

# Brian Morris

# 'In Cardigan Market'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University  
Prifysgol Abertawe

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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.)**

Brian Morris, also known by his later title Baron Morris of Castle Morris, was born in Cardiff in 1930. His varied career included being a teacher of English Literature (at the universities of Reading and Sheffield), before moving to Wales and becoming a crucial proponent of the University of Wales, as Principal of St David’s University College, Lampeter. Although he took the post as Principal as a way to reconnect with his Welsh roots, Morris retained his home in Derbyshire and split his time between England and Wales. Not a fluent speaker of Welsh, Morris nevertheless campaigned for its legal status, such as simultaneous translation in court cases.<sup>1</sup> He was a friend of R. S. Thomas, who encouraged him in his poetic pursuits. He was also, like Thomas, a keen Welsh nationalist.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, he published a book on the Welsh poet and nationalist, Harri Webb.

Morris was a poet, writer, and broadcaster, and a life of public service resulted in his appointment to the House of Lords in 1990. Possessing a keen interest in theatre, he was also an occasional actor, and appeared in BBC Children’s Hour plays (recorded in Cardiff) early in his career. As a poet, he produced several collections of poetry, including *Tide Race* (1976), *Stones of the Brook* (1978), *Dear Tokens* (1987) and *The Waters of Comfort* (1998). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 2001, just days before his death. He was a Shakespearian scholar (his first major academic appointment was to the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1956), and also general editor of the Arden Shakespeare. In addition he was said to have an ‘extensive knowledge’ of the Bible and Classical Literature, themes that feature prominently in his poetry.<sup>3</sup>

(A biography is also available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens)

(1) Andrew Roth, ‘Obituaries: Lord Morris of Castle Morris’, *The Guardian* (3 May 2001)

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/may/03/guardianobituaries.Whitehall>

(2) ‘Obituaries: Lord Morris of Castle Morris’, *The Telegraph* (2 May 2001)

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1328746/Lord-Morris-of-Castle-Morris.html>

(3) ‘Morris Papers’, Brian Robert Morris, Lord Morris of Castle Morris (1912–2002)

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.555768!/file/Morris.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.555768!/file/Morris.pdf)

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

Note that the title *places* the poem (gives it a location). There is a documentarian aspect to its titling, simply stating that the speaker – about whom readers will infer much more in the graphic opening lines – is *in* Cardigan Market. The use of a simple preposition: ‘**in**’, is crucial to our immediate expectations of the poem. If it were removed, it would give a reader the impression that the poem were *about* Cardigan Market, which it is not.

## A Note on the Location.

Cardigan Market is a large, mostly enclosed modern Gothic-style market (one of the first of its kind in the UK), and it also has some prominent Arabic influences. While the location of the poem isn’t mentioned in much detail by Morris’ speaker beyond its title, its setting will certainly conjure images in the minds of those readers familiar with the building’s idiosyncrasies. The market’s fortunes have waxed and waned and this poem appears to recall a period of bustling activity in the hall which is rather different to its modern day atmosphere.

## Form.

‘In Cardigan Market’ is written in Shakespearian (or English) sonnet form, with three quatrains and a final couplet (rhyme scheme: ABBA, CDDC, EFFE, GG). The rhyme scheme, while consistent in its way, uses different rhymes for each quatrain. In this version of the sonnet, the final couplet usually performs a *volte*, indicating a turn (but not an outright departure) from the substance of the lines that precede it. Each line consists of ten syllables, also known as a pentameter. Shakespeare’s variation on the sonnet form brings along with it certain expectations in a reader, expectations that a Shakespeare scholar such as Morris would have understood.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1-4.

The opening quatrain introduces the subject of the poem, 'Auntie Jane fish'. Note that the nickname gives Jane both a familiar (even familial) identity ('**Auntie**'), and also a place within the market ('**fish**', as in fishmonger). It might even suggest an overarching familial relationship between the market sellers and also the wider community. Also, note how the use of '**they**' places the speaker outside of the group (it is a nickname used by others, but not the speaker). The language is colloquial, and has an *in media res* quality, suggestive of familiarity or an imagined or conversation that has already begun between the speaker and the reader. This kind of opening creates a sense of intimacy between speaker and reader, which is quickly shattered by the graphic and seemingly offensive language used to describe the poem's subject: '**rough**', '**fat**', and '**toothless**'. Contemporary readers might recoil from such objectifying language, although the speaker may simply be listing and repeating overheard terms '**they**' have used to describe Auntie Jane.

