive words, 'gale-battered', 'winter-worn', 'half toppled away' and short phrases, 'late March blizzards', 'raw winds' capture the harshness of the weather they encounter on the final stages of their long migration from sub-Saharan Africa to their annual nesting places. The enjambement in the phrase 'before the tilt / across the A9' creates the image of the ospreys towards the end of their long journey, turning like a plane positioning itself for a safe landing. The final stanza begins with a rhetorical flourish: 'Redd up your cradle, on the tree top', which humorously alludes to the nursery rhyme and is followed by the formal, 'claim your teind', the expression declaring that they have just as much right as any human being to their portion of land. The rhetorical question: 'What do you care?' expresses the poet's acknowledgement that the birds are wild creatures indifferent to human concern. They must be protected but left well alone in their world.

The poet's keen observation of the birds' behaviour and environment, expressed concisely in memorable images and with humour, gives the poem its lasting charm.

BEN LOMOND

This poem describes a group of young football players, supporters of Celtic FC, climbing Ben Lomond and unfurling a banner at the summit in memory of the young player who had died. It is written from the point of view of an observer, perhaps the poet herself. The speaker uses a mixture of colloquial Scots and a more formal English to describe the event and reflect on it. There is a warmth and a sense of familiarity in the Scots words and phrases: 'Thae laddies'; 'the midgies'; 'the photies'; 'wee boy'; 'wean', although the speaker most probably did not know the

group of young boys. The formal English phrase 'larks trilled' is associated more with the imagery of English lyrical poetry but aptly expresses the natural beauty of the scene on 'a hot last Saturday in May'. The compound words 'loch-side' and 'raven-haunted' describe concisely the loch-side and mountain setting. By placing together two words, 'triumphant' and 'sombre', Kathleen Jamie encapsulates the conflicting emotions of the group: their considerable but restrained pride in reaching the summit after 'lumbering' up the hill carrying the heavy banner; their feelings of grief and the desire to honour his memory in a fitting way.

Words and phrases from the traditional song 'Loch Lomond' are interwoven into the poem, linking the commemoration of the death of 'one wee boy' with this iconic song, which expresses perhaps the grief of a young woman for the death in the 1745 Jacobite Rising of her soldier lover. In the second-last stanza the poet paraphrases words from the song, changing 'we'll never meet again' to 'they'll never meet again' and expresses the regretful wish that the boy were still alive 'playing fit-ba / on some bonny banks somewhere', the alliteration echoing the final words of the song. The metaphors used in the song, 'the high road' and 'the low road' symbolise the contrasting fates of the lovers: one will survive and continue with life but the other will die. The question asked by the speaker in the final stanza expresses the human need to seek answers to the fundamental mysteries of life and death and emphasises succinctly the sense of unfairness that a young life had been cut short so soon.

THE GLEN

In this evocative poem, the poet describes a walk in a Highland glen in spring and reflects on her relationship with this often harsh environment. The first five lines are a concise description of the characteristic features of this landscape: 'rising mist'; 'the snow-drifts'; an 'ash tree'; 'a tumbling burn'. Kathleen Jamie applies the Scots word, 'cooried' (for a person or animal huddling close to a sheltering wall) to 'the last fugitive snows' which are slow to disappear from the foot of the dykes.

In the second stanza the poet addresses the heather of the hillside and the 'small invincible bird' familiarly, using the device of personification to show respect for and a feeling of affinity with the landscape and creatures of the glen. She is at ease in this glen which, to some observers, might seem a harsh and uninviting place. She expresses these thoughts and feelings with a light touch. There is no heavy philosophising about wilderness. She accepts that the glen has a long history of human activity, referring to the dykes and the centuries-old drove road. Deploying a self-deprecatory humour, she uses the conceit of appearing to ask the heather of the hillside and the small bird for permission to visit their territory. In the final two line stanza she imagines the glen and its natural inhabitants 'shrugging' as if to say that human concerns make no difference to them. They have their own being which must be valued and respected.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

In this dramatic, satirical poem, Kathleen Jamie highlights an important social issue by imagining the legendary Queen of Sheba, a symbol of female power, influence and sexuality, visiting a small Scottish Lowland town. According to the biblical account, she travelled to Jerusalem to seek knowledge and wisdom from King Solomon. The poet imagines the bejewelled queen and her entourage riding, on swaying camels, into a small Scottish town. She and her entourage make a dramatic entrance, making their stately way past awestruck crowds and bringing an exotic glamour to an ordinary, socially conservative community in mid twentieth century Scotland. Her presence provides the opportunity for the girls and young women of the community to question their traditional roles and have the confidence to assert themselves and challenge those who would keep them in their place. This extended analogy, which creates the unlikely connection between the exotic queen and the young women of an ordinary Scottish community, is developed through the poet's use of different voices, dramatic and vivid description and humour

which ranges from the satirical to the engagingly absurd.

