

Gillian Clarke

'My box'

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.)

Born in Cardiff in June 1937, Gillian Clarke was brought up in Cardiff and Penarth. During the Second World War she spent time in Pembrokeshire, staying at her paternal grandmother’s farm, known as Fforest. The landscape of Clarke’s beloved Dyfed has a significant presence in her writing and is often identified with the memory of her father, as in poems such as *The King of Britain’s Daughter*. When her children were young, Clarke bought and renovated an old, ruined smallholding called Blaen Cwrt in Talgarreg, south Ceredigion, where she now lives, and which she often figures as her poetic ‘milltir sgwâr’ (square mile).

The publication of Clarke’s collection *The Sundial* in 1978 announced her arrival as a significant new voice in the world of Welsh letters, and marked the beginning of what she calls her ‘hard-working writing life’. By her own admission, she has ‘worked hard for poetry, preaching the sermon of poetry, as it were’:[1] editor of *The Anglo-Welsh Review* from 1975 to 1984, she co-founded the Writer’s Centre, Ty Newydd, in 1990, and has always retained a connection with her readers. She worked as a tutor in Creative Writing at the University of Glamorgan (now the University of South Wales), and has visited hundreds of schools to encourage the study and composition of poetry. The National Poet of Wales from 2008–2016, she is now seen as ‘arguably the most dominant and distinctive voice of Welsh women’s writing in the last two decades of the twentieth century’ – a progenitor whose work has influenced many others, including Sheenagh Pugh, Anne Stevenson, and Jean Earle.[2]

[1] Gillian Clarke, Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005

<http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/advanced/interviews/gillian-clarke-interview> [accessed August 2018].

[2] Katie Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women’s Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 146.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'My Box' was originally published in Gillian Clarke's poetry collection *Letting in the Rumour* (1989), dedicated to her mother and late father, John Penri Williams. It is the product of what Alice Entwhistle calls Clarke's 'productive middle career'[3] – a time in which Clarke, following the publication of *Letter from a Far Country* (1982), was seeking to 'build up a map of Wales as a whole', to which the voice of her poems assert 'a sense of belonging and allegiance'.[4] Important to this process was the act of re-imagining a 'communal family history'.[5] In this poem, the box becomes emblematic of a female history that has traditionally been marginalised, or hidden from view; it is reminiscent of the bride's trousseau, the sewing tin, or any other of the material artifacts that signal a female presence otherwise unrecorded in history books. But it also points toward a new experience, a new tradition, created through the act of poetic making.

The title, then, is deceptively simple, for it throws out a complex web of associations and affiliations. The use of the possessive, 'my', could be seen to enact a poetic gesture of reclamation and possession of a Welsh cultural past. Yet, as we will see, rather like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, 'my box' can also be seen as a declaration of female creative agency and freedom in the here and now. Promising to unveil personal experiences and secrets, the title yet conceals as much as it reveals, leaving an aura of mystery that invites the reader to fill in the gaps.

Form.

This poem is about a wooden box, created and given as a gift from a lover to the speaker. It draws on elements of the poet's autobiography, evoking a time in Gillian Clarke's life when she and her then husband bought an old condemned ruin called Blaen Cwrt in Ceredigion, which they proceeded in restoring together. Reminiscing on that time and that house as formative to the emergence of her poetic voice, Clarke recalls that 'to "work hard" meant more than one thing. It's both chopping wood, carrying water, and writing about it.'[6] The form of the poem thus reflects and embodies the act of careful construction (of a box, a house, a life, of love) depicted in its content. Its visual appearance on the page conjures a sense of solidity and self-sufficiency: lines are relatively short and even, and their arrangement in eight-line octaves gives each stanza a 'boxy' shape, as if each line were a building block, building up the poem brick by brick.

The poem shares many elements with the traditional ballad form. Characterised by strong, rhythms, repetition and rhyme, the ballad has associations with childhood, nursery rhyme, and oral folk traditions, traditionally associated with female-oriented or domestic realms of culture. The simple vocabulary of the poem accentuates its ballad- or nursery-rhyme-like feel, heightening the aura of fable or magic that pervades this poem and transforms the lived everyday into something magically other.

[3] Alice Entwhistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2-13), p. 9.

[4] Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, p. 147.

[5] Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, p. 147.

[6] Gillian Clarke, Interview by Barry Wood, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005 [Online].

