

Robert Minhinnick

'After a Friendship'

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.)

Robert Minhinnick (b. 1952) was born in Neath but grew up in Maesteg and Pen-y-fai near Bridgend. He read English at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth and University College, Cardiff. He came to prominence as a poet in the late 1970s, with the publication of two collections in quick succession, *A Thread in the Maze* (1978) and *Native Ground* (1979). He has since published some ten collections of poetry, along with well-received collections of essays and three novels. He is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (twice, 1999 and 2003) and the Wales Book of the Year (three times, 1999, 2003 and 2006). Alongside his writing, he is an environmental campaigner. He co-founded Friends of the Earth Cymru in 1984 and Sustainable Wales. He was the editor of *Poetry Wales* magazine from 1997 to 2008.

The years in which Minhinnick began writing and publishing were a turbulent time for Welsh society. Since the 1960s, Wales as it had been known – a land of, primarily, coalmining and agriculture – had been changing. By the late 1970s Wales was in the throes of a slow but steady process of deindustrialisation. A society whose economy had once depended almost entirely on the ravaging of natural resources was fast becoming aware of the toll this extraction had taken on the landscape and environment. Much of Minhinnick’s early poetry registers this shift and displays a sensitivity to the industrial past and its place in shaping the present environment: his first collection, *A Thread in the Maze* is full of images of the detritus of former industrial vigour: ‘Old ships lie out in rust-coloured lagoons [...] Their rudimentary structures/Like the skeletons of dinosaurs’ (‘Old Ships’). These poems are rooted in a sense of place and a lived past. ‘After a Friendship’ can be read alongside these in its recollection of a lost childhood friendship. Once asked whether the exploration of childhood and the past was important to him as a poet, Minhinnick answered ‘Yes, it is. Perhaps it derives from the simple fact that I live not far from the place where I was brought up, so that I’m close to my childhood in terms of distance if not time.’

(1) Sam Adams, ‘Interview with Robert Minhinnick: ROBERT MINHINNICK IN CONVERSATION’, *Carcenet*, 2000, carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=14;doctype=interview

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

However, what remains for Minhinnick after the weighty Welsh past recedes is not a narrow nostalgia or sentimental sense of place but a broadening awareness of the vigorous processes of the natural environment. 'I am interested in the environment and I've looked at it closely and learned to love it and to fear it, to be disgusted by it and to be inspired by it.'² This extends not only to the natural world and its rich, colourful symbolism, which is abundant in Minhinnick's writing – 'scarlet honeycomb'; 'jewels / Of the pomegranate'; 'the creeping flower [...] / Scattered everywhere like confetti' ('Native Ground') – but also inwardly, to an intimate awareness of the biological processes of the body and its interactions with nature: 'I sweat / Listening to my blood's journey, / The thin blue pulse that throbs above the eye' ('In Class').

Moreover, Minhinnick's concern with the natural world extends outwards, beyond the body and the locality in which he lives, to the globe. His poetry evidences an interest in international issues which connect to changes taking place within Wales. In particular, travel is a consistent and energising theme in much of Minhinnick's poetry and prose, with collections such as *Watching the fire-eater* (1992) and *Badlands* (1996) drawing extensively on his travels. Minhinnick himself has disputed the idea of himself as a travel writer, documenting 'other' places – rather he views these books as being 'about Wales viewed from other, strange parts of the world.'³ The broad effect is a body of work that is profoundly attuned to the organic forces that drive both the natural world and us; one that places humans not at the epistemological centre of the universe but as participants caught up in the biological processes of time and the lived environment. In his own words, he is 'interested in a universe which is teeming and is indefinable, and trying to reflect on our part in it.'⁴

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'After a Friendship' is a poem about childhood friendships – how profoundly important these are for childhood development and maturity, but also how transient they can be, and how easily lost. It explores the ways in which early friendships, while often brief, are unique, and resonate with us throughout our lives, acquiring new meaning as we develop and mature as adolescents and, later, as we reflect on them as adults. This is, then, a poem about the grief of losing a friend, and the unavoidable passing of time, but also the significance of learning to value lost friendships and relationships. Moreover, this understated, emotionally restrained title captures one of the poem's key themes: the reticence of childhood friendships, where profound feelings are so often unspoken, and instead expressed through actions.