The poet places herself in the position of a critical observer of the event, describing and commenting on it. She begins by satirising the judgmental, puritanical culture of the Presbyterian churches which still had influence on personal lives and civic institutions. In the course of her narration she inserts the comments of one of the spectators who voices his/her incredulity: 'Whit, tae this dump?' and gives her reply: 'Yes! and a mother's advice to her daughter: 'Stick in / with the homework and you'll be / cliver like yer faither / but no too cliver / *no above yersel*'. In the last section of the poem the poet uses four different voices to bring the poem to a dramatic climax. The first is that of the poet/the critical observer who, in a demonstration of solidarity with the watching girls, voices her own and the girls' aspirations to have the social and educational opportunities the queen's status and wealth allow her and declares, with humorous hyperbole, that they would like 'to clap the camels'; 'smell the spice' and 'take PhDs in Persian'. The next is the queen, who shouts her demand: 'Scour Scotland for a Solomon!'. Then is heard a spectator who growls: '*whae do you think y'ur?*', the traditional put-down, and finally the 'thousand laughing girls', who reply defiantly and triumphantly: '*THE QUEEN OF SHEBA!*'. Kathleen Jamie uses the idioms, rhythms and vocabulary of Scottish vernacular speech alongside more formal descriptive English and religious vocabulary to create vivid images.

In a series of detailed vivid images she describes the procession of the queen and the different reactions of the watching crowds by juxtaposing this display of glamour and wealth with the 'drab' reality of small town Scotland. She has a keen eye for the civic rituals of the small town in which she was brought up; the lives of young women and the everyday items of domestic life. She contrasts the hot desert sands of the queen's African lands with the windswept Pentland Hills; the luxurious bathhouses with the chlorine-smelling municipal swimming pool; the queen's expensive, seductive fashion

style with the less sophisticated style of Vi-next-door and Curriehill Liz; mutton shanks boiled for broth with avocados, exotic fruits not easily obtained or afforded at that time. She creates a vivid picture of the town's gala day procession, the gala queen giving the royal wave from 'the Brownies' borrowed coal-truck'. She derives much fun from imagining the queen leading her camels 'widdershins' round the kirkyard, defying the old superstition that to do so was sacrilegious and would bring bad luck.

The poet establishes a satirical tone immediately addressing the nation mockingly for its traditional Presbyterian puritanism which considered the Queen of Sheba a symbol of over-indulgence and sexual licence, an attitude passed down the generations. She uses the words of religious discourse: 'yea / even unto heathenish Africa' to poke fun at the entrenched attitudes of a considerable proportion of the elders and adherents of the Scottish Presbyterian churches. In the course of the poem she describes the

Queen of Sheba eating avocados 'with apostle spoons', humorously commenting on the irony of the 'heathenish' queen eating avocados with this type of spoon, a common household item popular in many Scottish homes. The sophisticated queen will teach the citizens to eat them! There is an engaging absurdity in the image of the queen, accustomed in the popular imagination to dance sensuously and seductively, letting her hair down and dancing 'strip the willow', an energetic and often boisterous communal dance. The queen's desire to seek knowledge and wisdom from King Solomon is transferred to her wish to hold the keys to the National Library of Scotland.

This poem is a linguistic *tour de force*. There is no doubt the poet is taking a stance, using satirical humour and vividly imagined scenarios to challenge society's prejudiced attitudes towards women's fundamental right to be themselves; to refuse to have their horizons limited, be independent and enjoy life.

PRACTICE HIGHER EXAMINATION PAPERS

SECOND PAPER sections 1 and 2

Crossing the Loch

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanza 1 (lines 1–7). Discuss how the poet uses language to introduce the poet's situation.
2. Look at stanza 2 lines (8–14). By referring to at least two examples, analyse how language is used to convey a sense of fear.
3. Look at stanza 3 (lines 15–23). Explain how the poet uses imagery to convey a change of attitude.
4. By referring to this poem and one other, discuss how the poet explores a memorable experience.