<http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/advanced/interviews/gillian-clarke-interview>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

These opening lines appear to depict the start of a relationship, marked by the offering of a love-token in the form of a hand-made **'box ... of golden oak'**. This gift gestures to a Welsh craft tradition, which saw suitors carve lovespoons for the object of their affections. Thought to be expressive of the emotion of the carver, no two lovespoons are the same. The box, then, would seem to point to the uniqueness of the lovers' relationship, all the while connecting it with a Welsh cultural history that, given the lack of historical sources recording it, remains something of a mystery.

In spite of the intimate tone of these opening lines, the speaker's emotions remain somewhat hidden. Gillian Clarke has admitted that 'I like mystery' in poetry – hence, perhaps, her attraction to the obliqueness of the fairy tale form.[7] Here, the speaker's reticence, conveyed in a language stripped back to the bare essentials of the box's composition and construction (**'He fitted hinges and a lock / of brass and a bright key'**), hints at the myriad Welsh voices – particularly those of women – curtailed or suppressed in history. But it also invites the reader to speculate imaginatively on the missing parts of the lovers' story – why did **'He'** put so much care into the box's fabrication? Does its recipient experience joy, ambivalence, or even unhappiness on receiving it?

That the poem is focused on a material object rather than emotions also indicates Clarke's 'strong tactile and visual sense' – what scholars such as Katie Gramich see as her tendency to present history and experience in markedly spatial, material terms.[8] The sensuality and spatiality of Clarke's vision can be seen in the depiction of the shining, **'engraved'** box and the homestead with its **'sanded'** surfaces and solid stone **'wall'**, all of which invite the reader to look, to wonder and touch. Both are presented as important sites of memory and story; through her focus on the wooden box, Clarke could be seen to suggest that material objects can speak more eloquently about history (especially women's history) and the inner world of human relationships than can official history books.

The speaker's switch from the immediacy of the present tense in the first lines to the past tense in line three (**'He fitted hinges and a lock'**) indicates that she is looking back, to the time of the box's fabrication. This might account for the archaic, nostalgic tone of the opening four lines; the colour symbolism of the **'golden oak'** conjures the golden fleece and apples of Greek myth and European folklore, situating the narrative within the realm of myth.

Indeed, the speaker's box conjures the classical myth of Pandora – the woman created by the gods who opened a jar or pithos (later mistranslated as a box), thus unleashing evil and worry on the world. Yet Pandora also set in motion the human cycle of death and rebirth, and her name in Greek means 'all-giving.' Here, Pandora's box is interpreted more positively, as a receptacle for life and regeneration.

[7] Gillian Clarke Interview, Sheer Poetry, 24 August 2005.

[8] Gramich, Twentieth Century Women's Writing, pp. 147-148.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4 (continued).

The box, as suggested, can be seen both as a material expression of the lovers' relationship and as a symbol for a hidden female inheritance. The reference to the wood out of which it is made emphasises that the speaker's relationship with her/his lover is mediated by the environment and their shared appreciation of nature. Further, while the 'golden oak' is mirrored in the box's '**lock /of brass**' and '**bright key**', the box's materials also establish a contrast between the natural and the man-made. This tension opens out onto other points of tension or uncertainty in the poem: is the box an act of love, given freely? Is its key the key to the speaker's heart, as suggested by the rhyming of '**me**' with '**key**'? Or does the box with its carefully-fitted lock convey a sense of protection or even imprisonment within marriage and other 'man-made' structures? The gender of the speaker is never explicitly revealed to us (although it is hinted as female), but the box's creator is explicitly gendered male. His fabrication of the box can't help but evoke a 'heteronormative' Welsh tradition in which male lovers carved gifts – and wrote poems – for female lovers who were expected to remain passive, their identities assimilated to the objects that they were given. As we will see, this poem will subtly overturn and transform this gendered tradition.

Lines 5-8.

If the first part of the stanza describes the box's materials, the second describes how it was made: '**out of winter nights**'. This presents the box (and by extension, the poem that has been made about it) as a process, a weathering of time; like love, it speaks of the human capacity to create something from nothing, the will to make new at a time when the world appears cold and dead. It also places the object in the context of the seasonality of working rural Welsh life, in which the winter was traditionally seen as a time to make and mend things that could not be attended to during the busy spring and summer months.