Form.

Minhinnick employs the ballad form in this poem. The ballad is a traditional, folk verse form: four lines per stanza, with a repeating, songlike rhythm and rhyme scheme. They were traditionally oral in inception, sung by the working class both as entertainment and as a means to convey dramatic, comic or heroic stories about history and popular memory. However, in the case of 'After a Friendship', the use of the ballad form is deceptive. Modern poets often use traditional forms to experiment with poetic technique and to reflect playfully on literary form and convention. This poem is an excellent example of this; Minhinnick ingeniously employs the ballad form to reflect on the tension between the perceived simplicity of young friendships and their emotional depth – the ways they contribute to the '**great / Discovery of ourselves**' (Lines 27–28).

While the poem does employ rhyme and half-rhyme throughout, unlike the traditional ballad, the rhythm is deliberately staggered and syncopated. Some lines and stanzas flow freely into one another (enjambment), while others break off suddenly, with caesuras interrupting the flow mid-line – as though mimicking the irregular rhythms of life itself. Further significance about the use of the ballad in this poem is the fact that this was, traditionally, a form designed to be easily memorable, yet this is a poem that reflects on the strange paradox and contradictoriness of memory – the ways it can make the distant past feel visceral and immediate, while also changing and altering organically with time and experience.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The poem begins rather abruptly with the noun phrase, **'Still clear'** (line 1). This gives the first sentence of the poem a colloquial syntax, as though the memory has startled the speaker into recollection. The phrase also allows for a clever multiplicity of meaning. Strong memories are often described as **'clear'** but the phrase could similarly mean that the weather that morning was **'clear'**. If we take the latter to be true, then the phrase **'still clear'** also implies a sense of continuity between past and present – the idea that the **'clear [...] morning'** all those years ago is still **'clear'** today. This further sets up a conceptual tension that is key to the meaning of the poem: the tension between the deceptive clarity of recollection and the complexity of what a memory can mean or symbolise as time passes.

Pursuing the idea of the immediacy of the memory, this first sentence is spoken using the present participle – **'The lorry carrying furniture'** (line 2). The lack of a primary verb (is/was **'carrying'**) creates ambiguity about the aspect/timing of the event. In the speaker's mind, with the immediacy of recollection, this is happening as he speaks: past and present are interwoven through memory, and this is conveyed through the use of the language of the present tense. The caesura (commonly known as a pause in the middle of a line or a break between words within a metrical foot, here represented by a full stop) after **'Swansea'** (line 3) brilliantly conveys a sense of finality and disconnection: this is the beginning of the end of the speaker's friendship. The stanza concludes with a poignant image of a young boy staring out at his departing friend, close enough to the glass that his breath creates condensation on the window of the **'empty house'** (line 5). The speaker now recalls that he **'never waved'** (line 3). The use of the past participle here (**'waved'**) perhaps implies that he is now, in the present, able to reflect back on his actions as a young boy: perhaps he was, at the time, paralysed by grief, or lacking the emotional maturity to see **'clear[ly]'** (metaphorically, as well as literally through the **'window'** clouded by his breath [line 4]) what was happening and what a change this would make in his life.

Lines 5-12.

The final line of the first stanza runs over into the second, a use of enjambment that conveys a sense of the strange continuity of memory, and the way it connects the past with the present: here the vividness of the speaker's sense of the **'sweet-stale / Air of the empty house'** continues into his recollections as an adult of the event.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The next two stanzas convey the young speaker's sense of loss. Again, a tension is produced between the specifics of what the speaker is able to recall and the depth of feeling, or what these memories symbolise. There is a studied matter-of-factness about these stanzas, beginning with the understated drama of the lines **'If there was grief I have forgotten it, / But from then on things were not the same.'** (lines 6-7). The iambic cadence of these lines, followed by the end stop that closes the latter line, stands out in a poem that contains so much flowing enjambment, and more firmly emphasises the sense of finality. Indeed, what the lines that follow convey is a sense of absence and emptiness, of things **'not [being] the same'**, and of a sense of grief that cannot be remembered, but which leaves its outline in the banality of day-to-day life: **'Grammar-school, homework, rugby-kit / Filled my time'** (lines 8-9). This asyndetic listing of the symbols of school-life offer a sense of time being **'filled'** without joy or enthusiasm.