Critical Essay

1. Choose a poem which describes a particular experience and discuss how the poet's presentation of it enhances your appreciation of the poem.
2. Choose a poem in which the poet's use of different language techniques conveys the emotional effect of a particular experience.
3. By referring to specific techniques in a poem of your choice, examine how the poet uses language to explore the connection between the speaker and her surroundings.

Hackit

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanza 1 (lines 1–3). By referring to two examples, explain how the poet uses language to describe the woman's actions.
2. Look at stanzas 2–4 (lines 4–12). Analyse how the poet establishes the woman's previous situation.
3. Look at stanzas 5–8 (lines 13–24). Discuss how the poet's use of language effectively depicts the woman's life experiences in Canada.
4. By referring to this poem and one other, discuss how the poet brings a historical character to life.

Critical Essay

1. Discuss how the presentation of a character contributes to your appreciation of the poem.
2. Analyse how the poet uses language in a concise and distinctive way to highlight her interest in a particular character's life in a poem of your choice.
3. Choose a poem in which the poet does not overtly express her feelings about the character. Discuss why her language choices, nevertheless, create an emotional connection with the person portrayed.

Ospreys

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanzas 1 and 2 (lines 1–5). Discuss how the poet's direct address to the ospreys and word choice create an effective opening to the poem.
2. Look at stanza 3 (lines 6–9). Analyse, giving two examples of language techniques, how the poet creates a strong connection between wild creatures and human beings.
3. Look at stanza 4 (lines 10–15). Examine, giving examples, how the poet develops this connection between wild creatures and humankind.
4. By referring to this poem and one other, discuss how the poet brings them to an effective conclusion.

Critical Essay

1. In a poem of your choice, analyse how the poet's use of imagery and direct speech highlights the poet's appreciation of the natural world.
2. Discuss how the poet presents her reactions to and reflections on the natural world in a poem of your choice.
3. Choose a poem in which the poet describes aspects of nature and discuss how it enhances your appreciation of the natural world.

Ben Lomond

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanza 1 (lines 1–6). By referring to two examples of language technique, examine how the poet vividly conveys the situation.
2. Look at stanza 2 (lines 7–12). Analyse how the use of different language registers and distinctive word choice effectively conveys the poet's feelings.
3. Look at stanza 3 (lines 13–15). Discuss why the poet uses a line from the traditional song 'Loch Lomond' and why it is an effective addition to her own words.
4. Look at stanza 4 (lines 16 and 17). By referring to this poem and one other, discuss the language of the final stanza explaining why it brings the poem to an effective conclusion.

Critical Essay

1. Analyse how the poet uses imagery and tone in a poem of your choice to express her feelings about a particular situation.
2. Choose a poem which explores the connection between the characters and their surroundings and discuss the poet's effective presentation of this theme.
3. In a poem of your choice, explain how the poet's description of and reaction to a particular event contributes to your appreciation of the central concern of the poem.

The Glen

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanza 1 (lines 1–5). By referring to two examples of language technique, examine how the poet effectively conveys the scene.
2. Look at stanza 1 (line 6). Discuss how the poet places herself in this landscape.
3. Look at stanza 2 (lines 7–11). Analyse how the poet uses different language registers to convey her comfort in and respect for this landscape.
4. Look at stanza 3 (lines 13–14). By referring to this poem and one other, examine how the poet's use of language highlights the poet's feelings of connection with the natural world.

Critical Essay

1. Choose a poem in which the poet's presentation of place contributes to your appreciation of the poem.
2. In a poem of your choice, by discussing two examples of a language technique, show how the poet establishes a relationship with the natural world.
3. By referring to the use of imagery and direct speech in a poem of your choice, discuss why it is an evocative depiction of a particular landscape.

The Queen of Sheba

Critical Reading

1. Look at stanza 1 (lines 1–9). Analyse the poet's use of language to express a particular point of view.
2. Look at stanza 2 (lines 10–19). Discuss how the poet uses contrast and her purpose in doing so.
3. Look at stanzas 6–8 (lines 62–73). Examine how the poet uses humour to describe the character's behaviour.
4. Look at stanzas 9–14 (lines 74–92). With reference to this poem and one other, discuss how the poet uses language effectively to bring the poem to a dramatic conclusion.

Critical Essay

1. In a poem of your choice, analyse how the poet's use of language highlights an important issue.
2. Paying close attention to the poet's use of language, discuss how the issue of identity is explored in a thought-provoking and entertaining manner.
3. Choose a poem in which the poet uses humour to express a particular point of view and discuss the language techniques used to make us both laugh and think.