Like the four lines that precede them, these lines adhere to the metric pattern of the ballad stanza (four lines linked by rhyme, with four stresses on the first and third, and three stresses on the second and fourth). However, the dactylic rhythm of line 6 (one stressed syllable, followed by two unstressed) disrupts the regularity of the ballad's iambics in a way that emphasises the physical effort put into the box's fabrication over the long winter nights. And just as slowly, the box is made, so its secrets begin to be revealed over the course of the stanza: in describing the engraving on the inside of the lid, the speaker encourages us to open it – and to read on.

Clarke's poem can also be seen to reach back to a bardic Welsh tradition that figured the poet as a kind of crafts(wo)man, a figure prized for her or his technical skill. Specifically, it can be seen to reference the *cywydd gofyn*, a late medieval form in which a bard would traditionally petition his patron for a gift, in so doing describing its great beauty. As critic Katie Gramich has pointed out, many of Clarke's poems engage with the writing of fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym – a prolific composer of *cywyddau*. By emulating medieval Welsh forms in a new, domestic and interpersonal idiom, the poet, in Katie Gramich's words, 'fearlessly places herself in the same poetic tradition and gently provides a female vocal counterpoint' to the voices of the medieval bards.[9]

[9] Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, p. 147.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-8 (continued).

The repetition of **'golden'** across lines 1 and 8, and the linking of lines 2 and 4 with 8 through the rhyming of their final syllables (**'my lover's gift to me'**, **'of brass and a bright key'**, **'golden tree'**) appear to offer a pleasing sense of continuity and completion. However, this is balanced by subtle changes that occur in form and image across the first stanza. The fact that the wood of the **'oak'** is transformed into a **'golden tree'** by the end of the stanza signals that, through the act of writing, the poet is putting down roots. The traditional ABCB rhyme scheme of the first four lines is disrupted in lines 5-8 (**'planed'** and **'tree'** do not rhyme), defying reader expectations and opening out the poem to the possibility of different phonic connections. Again, this accentuates the idea that the poem – like its lovers – draws on the ancient past to create its own tradition, in fitting with 'a new society, a new Wales.'^[10]

Lines 9-16.

These lines are more explicitly about writing, and, crucially, being able to feel at home in writing. They also explore the theme of mutuality, and consider poetry's role in processes of reclamation and conservation. The traditional gender roles of the craftsman as artist and his lover as passive recipient are challenged here when we learn that the speaker, too, is an artist, a fabricator of words. For rather than keeping linen or jewellery or any of the traditional paraphernalia of femininity in her box, she keeps **'twelve black books'** of her own writing. These make allusion, perhaps, to the *Lyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (the Black Book of Carmarthen), one of the earliest surviving manuscripts written solely in Welsh. Speaking Welsh was discouraged in Clarke's childhood home by her mother, who like many Welsh speakers of her generation associated English with social betterment. The box of black books, placed under lock and key, might be seen to convey Clarke's childhood sense of being locked out of the Welsh-language tradition.

For Clarke, feeling estranged from the Welsh language was bound up in a sense of estrangement from the world of poetry that she often links to her gender identity. She recalls how, at university, 'I was taken aside by my tutor and told: 'Forget your poetry now. This is an academic institution and you must concentrate on your studies ... Where, in my education, were the women poets? Where were the Welsh poets? I became secretive about my writing after that.'^[11]

In this poem, the **'black books'** become emblematic of a new, female literary authority. Inscribed with the details of the speaker's daily life, they emphasise a sense of writing as something immersed in shared effort and domestic, everyday life (hence the shift from the third person singular, in stanza one, to the first person plural in this stanza). Repetition abounds: line 11, **'how we have sanded, oiled and planed'** echoes line 6; the **'apples and words and days'** harvested by the lovers in line 15 echo the reference to **'winter nights'** in the first stanza; the reappearance of the **'golden tree'** in line 16 signals its status as a kind of refrain, typical of the ballad form. Like ancient Welsh poems in the oral tradition, Clarke's use of circularity and repetition function as a kind of memory work, shoring up precious aspects of the past against forgetfulness.

[10] Emyr Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition* (2000), quoted in Alice Entwistle's chapter on Gillian Clarke in *Poetry, Geography, Gender*, p. 117.

[11] Gillian Clarke Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The **'wild heartsease'** and **'well'** allude to a sense of healing and flow: heartsease is a wild flower used in traditional botanic herbalism to purify the blood and aid respiration.