In the context of the words that surround it, '**Rawboned**' doesn't appear to fit, given that it usually means skinny or gaunt. However, it can also be used to mean 'big-boned', and 'physically powerful' (*OED*), but whether this is meant in a complimentary way is unclear. There is one other word here that doesn't quite fit with the others: '**grin**'. It serves as a counterpoint to the mostly negative introduction to Jane, even if the verb, 'to grin' can seem lacking in sophistication. Enjambed (running over the line break) onto the next line, this single positive quality is instantly undercut by the description of Auntie Jane's '**grumble**'. Following this, the reader is presented with a striking simile, likening Jane's voice to the sound of '**a saw on a nail**'. While the simile appears intended as a veiled compliment about Jane's ability to make herself heard across the din of the market – her voice 'cuts' '**Like a saw**', but adding '**on a nail**' transforms the power into a painful shriek. Readers might be reminded of the phrase 'to shriek like a fishwife', or the use of fishwife to denote a shrewish woman. It is the first of several echoes of the irony found in Shakespeare's ground-breaking satirical Sonnet 130, in which the speaker writes of his mistress' voice: 'I love to hear her speak, yet well I know / That music hath a far more pleasing sound'.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 5-8.

The second quatrain (the beginning of the CDDC rhyme section), builds upon the first (indeed, the beginning of this section straddles the end of the opening quatrain's **'She stinks enough'**). The sensory experience of the poem, up to this point both auditory and visual, now extends to the smells of the market, and Jane in particular. Her **'stink'** is so strong that it has an effect on Jane's appearance, creating a **'phosphorescent [...] glow'** that surrounds her (a description that could equally apply to one of the fish that she is selling). In addition to the smells described so luridly in this quatrain, the **'drips [of] female sweat'** create an almost tactile quality (one that can be felt or touched). You could also read this **'female sweat'** as Jane's femininity as some how out of control, incontinently transgressing the body's boundaries. Not even halfway through the poem, the reader has arguably encountered four of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, and touch. In a similar way to the description of Jane's **'grin'** in the second line, the reference to **'friendship'** (though tacked-on to the description of her **'sweat'**) adds another positive quality to the litany of supposedly negative ones already attributed to Jane. This **'friendship'** also imbues Jane, and the market, with a strong sense of community.

## Lines 9-12.

The third and final quatrain (with an EFFE rhyme scheme) demonstrates a significant shift in the speaker's focus, from Jane to the produce she sells (varieties of fish), and it also alludes to the catching of the produce (work that takes place away from the market in the nearby river Teifi and Cardigan Bay). This shift has the effect of placing Jane into a wider context (one in which she is not the only focus of attention). The negative physical description of Jane that emerges in the first and second quatrains is superseded by much more attention to the supposed negative qualities of the fish that she sells: for example the **'vulgar herring and the vicious eel'**. This amplifies the *resilience* of Jane only briefly alluded to previously. Her ability to smile (or **'grin'**) and form friendships in the presence of such a grotesque gathering of sea creatures (and the death that they also represent) seems both commendable and unlikely in the circumstances.

## Lines 13-14.

The final two lines form a couplet that, as expected in a Shakespearian sonnet, perform a *volte* (a turn), and turns the poem from a portrait of Jane that emphasises grotesqueness to one that appears to admire its subject. Jane, we are now told, is **'Richly alive'**, despite working **'All day'** (**'till night'** as well, as we learnt in line 8). While the formal characteristic of the final couplet's *volte* is to be expected, it does arguably – and for the first time in this poem – break with the pentameter of the previous thirteen lines. The crux of this rests on the pronunciation of the word **'silvery'**, which would need to be two syllables (silv-ree), and not the more potentially more naturally rhythmic sil-ver-ree. Are we, as readers, meant to understand this as a deliberate challenge to the constrictions of the sonnet form, or even a way for Morris to draw emphasis to the last line (which is obviously crucial to the overall meaning of the poem)? The word itself is very evocative, and recalls the saw and nail metaphor from the opening quatrain, as well as the colour of both the money and the fish it is traded for.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Morris's sonnet has many strengths, such as its ability to weave complex vocabulary into a simple style, its sympathetic portrait of a person who may seem an unlikely subject of a sonnet, and its raucous evocation of sensory experience. The trick of this poem, it appears, is the skill with which Morris builds, and *maintains*, tension. Crucially, this is not achieved through action (Jane, and the market, remain notably still throughout: '**All day she squats here**'), but rather the nuanced observation of its subject. The tension arises from the conflicting ways in which Jane is described, and the way in which the language veers between vulgar and sentimental. This might be accounted for if we are to understand the vulgar sections at the beginning as the descriptions of other market traders (or shoppers) who have neither the time nor inclination to make an effort to understand Auntie Jane fish's qualities.

