

# R.S. Thomas

## 'A Peasant'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University  
Prifysgol Abertawe

# CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :  
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :  
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 7 SECTION 3 :  
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 9 SECTION 4 :  
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 9 SECTION 5 :  
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 10 SECTION 6 :  
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

# BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

**(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)**

One of the best-known poets to emerge from Wales, Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913 and educated at Bangor University, before publishing his first collection of poems, *The Stones of the Field*, in 1946. By the time this collection was published, Thomas had been ordained as an Anglican priest and installed at a parish in Manafon, Montgomeryshire. It was within this rural location that Thomas began to pen the pastoral-themed poetry which marked the early part of his writing, including ‘A Peasant’. As his career in the church continued, Thomas developed a keen interest in science and a more questioning nature, reflected in his poetry which had taken on a metaphysical tone by the early 1970s. Thomas also became a fluent Welsh speaker at the age of 30. While he expressed regret at his inability to write poetry in Welsh, Thomas explored issues of language and identity in his work and opted to use the Welsh language for much of his prose writing. The complex relationship between spirituality, science, the landscape and nationality continued to manifest itself in Thomas’ writing until his death in 2000, becoming a prominent feature of collections such as *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) and *No Truce with the Furies* (1995). He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.

In his personal life, Thomas was married to artist Mildred ‘Elsi’ Eldridge for fifty one years, until her death in 1991. The loss of his beloved wife hit Thomas hard and it was a blow from which he never fully recovered, in spite of marrying second wife Elizabeth Vernon in 1996. In addition to his poetry, Thomas published a range of other writing, including his seminal lecture ‘Abercuawg’ (1976) and his autobiography *Neb* (1985).

Almost two decades after his death, Thomas remains a towering figure of Anglophone Welsh writing, leaving behind a rich and varied body of work which reflects the changing landscape of Wales throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

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

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

The title is as provocative as it is simple. The poem both draws on this rural archetype and asks the reader to question what they understand it to mean. Despite introducing us to the emblematic figure of Iago Prytherch, who would become a recurring figure used by Thomas as a symbol of the Welsh farmer and his struggle with the land, the poem's title is carefully anonymous and does not identify the 'peasant' by name. The simplicity of the title foreshadows the poet's focus on Prytherch, placing him, and not the natural world, as foremost in the poem. The fact that there is nothing personal or specific about the term 'a peasant' supports the idea that the figure created by the poet is generic figure who may be used to represent all those who work on the land in this kind of environment.

## Form.

The poem is constructed using one single stanza, with an irregular form and a varied rhythmic pattern. The poem's fluid form invokes a sense of instability and hints at the volatile nature of the landscape on which the central character works, while line breaks challenge the reader's evolving perceptions of Prytherch himself. The poem ends with a rhyming couplet lending a sense of order and completion to the poem, affording the closing lines a soothing tone as they reassure the reader that Prytherch will not be forgotten and presenting him as a warrior, emerging from a chaotic struggle. Thomas uses this form frequently in his poetry.

## Lines 1-7.

In contrast to the anonymity of the poem's title, the opening lines of the poem start by identifying the character of Iago Prytherch. The name itself is hybrid. Iago is a common Welsh name, (a version of Jacob) though one which may be more familiar to English readers from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Prytherch anglicises the Welsh sound 'dd' in Prydderch to 'th'. The poet is at pains to stress that Prytherch is just '**an ordinary man**' (line 2), suggesting that there is nothing special about this man. The poet goes on to firmly locate Prytherch within a harsh Welsh landscape, describing him as a figure of the '**bald Welsh hills**' (line 2). While the initial image of a man who '**pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud**' (line 3) may seem gentle and appealing, there is nothing romanticised about rest of this scene. Indeed the paucity of the living suggested by this line should not be overlooked. The description of the hills as '**bald**' lends them a cold and unfriendly nature. There is a gothic or monstrous slant to the descriptions of the '**yellow bones**' (line 5) and '**green skin**' (line 4) of the mangels (a root vegetable similar to a swede and grown as animal fodder). The corporeal imagery connects the man to the land, inviting one to reread the assertion that he is a '**man of the bald Welsh hills**'.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The language also reminds the reader that this is not an idyllic, pastoral landscape, but one which is challenging to Prytherch. Likewise, the verbs used by the poet in this section of the poem reinforce these challenges and reveal how hard Prytherch is working on the land, **'docking mangles'** (line 4), **'chipping'** (line 5) and **'churning the crude earth'** (line 6) as he labours.

However difficult his toil may be, Prytherch appears to take some satisfaction in his work and permits himself a **'half-witted grin Of satisfaction'** (lines 5-6) while he struggles with the land. Like the use of **'peasant'** to describe the farmer, **'half-witted'** is troublingly dismissive. The reader may feel a sense of unease in the way the poet describes Prytherch. Similarly, there is a hint of menace in the landscape itself: the clouds **'glint in the wind'** (line 7) foreshadowing the struggle between man and nature which unfolds throughout the rest of the poem.