At the same time, the disruption of the ballad's iambic rhythm becomes even more pronounced here: the first line is trochaic (a 'trochee' is a metric pattern or 'foot' made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable), and the dactylic rhythms at the beginning of lines 12, 14 and 15 (a 'dactyl' being composed of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed) emphasise a sense of growth and overflowing abundance. In fact, you could argue that the poem derives its gently subversive power from the practice of incremental repetition: phrases and images recur but always with subtle differences – with the result that the same old words take on fresh new meanings, almost imperceptibly.

Lines 17–20.

The accentual rhythm of **'On an open shelf'** places emphasis on **'open'**. The speaker's assurance that the key is not hidden away, but is instead **'in the lock'** highlights the accessibility of the box, and by implication, the openness and inclusivity of the new poetic tradition it has come to represent. This stanza has to do with poetic legacy – with what it handed down – as implied by the speaker's statement that **'I leave it there for you to read, /or them, when we are dead'**. Although it is projected as a kind of heirloom, the tradition represented by the box is not so much about ownership: rather, it is freely offered to each and every reader of the poem, who are invited to discover and use it for themselves.

Lines 21–4.

The final four lines of the poem gather together images that have recurred throughout the poem. In a similar moment of synthesis, the speaker reaches a realization of **'how everything is slowly made, / how slowly things made me'**. In this way, s/he offers a reflection on the different ways that the space that is Wales/Welsh tradition has shaped the figure of the poet, even as s/he slowly shapes and recreates it through writing. The ancient words that make up the poem's refrain, **'books and a golden tree'** are no longer tinted with nostalgia: rather, they now evoke a sense of growth and, in the roots of the tree, interconnection. This sense of the interconnectedness of books and trees, people and things, inside and outside, is accentuated by the complex, interlocking sound correspondences in these lines, which make innovative use of rhyme, assonance, and alliteration (**box/lock, made/me, me/tree, box/books**).

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The presence of the lyric 'I' in this poem signals Clarke's skillful adaptation of the traditionally communal ballad form to the more personal, reflective idiom of the lyric. The interrelation of these forms highlights the play between interiority and exteriority, secrecy and sharedness, which characterises this text. For Clarke, a poem is 'about telling the truth. It is personal, but never just my experience.' [12] The story of the box is particular to the speaker, but it is also, the poem seems to suggest, common in some ways to many people. Furthermore, the lovers' painstaking, joyful reclamation of the house from nature becomes a metaphor for the speaker's reclamation of a 'home' in poetic tradition. The box with its engraved '**golden tree**' becomes a more fitting image for love and partnership, perhaps, than the gold wedding ring. For it speaks, not of closure, but of sharedness and connection. Clarke herself has suggested that she prizes sequences 'where one poem will glance at another and connect ... so that things will layer into each other and connect, sing to each other - I love that! So instead of the poem being boxed in, it opens out.' [13]

'**My Box**' also glances at other poems: not only those of the medieval Welsh-language tradition, but also the lyrical ballads of Wordsworth, a strong influence on Clarke in her early career. Yet, rather than being boxed in by this wealth of cultural knowledge, the speaker, like a new Pandora, discovers in her box materials with which to build a new creative life.

[12] Gillian Clarke Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005.

[13] Gillian Clarke Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How do you think the speaker feels about the box? Why?

What do you think are the most important images in this poem?

What is the role of the natural world in this poem? Are the species of birds and flowers that are mentioned linked to a particular place? What might be the relevance of this?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses? Why might this be?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

<https://i2.wp.com/www.gillianclarke.co.uk/gc2017/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Windswept.jpg?resize=768%2C858>

Clarke's photograph, featured on her official website, is marked by the directness of her gaze. The camera angle, facing slightly upwards, signals her status as a respected figurehead for Welsh poetry, while the background of autumnal trees is apt given the importance of the natural world in her writing.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

This webpage includes an extended critical perspective, biography, bibliography (up to 2012) and a list of awards:

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/gillian-clarke>

Gillian Clarke's own website has a useful page of recommended resources for teachers:

<http://www.gillianclarke.co.uk/gc2017/resources/>

Gillian Clarke's reading of 'Swans', from her 2012 Collection *Ice*, gives an insight into her use of pacing and rhythm:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuKxqIJZg00>

An interview with Gillian Clarke at Glyndwr University, filmed 23.11.11. Clarke offers insights into her view of the role of the National Poet of Wales; her attitude to Wales and Welsh culture; her smallholding in Ceredigion, and attitude to life in the country and the city. It finishes with a reading of her poem 'Welsh':

<https://vimeo.com/32633745>



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