There is a profound melancholy and isolation in the lines **'I learned to become / Invisible'** (lines 9-10), which again plays with the idea of absence/presence, encouraging readers to reflect on the way that grief can make us feel absent and alienated from others and from ourselves. It also suggests that, alongside his immersion in his formal school learning, the speaker is also learning to become an adolescent/young adult – with all the emotional baggage that comes with a child's fall from innocence. The speaker recalls that he **'wrote the days' timetable / In an exercise book'** (lines 10-11), an image which further conveys the idea of merely filling time with no enthusiasm, as though life is an empty outline, a futile **'exercise'**. Notably, these lines deliberately disrupt the rhythm of the ballad form, using frequent punctuation to give an irregular rhythm, mimicking the irregular, disjointed emotional rhythm of the speaker's sense of loss.

However, stanza three ends with a powerfully evocative image: the **'heart-shaped badge and its black wool / Steamed in the rain'** (lines 12-13). In striking contrast to the prosaic nature of much of the imagery in these two stanzas, this is a visceral, immediate, and multi-textured image: the **'heart-shaped'** badge naturally mirroring the human heart, but also the **'black wool'** hinting at something more vividly animalistic and primal. The fact that the uniform **'steam[s] in the rain'** further suggests a sense of the natural world, of elemental forces at play, in contrast to the banal reality of school life, and foreshadows the appreciation of natural forces later in the poem. Notably, this final phrase flows into the following stanza, which heralds a new phase and shift in mood in the boy's life, as well as in the speaker's recollection of it.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-20.

Stanza four contains perhaps the most conventionally poetic phrasing so far: **'And seven years passed like the days' / Seven lessons and he slowly dwindled / From my mind'** (lines 14-16). This lyrical, rhythmic use of language contrasts with the previous two stanzas. These lines are much more in keeping with the conventional ballad form, with a flowing iambic meter and the use of assonance and consonance conveying a softer, almost song-like quality. This is a clear stylistic break from the first three stanzas, indicating a shift in mood or feeling. Here we are given the sense of time rapidly passing – interestingly the idea of **'seven years'** mirrors the folk notion of 'seven years' bad luck', as well as Rudolf Steiner's mystical idea of human life following seven-year cycles.

Once again enjambment is used between stanzas four and five, and here the speedy flow of seven years leads the speaker to a new phase of recollection: no longer caught up in the minutiae of day-to-day life, he acquires a new perspective on the memory of his friend: **'he slowly dwindled / From my mind, a small ghost who preys / Now suddenly but for good reason / On imagination and memory'** (lines 15-18). Indeed, it is notably only here that the boy is finally remembered – earlier in the poem he had only been present as an absence but here the more vivid recollection of the friend begins. The use of the word **'reason'** here is playfully ironic – the **'good reason'** he remembers has nothing to do with conventional logic or reason but with the way emotions and memories work: subtly, elusively, always eluding the full grasp of the intellect. Indeed, the phrase **'imagination and memory'** here makes explicit one of the poem's key themes: the idea that these two things are always connected and intertwined, that memory is never as straightforward as it seems, but, rather, is interconnected and palimpsestic, shifting with time, changing – and changing us – with every new recollection. The full rhyme used in this stanza **'reason [...] season'** is a further play on the palimpsestic nature of memory. From this new, more mature perspective, the speaker is able to look back and see that his **'season / Of friendship'** (lines 19-20) with the boy was **'never repeated'** (line 21), implying that he is now more fully able to appreciate the significance of the bond he had with his friend.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 21-28.

