

GILLIAN CLARKE'S 'SWINGING'



In what ways does this poem subvert or contradict our expectations of a poem about a mother and daughter?

Carl Tighe

Gillian Clarke (b.1937) was brought up to speak English, but her first language is Welsh. Her parents were Welsh speakers and '100% Welsh'. Her work has been translated into ten languages. She is the National Poet of Wales.



Her entry on Wikipedia reads:

Gillian Clarke was born on 8 June 1937 in Cardiff, and was brought up in Cardiff and Penarth, though for part of the Second World War she was in Pembrokeshire. She lived in Barry for a few years at a house called 'Flatholme' on The Parade. Although her parents were Welsh speakers, she was brought up speaking only English and learnt to speak Welsh as an adult - partly as a form of rebellion. She graduated in English from Cardiff University. Afterwards she spent a year working for the BBC in London. She then returned to Cardiff, where she married, and had a daughter, Catrin - about whom she has written a poem of the same name - and two sons. She worked as an English teacher, first in the Reardon-Smith Nautical College, and later in Newport College of Art. In the mid-1980s she moved to rural Ceredigion, west Wales with her second husband, after which time she spent some years as a creative writing tutor at the University of Glamorgan. In 1990 she was a co-founder of Ty Newydd, a writers' centre in North Wales.

Her poetry is studied by GCSE and 'A' Level students throughout Britain. She has given poetry readings and lectures in Europe and the United States, and her work has been translated into ten languages. A considerable number of her poems are used in the GCSE AQA Anthology. Clarke has published numerous collections of poetry for adults and children, as well as dramatic commissions and numerous articles in a wide range of publications. She is a former editor of *Anglo-Welsh Review* (1975–84) and the current president of Tŷ Newydd. Several of her books have received the Poetry Book Society Recommendation. In 1999 Gillian Clarke received the Glyndŵr Award for an 'Outstanding Contribution to the Arts in Wales' during the Machynlleth Festival, and she was on the judging panel for the 2008 Manchester Poetry Prize. Clarke reads her poetry for teenagers who are taking their English GCSE school exams. She is

part of the GCSE 'Poetry Live' team that also includes: John Agard, Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Imtiaz Dharker, Moniza Alvi, Grace Nichols, Daljit Nagra and Choman Hardi.



SWINGING

At the end of the hot day it rains
Softly, stirring the smells from the raked
Soil. In her sundress and shorts she rocks
On the swing, watching the rain run down
Her brown arms, hands folded warm between
Small thighs, watching her white daps darken
And soak in the cut and sodden grass.
She used to fling her anguish into
My arms, staining my solitude with
Her salty and grimy griefs. Older now
She runs, her violence prevailing
Against silence and the avenue's
Complacency. In her hatred's object.
Her dress the washed green of deck chairs, sun
Bleached and chalk-sea rinsed, colours the drops,
And her hair a flag, half and then full
Mast in the apple-trees, flies in the face
Of the rain. Raised now her hands grip tight
The iron rods, her legs thrusting the tide
Of rain aside until, parallel
With the sky, she triumphs and gently
Falls. A green kite. In wind in the string.

Notes

- In the complex relationship between a mother and daughter, is the focus on the girl swinging or the anxieties of the watching mother?
- The mother, rather than the girl, charges the scene with sexuality. The girl is too young to understand the full significance of the experience of the swing. Her watching mother, however, does understand.
- What direct references are there to sexuality? In fact there are very few direct references to sexuality: the poem operates through suggestion. The swing, for example, anticipates the sexually active young woman she will become. In what way does the movement of the swing connote sexual activity?
- What indirect references are there to sexuality? There are several:
 - 'small thighs'
 - 'cut and sodden grass' - loss of virginity and innocence
 - the darkening of the white daps (plimsolls, gym shoes, pumps) - loss of virginity and innocence
 - the apple trees – a reference to Paradise
 - two references to the colour green – denoting fertility but also jealousy
 - the girl's hair as a flag - denoting a state between innocence and experience
 - 'legs thrusting'
 - 'she triumphs and gently falls' – a reference to orgasm?
- Is the traditional notion of the woman as sexually passive overturned here?
- What do the final lines – 'A green kite. I wind in the string.' - indicate about the mother's feelings?
- Poetry written by Welsh poets often makes use of different rules from English poetry – even when it is written in English.
- Cynghanedd – the Welsh word for poetics, the sound system of a poem – means not only line length, rhyme and alliteration, but the harmoniously effective musicality of the sound effects within and across each line as they build to total effect:
 - Unusual 9 syllable line
 - The sibilants of the first half of the poem gives us the rain
 - The opening 3 lines end with r words
 - The next three lines end with the letter n
 - The repeated 'r' sounds of *grip, iron rods, thrusting* and *rain*, and the short phrases give us the girl pumping the swing to go higher
 - Look at the internal rhymes and half rhymes of *tide* and *aside, sky, triumphs, kite*, and also *down* and *brown*.
- What do you make of the title – Swinging – what has the word meant? What connotations does the word 'swinging' have? Swinging sixties? Spirited: up-to-date; attracting a lively, trendy crowd e.g. 'a swinging nightclub'; sexually promiscuous; the practicing of 'swingers' and 'swinging' - the exchange of partners, especially spouses, for sex. In what ways do these meanings impact on the poem?
- In what ways does this poem subvert or contradict our expectations of a poem about a mother and daughter?