It is revealing to note the adjectives used to describe the secondary subjects in this scene (the fish), in order to decipher what, to the speaker, Jane is not. She is not '**vulgar**', like the herring, and nor is she '**princely**' like the salmon. She is certainly not '**vicious**' like the eel. Most importantly, as is revealed in the final line, Jane is '**Richly alive**', and not, as are the fish, '**dead**'. While the speaker of 'In Cardigan Market' doesn't make direct comparisons between Auntie Jane and the fish, they are arguably implied by Morris. In evoking the grotesque imagery of the fish that adorn Jane's stall, the poem sets up its denouement: its final couplet. Jane is, crucially, '**alive**', even when surrounded by all of these dead fish.

The process of comparing the subject of a sonnet with a series of inanimate objects has precedence (think of the famous opening to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day'). But Auntie Jane doesn't appear to be the object of romantic affection of the speaker (at least, not from what we can discern in this poem). A more apt Shakespearian poem to look at would be Shakespeare's satirical Sonnet 130, in which the subject of the poem is compared unfavourably with several objects (and begins with the line 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'). Morris begins his sonnet by wrongfooting his reader, allowing the final couplet to fully subvert the poem's opening.

In a twenty-first-century context, there are certainly some potential issues with Morris's (or, more appropriately, the speaker's) objectification of Auntie Jane, who is judged predominantly on her physical appearance rather than her less visible qualities. There are some misogynistic tropes, such as the loud and painful voice, and a blunt appraisal of her physical appearance which is arguably threatening in its watery potential to overflow its boundaries. While it is always important to judge a poem in its original context and not subject it to a kind of moral relativity (judging it by the standards of the modern day), it is also worth noting that by the end of the poem the speaker, it seems, has overcome their initial revulsion to Jane and arrived at a point of admiration or awe (she has become a kind of totemic queen, brooding over the primeval creatures '**caught before the stars went out**').

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The identity of the speaker is also one worth returning to. While the voice does not appear to be that of a regular to the market, one of the **'Men [who] come from miles'** about, would we be correct as readers to assume that it is indeed Morris who is standing in the market and observing Jane? The voice adopted by the speaker of the poem is markedly different to the speaker of the other Morris poems anthologised on the previous pages of *Poetry 1900–2000*, both in tone and style. Perhaps, then, we might think of this as an overheard remark, later elaborated upon by Morris in the form of a poem. Whichever of these is the case (and it could of course be neither), as readers we might question what is the effect of taking a mundane, seemingly unremarkable scene and weaving it into not only into a poem, but into the form of a sonnet (a very particular *kind* of poem, with a very particular set of expectations).



# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Do you think that the poem's speaker is repulsed by 'Auntie Jane fish', or that they admire her? How do you respond to her? How do you respond to the speaker?

What do you think about Morris's use of description, especially his use of adjectives?

What is the effect of Morris's use of sensory language, particularly sights, smells, and sounds?

How does the poem use the sonnet form? Is it respectful of its boundaries, or does try to break through them?

## SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

# PHOTOGRAPHS

A photographic portrait of Morris is available here:

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw09491/Brian-Morris-Baron-Morris-of-Castle-Morris?LinkID=mp06502&role=sit&rNo=0>

An early sketch of what Cardigan Market would have looked like before it was surrounded by other buildings is available here:

<http://www.guildhall-cardigan.co.uk/history/>

# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales has website with some good information, and images, of Cardigan Market Hall:

<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/23291/details/market-hall-cardigan#online>

The University of Sheffield, where Morris spent over a decade working in the English Department, has a very useful, detailed biography (covering his early military career and his later political achievements):

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/special/morris>



**DR JAMIE HARRIS**

*Aberystwyth University*

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