Following the tonal shift of the previous two stanzas, the poem here paints a vivid picture of the speaker's relationship with his friend. The friend is portrayed as an animalistic force of nature, associated with natural imagery: **'mad eyes, a truant, a sleeper-out / In haystacks'** (lines 21-22). In contrast with the empty, anaemic quality of the recollections of school life, these lines are filled with colour, vigour and physicality: **'blood like a grape'** (line 24), **'dust'** (line 24), **'steel and flint'** (line 26). Notably, the only memory of his friend takes the form of a childhood scrap. Here, the conceit rests on the idea that the learning of youth takes place not in school but in the rough-and-tumble of childhood friendship: **'fear and learning'** (a play on Hunter S. Thompson's famous phrase 'fear and loathing'⁵, line 25), where the boys **'sparked each other to the great / Discovery of ourselves'** (lines 27-28). There is violence here, but this is not portrayed with prudishness; rather there is a natural beauty to the image of blood **'like a grape'**, with the implicit connotation of the idea of Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers*⁶. In this way, the rhythm and syntax of these stanzas are jumbled and disorganised, mimicking the physicality of the boys' fight. Moreover, the poem's use of sudden allusions to Thompson and Russell's writings add a chaotic sense of intertextual colour to these violent lines.

Lines 29-32.

Notice the significance of the enjambment that begins the final stanza: **'And went / Our ways'** (lines 28-29) which emphasises the separation between the two boys. Yet, notably, the final separation is not treated sentimentally; rather the tone here is a stoic acceptance that life goes on. The implication is that children, despite their innocence, perhaps have a certain natural wisdom that adults, in the inevitable accumulation of experience, forget: **'Children with their tough minds / Would understand'** (lines 28-29). There is a certain reticence about the boys' acceptance of losing one another that perhaps underplays the significance of the emotion they feel: their feelings are unspoken, communicated through physical gestures rather than words, but their bond is no less real for this. Again, the reference to blood alludes strongly to the notion of the boys as 'blood brothers'. The final line is masterly: **'We both knew we were going away for good'** (line 32). **'Going away'** is a euphemism for going to prison – the implication is that the end of their friendship signifies the end of the 'freedom' of childhood and entering a new phase of emotional development: the 'prison' of adulthood.

(5) Hunter. S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York, USA: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005).

(6) Willy Russell, *Blood Brothers* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2001).

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'After a Friendship' is a poem about childhood friendship and love. It explores the significance of childhood friendship – what this means in the emotional journey we travel along in life – as well as a meditation on the nature of memory. Minhinnick employs the traditional ballad form, but modifies this in ways that allow him to explore the experience of memory as something not logical and linear, but accumulative, messily jumbled up with emotion and experience.

The poem also exemplifies Minhinnick's concern with nature, the environment and natural processes in its emphasis on the physicality of the human experience. In particular, the boys' friendship is expressed not through words but through primal actions: a fight that ends with a bloody face. This ties in with one of the major themes of Minhinnick's writing: an attempt to place humans within the natural world, rather than as somehow transcendently above it.

Ultimately, this is a poem that explores a critical phase in human life: the end of the freedom of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. The poem implicitly asks whether the transition to adulthood is a time of emotional maturity or emotional imprisonment. In this way, the poem explores feelings which are so often sublimated or repressed rather than expressed.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- In what way does the poem deviate from the traditional ballad form? To what effect?
- What kind of language is used to describe the speaker's friend?
- What is the significance of the natural imagery used in the poem?
- Is this a masculine representation of childhood/friendship?

SECTION 5

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo credited to Robert Minhinnick.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Interview with Robert Minhinnick: carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=14;doctype=interview

Another, more recent interview: walesartsreview.org/eamon-bourke-talks-to-robert-minhinnick

Information and critical commentary on Minhinnick's writing: literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/robert-minhinnick

Information on Sustainable Wales, an organisation co-founded by Minhinnick: <https://www.sustainablewales.org.uk/>

SECTION 7

BIBLIOGRAPHY: FURTHER READING

Robert Minhinnick, *New Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012).

Matthew Jarvis, 'Robert Minhinnick: From Pen-y-fai to Iraq', in *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Press, 2008).

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