

# The Birthright

- by Eiluned Lewis -

## Activities

### A

The idea of 'birthright' will be unfamiliar to most modern learners. Discuss the word itself and what might be considered their own birthright as UK citizens, EU citizens or as part of a family. What rights might the learners consider theirs simply because they were born to them? Are these rights enforceable, do they endure over time?

Some more concrete examples such as the Jew's 'right to return' to Israel or the right of the eldest son to inherit may help to initiate the discussion, although the concept's ambiguous, perhaps rather abstract use, should become clear.

The poet's version of 'birthright': learners should be able to identify the natural world and a particularly rural, perhaps idyllic landscape as important aspects of the poet's sense of birthright. Some probing of the 'we' in the poem and who might be included (and who excluded) in it could be encouraged here. Substituting first person pronouns might help to highlight the way the reader is included and encouraged to share the 'secret' of the birthright with the poet.

### B

If time allows, some study of traditional nursery rhymes such as *Little Bo Peep* or *Little Boy Blue* might help to analyse what makes the poem seem so simple. These rhymes have techniques used by the poet here:

- regular, uninterrupted rhymes
- an affinity with music
- a repeated structure from stanza to stanza
- repetition of phrase types
- a restricted, often monosyllabic vocabulary
- simple, rural settings.

Learners should be encouraged to use the punctuation and the changes in focus in each stanza to see that the eight-line stanzas are tightly-controlled double quatrains.

The rhymes allow the poet some freedom but the repeated pattern of rhymes is replicated strictly in each stanza, making for a song-like, lyrical quality to the poem. The repeated phrasing in the poem, the patterns of language, are also important in creating its apparent simplicity. Learners should be able to find these themselves but some examples, such as 'No man' and 'To pike and salmon/To bull and horse' might help to

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start them off. Abler learners may see how the patterns move from concrete description in stanza 2 to abstract ideas in the last stanza.

The vocabulary isn't complex. All words have one or two syllables only. Learners may not be familiar with 'kindred' and 'baser' which it will be useful to explain here. The slightly archaic nature of these words may be noticed by abler learners, adding to the sense of the poem as a sort of traditional, simple rhyme.

## C

The references in the first and last stanzas to the idea of 'birthright' is another example of the tightly-controlled structure of the poem which gives it cohesion and an impression of simplicity.

In the first stanza, learners will notice that the poet considers her birthright to be something that cannot be bought or sold and that it is a source of joy but is secret and exclusive - not a right to be asserted but rather experienced/felt.

In the last stanza, the slightly archaic syntax will need to be unpicked to get the meaning. The birthright here suggests a sense of ownership of the landscape, a right to an idyllic, rural connection with the land.

## D

Learners should begin to identify the kind of landscape which the poet says is 'our' birthright as quite specific:

- definitely not a cityscape
- it's exclusive - a 'secret' - which is kept from others
- it's remote - 'far from...' suggests that it is a long way from the modern city life, perhaps rooted in the past.

The poet's own experience growing up in rural Wales but living most of her life away from her birthplace may suggest that this rural landscape is not exclusively Welsh but is defined by its connection with nature rather than nationality. The prompt question asking learners to consider whether they recognise this landscape as their own birthright might serve to highlight the idyllic, rural nature of it. Learners may also see that where they live may affect their view of Wales, the countryside and the city.

The 'shifting faces' seems to imply a criticism of city life as lacking permanence or being rootless. However, there may be an element of 'golden age' nostalgia for her homeland in the description of the landscape here. Learners should be encouraged, as ever, to consider both aspects rather than choose one interpretation.

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The idea of the birthright and the landscape implied by it as 'a secret joy' should elicit some discussion about both words. The way the reader is made complicit in the 'secret' by the use of pronouns may interest learners as well as the exclusivity implied. The landscape as a source of simple 'joy', an unsophisticated, spontaneous emotion might also be noticed.

## E

The first two lines suggest the deep connection between people and the natural world which is their birthright. The connection runs deeper than a liking for nature – the word 'kindred' suggests a familial link, that the landscape and the humans whose birthright it is are made of the same elements and belong together.

The use of 'lordly' associates the creatures in the natural landscape with nobility or royalty, elevating the status of humble birds and fish in an interesting way.

The sound of the curlew and the smell of the gorse might serve to show learners that the other descriptions are perceived through sight. The impression of the landscape as filling the senses is evoked here. The appreciation of nature is experienced through the senses, not the intellect, perhaps to evoke a strongly idealised landscape.

The wild duck, white owl and curlew are generally thought of as birds of the inland countryside. Two of the birds, the two fish and the two mammals share a line, briefly categorising some typical elements of country life. An agricultural, farming way of life is suggested by the inclusion of the bull and the horse – this is not a wild, untamed landscape. Everything is ordered and idealised. Learners could be encouraged to consider how 'real' this landscape is, as well as why and how this sense of order affects readers' views of it.

## F

The transition from concrete images in the previous stanza (albeit carefully selected to highlight the idyllic nature of the landscape) might help to focus on the more abstract qualities presented here. For the poet, 'pride', 'swiftness' and 'magic' are intrinsic qualities of nature which 'shape our dreams.' Learners may see a love and affinity with nature as an important part of their own 'birthright' or they may not share the poet's interpretation of 'birthright' at all. Some discussion of the reasons for their views, or their alternative versions of the landscape of their birthright, may shed light on the poet's version of the landscape of her birthright.

Learners may need to work out the sense of the last four lines before considering in what ways the landscape we identify with shapes our personalities and ideas.

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The tone of elation and celebration may be noticed here and located perhaps in the uplifting abstract vocabulary and the slightly archaic syntax on the stanza.

## Further Activities

Look for companion poems which portray the landscape in a very different way or a contrasting landscape altogether.

Able learners may be interested to read older poems in the pastoral tradition to understand the place of the idealised landscape in poetry.