

R.S. Thomas

'Cynddylan on a Tractor'

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.)

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in March 1913. The family were in Liverpool for much of World War I, but in 1918 they moved to Holyhead, Anglesey, where the young Thomas was primarily brought up. At university in Bangor, Thomas studied Classics. Then he went to St Michael’s College, Llandaff (Llandaf), in Cardiff, to be trained as an Anglican priest. Thomas was rector in Manafon, Montgomeryshire (1942–54), Eglwys-Fach, near Aberystwyth (1954–67), and finally Aberdaron, on the Llŷn Peninsula, from 1967. He retired from Aberdaron in 1978, but stayed in the area, living in the austere early seventeenth-century cottage Sarn Rhiw (or Sarn Y Plas). Late in his life, Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature but did not win. He died in September 2000. Byron Rogers’s book, *The Man Who Went into the West* (2006) offers a wonderfully insightful and entertaining account of the poet’s life.

‘Cynddylan on a Tractor’ was first published in Thomas’s 1952 collection *An Acre of Land*, and can best be understood alongside his other character portraits of people in rural Wales whom he encountered in his ecclesiastical work. These include ‘A Peasant’, ‘Iago Prytherch’, ‘Evans’, ‘Farm Wife’ and ‘The Hill Farmer Speaks’. These poems offer a celebration of a way of life and the people who live it which also understands its unpleasant aspects. ‘Cynddylan on a Tractor’ shows a concern over technological progress, which may be partly about an awareness of how the rise of machinery would threaten the routines of farmers, and their connections to each other.

This issue of concern over technological progress is the other key contextual factor to consider with regard to ‘Cynddylan on a Tractor.’ As Grahame Davies puts it, ‘It is hard to comprehend how far-reaching, and how swift, were the changes experienced by the Western nations in the twentieth century in the wake of mechanization, industrialization, urbanization and the massification of society. It appeared as if centuries of tradition, of patterns of living, and of intellectual and religious frameworks had been swept away by a wave of technological materialism.’¹ This is a poem which focuses complicated anxieties about such sweeping changes onto the simple sight of a farmer on a tractor. Anxiety about progress was something Thomas engaged with all his life, in poems such as ‘Fuel’, ‘No Through Road’, ‘Other’ and ‘Fair Day’. As poems like ‘Welsh History’ (collected in *Poetry 1900–2000*) show, anxiety over the future did not, of course, stop him being disappointed about the past.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 135–37.)

(1) Grahame Davies, ‘Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement’, in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 7 (2001–02): 50–77.
Available here: <http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php/en>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem stages a conflict between tradition and progress, which is clear from the way in which a man on a tractor is described as a **'knight at arms'**, and these forces of tradition and progress are arguably both present in the poem's title. The title's meaning is apparently direct and accessible, giving us the immediate subject of the poem, but it clearly also points towards the bigger themes of progress and the relationship between man and machine. It is significant that Cynddylan is named, and named distinctively, increasing our ability to connect and share the poem with him. It may be that the choice of name here connects the poem's subject to the seventh-century Prince of Powys, Cynddylan ap Cyndrwyn and, if it is accepted that the name chosen for the poem therefore draws on history, the title's placing of Cynddylan 'on a tractor' gives us, in a few words, the central conflict between tradition and modernity that the poem is based around.

Form.

At the end of the poem, Cynddylan, on his tractor, is literally moving forward – he 'passes proudly up the lane' – in a way which might figure the relentless forward movement of technology, advancing ahead after the end of the poem. This sense of continual forward movement is also enacted on the level of the form of the poem, which is constructed as a single stanza with no breaks. In length, the poem is close to being a sonnet; it contains a number of full rhymes, and appears, from its opening line, to be following roughly the rhythms of iambic pentameter: 'Ah, **you** should **see** Cynddylan **on** a **tractor**.' Yet, unlike the 14-line sonnet, the poem turns out to be 16 lines long, its rhyme scheme is irregular, and we soon discover lines whose metre is interestingly and markedly irregular: 'The **clutch** **curse**s, but the **gears** **obey**.' One way of looking at this is that the poem's form stages a conflict between poetic tradition – the sonnet, full rhyme, iambic pentameter – and a more innovative free verse. The relationship between these formal choices and the poem's subject – the battleground of nature and tradition versus technology and innovation – is easy to see.

Lines 1-4.