## Lines 8-12.

In these lines the poetic voice reaffirms the image of Prytherch as an uncultured figure, preoccupied with his struggle with the land. Prytherch spends every day labouring in this way, moments of happiness being **'rarer than the sun'** (line 9) across the **'gaunt sky'** (line 10). His bleak emotional life is a mirror of the bleak upland landscape. Even when Prytherch does have cause to smile it is with **'spittled mirth'** (line 8), a description which suggests an uncouth, possibly mentally or physically impaired man. This is developed by the crude language used as he **'leans to gob in the fire'** (line 12) and his lack of mental animation as he remains **'motionless'** (line 12) and **'fixed in his chair'** (line 11). Perhaps he is exhausted by his ongoing struggle to work this unforgiving landscape, but the poem is deliberately building the reader's sense of distance and perhaps distaste from and for this man.

## Lines 13-16.

The earlier sense of disquiet and even danger returns again in this middle section of the poem as the reader is told that there is **'something frightening'** (line 13) about Prytherch. Yet, according to the poet, what makes Prytherch frightening is not his actions or his continual struggle with the natural world, but **'the vacancy of his mind'** (line 13). Once again Prytherch is presented as being simplistic and is reduced to an earthy, almost animalistic character whose clothes are **'sour with years of sweat'** (line 14) and **'animal contact'** (line 15). The rawness of the landscape on which he has toiled for so long has transferred to Prytherch, becoming part of his identity and the language used here presents these aspects of Prytherch's character and appearance in derogatory terms.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

But here the poem begins to turn on the reader. Having carefully constructed a crude and disquieting figure, the poetic voice is arguably ironic in its declaration that these features would **'shock the refined, / But affected sense'** (lines 15–16). The enjambment emphasises the critique of the reader's senses as 'affected', here meaning 'artificial' or even false. The contrast within the description of **'stark naturalness'** (line 16) could also suggest that Prytherch's rugged appearance and habits are both natural and shocking at the same time, much like the landscape in which he works. At this point in the poem, Prytherch and the natural world are most closely in sync, connected by a sense of earthiness and inherent danger; both landscape and man are creations to be observed and feared.

## Lines 17–22.

The final five lines of the poem mark a change in tone and rhythm as the poetic voice turns away from the earlier description of Prytherch as a disturbing figure with the blunt announcement **'Yet this is your prototype'** (line 17). At this point the description of Prytherch becomes a tribute to the man as an emblematic hero. He is a timeless warrior a **'winner of wars'** (line 21), who has stood firm against the **'seige of rain and the wind's attrition'** (line 18) – the weather here presented in military terms of siege and attrition, while the span of his endurance is measured in the cyclical time – the 'seasons' of the natural world and agricultural calendar. His survival is linked with that of the nation, or rather in terms of race: **'preserve his stock'** (line 19), and the image of him as a successful shepherd evokes a quasi-Christ-like figure. The language used in this section of the poem continues to build, presenting Prytherch in heroic and military terms as **'an impregnable fortress / Not to be stormed'** (lines 19 and 20), an image which is in sharp contrast to the careworn figure we see working the land earlier in the poem. At this point even **'death's confusion'** (line 20) is not able to destabilise Prytherch and there are religious overtones to the way in which this one man has become symbolic of the many and stands strong in his aim to protect his flock – Christ is often pictured as a shepherd.

As the poem reaches its conclusion, Prytherch's transition from **'ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills'** (line 2) to **'a winner of wars'** (line 21) is completed. In one sense, the man who started the poem scraping a meagre living from the hills has become a champion over the same landscape by the poem's close. In the poem's last rhyming couplet Prytherch is further elevated. The poem is a memorial and an enjoinder to **'Remember him'** (line 21). His endurance is a tribute to agricultural struggles, but also, arguably, to a wider sense of national endurance. The poem closes with the sudden move away from the Welsh landscape on which the rest of the poem, and Prytherch's life, has centred, with the reference to **'curious stars'** reminding readers that this space which Prytherch occupies is just one part of a much larger universe.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Prytherch became a figure through which R S Thomas was able to address some of the internal contradictions he experienced in encountering the hill farmers in his parish of Manafon. He had expected to find in rural mid-Wales the 'real Wales of my imagination' (itself a sentence full of contradiction), but was often disappointed.<sup>1</sup> In 'A Peasant' Prytherch is set up as a figure from which the poetic persona recoils and then reclaims. At no point is he really a fully thinking human and in that sense, this voiceless figure can be compared with the distantly viewed peasants of romantic poetry. Indeed, the '**curious stars**' of the final line have been interpreted by some critics as referring to the poet-creator's own god-like gaze.