The poem's very first word, '**Ah**', is significant because it roots the poem in the realm of human speech. This small word, and perhaps too the word '**lo**' in line 6, gives the poem a sense of being something said by one farmer to another over a farm gate. As a result, there is a much stronger sense of material reality in the text, and we have the impression that what is being described is happening *now*. Similarly, phrases like '**He's a new man**' establish the sense that the speaker is celebrating the technological progress embodied by Cynddylan's tractor. As the poem develops, however, it is clear that the text subtly questions this celebration, while maintaining a superficially celebratory tone.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The choice of **'yoked'** in line 2 is significant. The yoke was originally the piece of wood fastened over the neck of two animals, connecting them to the plough they were pulling. Cynddylan has been freed, the line suggests, by the innovations of the tractor from a somewhat animalistic life of drudgery. But if he is no longer **'yoked'** to the old ways of working, he is also distanced from tradition – and from the animals he works with. This explains the tense relationship between technology and animals which is expressed in lines 7, 11 and 15 of the poem.

In lines 3–4, we again find a tone which is superficially celebratory of technology and Cynddylan's relationship to it, but actually expresses a more critical view. The idea that **'He's a new man now'** and the strength suggested by **'His nerves of metal'** offer stock images of a confident modern man. But the suggestion that Cynddylan is **'part of the machine'** and the conflation of bodily and technological images in **'his blood oil'** is a little troubling. This brilliantly-managed awkwardness is enhanced by the use of rhyme. **'Soil'** in the phrase **'yoked him to the soil'**, which might represent the old ways, in the sense that the tractor literally creates a new distance between farmer and soil, is given a full rhyme with **'oil'**, representing the newer ways, the sonic harmony reinforcing by contrast the tonal unease.

Lines 5–11.

The combination of different tones – one superficially celebrating Cynddylan's harnessing of technology, the other seeking to problematize this celebration – is here sustained. Cynddylan is **'Riding to work as a great man should,'** we are told, and is so powerful that he can command technology: **'the gears obey / His least bidding'**. The powerful sounds of technology are conveyed to us in the alliteration of **'The clutch curses'**. Yet the gears don't really **'obey / His least bidding'** – they don't do what they do as a result of listening to him. An animal maybe *would*, and the suggestion therefore is that Cynddylan is carrying forward his old ways of working, his old understandings, into this brave new world.

That Cynddylan is presented as moving **'away / Out of the farmyard'** sustains this idea. Because of the power of technology, the speaker suggests, Cynddylan can click his fingers and be gone, but the lines also imply that the minute one mounts a tractor one is moving away from the farm and rural traditions. The **'scattering hens'** and the accompanying image of the tractor **'emptying the wood / Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays'** also simultaneously celebrate the power of technology and make it seem sinister. **'Scattering'** and **'emptying'** both suggest technology's power, and the cumulative feel conveyed by the repetition of **'and'** in line 11 gives the sense that technology will scare away *everything*. The idea that all these animals are scared away – even the beautiful **'bright jays'** – makes technology seem destructive, intimidating, opposed to the world of nature.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

If technology is powerful, these lines suggest, men can be considered powerful who use it – and it is specifically *men*, as the vocabulary and images here are gendered. Cynddylan is **‘Riding to work as a great man should,’** we are told, and the next line connects him with a masculine tradition: **‘He is the knight at arms’**. Again, it is possible to read this apparent celebration of technology ironically. Technology is about advancement, a break from tradition, so to celebrate it by comparing it to an image from history could be read as mocking. The image of the **‘Mirror of silence’** is lyrical, synaesthetic and beautiful; it is drawn attention to by the awkward line break which precedes it (**‘fields’/ Mirror’**), coming as it does in the middle of a phrase. In what way the fields are a **‘Mirror of silence’** is not entirely clear (and this is part of the metaphor’s suggestive power), but the image gives the clear idea that the sound of the tractor is destroying something beautiful.

Lines 12-16.

The image of the morning – **‘The sun comes over the tall trees / Kindling all the hedges’** is beautiful. The metaphor is located in the verb with powerful economy, as that word **‘kindling’** allows the poet to avoid more laboured formulations such as ‘the sun is like kindling.’ The notion that such beauty of the morning is **‘not for him / Who runs his engine on a different fuel’** perhaps suggests that the embracing of technology distracts us from the beauty of nature.

There is much in the final couplet which is interesting. The concluding rhyme of **‘vain’** and **‘lane’** and the forceful alliteration of **‘passes proudly’** (echoing **‘clutch curses’** earlier) gives the poem’s ending a harmonic and musical flourish which enhances the sense of conclusion. Beginning this sentence with **‘And’** adds to the effect: it’s a small point, but how much less effective would this ending be if the sentence started with ‘All’? The noisiness of this last sentence matches its content – the birds singing. Cynddylan is named, as he was in the poem’s first line, accentuating that sense of conclusion.

The birds **‘singing’** as Cynddylan completes his one-man-on-a-tractor procession seem celebratory; **‘bills wide’** suggests their great effort, that they are singing their hearts out. They cannot be heard over the tractor though; their singing is presumably **‘in vain’** because Cynddylan cannot hear it, will not hear, now, nature calling to him. Given the image of Cynddylan **‘proud’** on his tractor, the other meaning of **‘vain’** has to be in play here – that Cynddylan’s pride in technology is essentially a vanity, all show, a mistake. Perhaps that initial, spoken **‘Ah’**, then, is about giving that vanity an audience? Ironically, at the point at which Thomas writes that the bills are wide **‘in vain,’** because the birds cannot be heard, he uses the sonic device of full rhyme, which certainly can be heard within the poem. The poem ends with Cynddylan moving forward – he **‘passes proudly up the lane’** – in a way which might represent the relentless forward movement of technological ‘progress’ and which, given the content of the poem, is more troubling than it is celebratory.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Cynddylan on a Tractor' concentrates the author's thinking about technological progress and its impact on the connections that people have to the land and to each other within a description of a single farmer riding a tractor. There is a celebratory aspect to certain lines of the poem: Cynddylan is **'a new man now,' 'the gears obey / His least bidding,'** he is **'Riding to work as a great man should.'** There is enough anxiety over technological progress in the poem though for us to infer irony in the more celebratory lines. Cynddylan is **'part of the machine,' 'his blood oil.'** Tellingly for Thomas, who was a committed environmental campaigner, the tractor is seen as having a negative impact on nature, the tractor **'scattering hens'** and **'emptying the wood / of foxes and squirrels and bright jays.'** It may even be possible to read this **'scattering'** and **'emptying'** as pointing towards the wider impact of technology on rural communities and on their sense of culture.

Among a number of interesting things about this poem is the richness and lyricism with which Thomas treats the subject of the advance of technology and of a man riding on a tractor. The poem is intensely aware of all of the ramifications and subtleties of language: when Cynddylan is described as freed by technology, it is said that he is no longer **'yoked...to the soil'** and the history of **'yoked'** gives the suggestion that technological advancement distances farmers from animals. When the birds at the end of the poem have their **'bills wide in vain,'** that other meaning of vain comes into play to give us Cynddylan's vanity in the illusory power technology gives him. The subtlety in Thomas's language accounts for the poem's richness and ambiguity in tone. We do not trust the celebratory statements that the poem makes about technology, but nor is this a one-dimensional satire or protest on the rise of technology. The poem draws us to look very carefully at each resonance of the speaker's language to try and see where his true position is. For Thomas to employ such rich language, in a poem which is so aware of the subtleties of meaning raised by each choice the poem makes, is very interesting given the subject matter of the poem. The language is working clearly in the tradition of the lyric poem, drawing on the resources of rhyme and rhythm in the way, say, Wordsworth and Keats did to meet the demands of the subjects of their day. Smashing this rich language, and the richness of the lyric tradition, up against the new subject of a man on a tractor, makes for an interesting contrast.

Like all truly great poems, 'Cynddylan on a Tractor' continues to resonate after the last line has finished. Cynddylan drives off into his future, and technology and progress keep on going beyond the ending of the poem - whether the poem is being read from the page on its first publication in the 1950s, or from a smartphone screen in the early twenty-first century.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How do you think the poem's speaker wants the reader to feel about the tractor in the poem?

What do you think will happen after the end of the poem?

What is the relationship between nature and technology in the poem?

Given the content of this poem, if you could speak to Cynddylan, what would you say? How do you think he would react?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913–2000)

by John Hedgecoe, 1966 (at Eglwys-fach)

© John Hedgecoe; collection National Portrait Gallery, London

• <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-74584>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An essay on Thomas's life and work is provided by an American organisation called the Poetry Foundation, and is a very useful complement to this help-sheet. At the end of the essay you will find links to a selection of R. S. Thomas poems that are available online and a substantial bibliography.

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

A simple summary of Thomas's life and career is provided on the BBC website.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/rs-thomas/>

A short extract from the television programme *Bookmark*, broadcast in 1995, is available on YouTube, filmed in the aftermath of Thomas's nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature (which he did not win).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g>

A 45-minute BBC radio programme on Thomas by Welsh author Jon Gower is available, which focuses on Thomas's lifelong engagement with birdwatching and the impact this had on his poetry.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r5n6g>

Scholarly essays on Thomas are available via the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University. Grahame Davies's article, 'Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement' is a particularly useful resource from this site in terms of the attitude to progress, technology and machines that we see at work in 'Cynddylan on a Tractor'. <http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en>

A discussion of Thomas's religious poetry between The Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan, Lord Rowan Williams and Prof

M. Wynn Thomas: <https://www.learnedsociety.wales/laboratories-of-the-spirit-rs-thomass-religious-poetry/>



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