The poem is rich in its use of striking imagery and multivalent adjectives which repay careful analysis. Meanings are unstable – what does it mean to describe a fortress as '**impregnable**'? It means it cannot be penetrated – but 'impregnable' is also an allusion to fertility or lack thereof. In the context of a poem about nation and survival – what is the significance of this choice of adjective?

This poem is also powerfully connected with the natural world. As is often the case in the Thomas's poetry, the landscape is presented as unforgiving and the natural world does not appear to provide for, or nurture, Prytherch in any way. Instead, it is presented as a sparse, brutal space which Prytherch must cultivate and work in order to control. The physical demands of this struggle are evident in the way Prytherch appears worn out by his toil and is left soured with sweat from his years of work on the land. There is something faintly repulsive in the description of this man who spends his life locked in a solitary battle with the natural world and by presenting Prytherch in this way, the poet is able to highlight how his engagement with the landscape has isolated him from others.

(1) R. S. Thomas, 'Y Llwybrau Gynt 2', *Selected Prose* ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1993) p. 138.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As much as Prytherch may be depicted as rugged and worn from his experiences, so too is the natural world presented as being unappealing. The landscape the poet evokes is far from idyllic and contributes to what may be read as an anti-pastoral poem which shows the natural world to be a dangerous and unreliable environment. The volatile nature of both the landscape and Prytherch is yet another feature which connects the man and the land on which he works in this poem, with both being shown as strong and somewhat menacing forces. In spite of these images, Matthew Jarvis has suggested that a sense of fertility and hope can still be found in the poem's description of the natural world. Jarvis notes that the description of Prytherch 'docking mangles' (a root crop which can be used to feed animals), is 'an indicator of a greater fertility in the environment imagined by the poem than its opening rhetoric of "bald Welsh hills" would imply'.<sup>2</sup> However brutal the environment depicted in the poem may be, the land still contains the potential for fertility and growth within this harsh environment, although this potential can only be uncovered through the physical toil of Iago Prytherch.

Taking a step back from the bleakness of the landscape in 'A peasant', it is possible to read the poem as a wider evocation of the struggles faced by those working on the land in Wales in the mid twentieth century. Nature is present throughout the poem, but its presence is stale and '**gaunt**', perhaps hinting at a need for change and revitalisation. Such themes are explored more overtly in Thomas's later Prytherch poems, but can be seen in early form here in the way in which the struggle between Prytherch and the environment becomes a fight for survival, amid a changing and challenging climate. As a result, we may read 'A Peasant' as being a comment on the complexity and volatility of the environment in Wales and the vulnerability of the lives which are dependent on it.

(2) Matthew Jarvis, 'Iago Prytherch's Mangles: Agricultural Contexts for R. S. Thomas's "A Peasant"', *Almanac: Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*, 15 (2010-2011), 70-83.

# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Does Prytherch's life working on the land seem lonely? If so, why?

What impression do the adjectives used in the poem create?

How do you feel about Prytherch at the start of the poem? Do these feelings change as you read the rest of the poem?

Why do you think Thomas chose to depict the landscape as being raw and unwelcoming to Prytherch?

## SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

# PHOTOGRAPHS

This photo is an image of Thomas as a younger man, wearing his clergyman's dog-collar and looking pensive as he gazes past the camera.

- <https://images.app.goo.gl/UmpxriPQj5oaaN5T6>

This picture depicts Thomas, some years later, in a more relaxed pose. Thomas is often associated with a stern appearance and this image offers a glimpse into a side of the poet which was not always reflected in photos, in part due to his intense dislike of media attention.

- [https://www.newwelshreview.com/lluniau/rs\\_gerallt\\_llewelyn\\_credit\\_bach.jpg](https://www.newwelshreview.com/lluniau/rs_gerallt_llewelyn_credit_bach.jpg)

This image pictures Thomas in focus, again looking beyond the camera, with the worn Welsh landscape behind him, bearing the scars of agriculture and the steep hills on which Thomas may have envisaged Prytherch working.

- [https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/media/5613993/p28\\_r-s-thomas.jpg?anchor=center&mode=crop&width=818&height=500&rnd=131387215690000000](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/media/5613993/p28_r-s-thomas.jpg?anchor=center&mode=crop&width=818&height=500&rnd=131387215690000000)

# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Details of Thomas's life and career as a writer, priest and poet are available at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/r-s-thomas>

An obituary published in *The Guardian*, following Thomas's death in 2000, offers further analysis of the significance of his career and his legacy:

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/sep/27/guardianobituaries.books>

A short portrait documentary of R S Thomas, produced following his nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature, can be found on YouTube and provides some helpful context about Thomas and his writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g>



DR EMMA  
SCHOFIELD

*Cardiff University*

*August, 2019*

*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.*