

Jean Earle

'Juggged Hare'

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.)

Jean Earle was born in Bristol in 1909 but grew up in the Rhondda where her father worked as an architect and surveyor, and spent most of her life in Wales, after marrying an engineer whose work took him all over the country. ‘I’m English but *I feel Welsh*’, she told an interviewer in 1996 (1).

Although she wrote from childhood, like a surprising number of women of her generation, Earle came late to publication; she brought out her first collection in her early seventies to swift acclaim. For all her popularity with readers, her work has never enjoyed the attention which its spry and meditative style invites and rewards. This seems strange, for a writer who drew openly on an intimate and affectionate knowledge of the culture and traditions of the country she was happy to call home. Place, and the resources of memory (like a faith she described as buried below a deep layer of doubt) was more important to her than gender: again like many of her female peers, she was suspicious of political positions and ‘isms’ (2). Her poems prefer to seek out traces of the revelatory, epiphanic or enchanted in the ordinary; the kinds of mundane events and routines she gently opens to transforming scrutiny are more often than not located explicitly in the quietly rural, frequently gendered, Wales which represents the places she grew up in.

Earle’s first collection of poems (*A Trial of Strength*) appeared in 1980. It was succeeded by four more: *The Intent Look* (1984), *Visiting Light* (1987), *The Sun in the West* (1995) and *The Bed of Memory* (2001). A *Selected Poems* was published in 1990. Jean Earle died in 2002. Her work has been included in a number of influential anthologies, including *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001* (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno).

(1) ‘Memory is like Company’, *New Welsh Review*, 33 (1996), 42.

(2) ‘Memory’, 44.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Jugged Hare' appears among a group of 'new poems' included in Earle's *Selected Poems*, published in 1990. The title refers to a traditional way of cooking game or fish, in which the whole animal, cut into large pieces, is stewed slowly in a sealed pot. Conventionally the dish is thickened with the hare's own blood, and served with port, a sweet fortified (red) wine. It is worth knowing that a number of ancient cultures ascribed the hare sacred or magical powers, and that – as well as being widely constructed in folklore as a trickster, sometimes benign, sometimes not – in classical sources the animal is associated (along with rabbits) with love and its deities.

'Jugged Hare' offers a touchingly detailed portrait of a mother remembered in the act of preparing the dish of the poem's title for her husband. The poem uses the memories it recovers to examine as well as honour the creative purpose and determination of the woman it places centre stage, while obliquely protesting at the way her domestic circumstances define and seem to confine her. It is tempting to imagine that the voice of the poem belongs to Jean Earle herself, and that the woman under scrutiny is the poet's own mother, but there is no direct or explicit evidence of this link. It does not seem particularly helpful to tie any of the characters to an actual family context or story.

For the most part, the poem's language is direct and straightforward; it uses the vocabulary of the child who reports the events it recounts. Towards its end, as the speaker's perspective shifts to that of the adult recovering a childhood memory, the word use grows more sophisticated.

Form.

'Jugged Hare' is lightly, rather than elaborately, formal. It falls roughly into two halves. Each half comprises three loosely built stanzas (or parts), each one 'end-stopped', or brought to a distinct and definite close by a full stop. The two halves are separated from each other by the single isolated line which marks the poem's centre.

The first three stanzas, which introduce the scene, the woman, and the process she is absorbed in, are all six lines long. The last three stanzas, in which the poem's reflection on that peaceful domestic scene grows broader and implicitly darker, are seven, nine and five lines long respectively. In this variance, the poem's form helps to trouble both the apparently calm scene it starts by describing, and the relationship that the meal seems intended to celebrate.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The opening stanza immerses us in the main scene of the poem: the work which goes into preparing the meal. A **'jugged'** stew needs freshly caught game, partly because the cooking method makes use of the animal's own blood. Hanging the catch upside down means that the blood collects in the chest cavity, from which it can be (relatively) easily drained and collected. The poem's first lines emphasise the woman's emotional connection with the hare, partly by telling us about her grief, and partly by giving an animal which is venerated in rural tradition a tender-seeming nickname: **'She mourned the long-ears / Hung in the pantry'**. The effect of the nickname is powerful, not only because it seems so affectionate; it also deftly conjures the visual image of the hare's ears hanging (long) beneath the rest of its corpse.

The animal's beauty, both heightened and made pitiable in death, is discreetly emphasised by the details of its **'shot fur'**: **'shot'** recalls the lustrous depth of colour and texture of 'shot silk' (fabric as costly as it is beautiful), as well as hinting at the manner of the hare's death. These ideas re-echo in the aurally-linked 'soft' embedded in **'Softly dishevelled'**, and the woman's instinctively caring response: **'She smoothed that'**. The line break which interrupts this response with the contrastingly ugly activity of **'gutting'** (which likewise interrupts the smoothing – or stroking – of the hare's fur) silently suggests that this cook must harden herself against her natural compassion in order to carry out her brutal task.

Lines 4-6.

The stanza's closing two and a half lines hint at a wider context for the meal, and the woman's reasons for embarking on it. The observation that her work **'Sicken[s]'** confirms that the task is physically as well as emotionally difficult. We begin to realize that we are witnessing – perhaps being asked to bear witness to – someone of particular strength of character and resilience; in the space of barely half a line we learn that her motives for putting herself through a task she seems to find repugnant are driven by feeling for her husband: **'she would rather / Sicken herself, than cheat my father...'**

In the context of marriage, the word **'cheat'** carries perhaps unusual force. Certainly it suggests the extent of the love or sense of responsibility which wife must feel for husband, given the 'sicken[ing]' work involved in making **'his jugged hare'**. Equally we might note the use of the possessive **'his'** in the stanza's final line. Does it honour **'his'** work, in (perhaps) having caught the hare? In doing so, does it hope somehow to distance – partly exonerate, or excuse – the woman from any involvement in (or desire for) the hare's death? Does the emphasis on **'his'** stew even (still more subtly) suggest an undue degree of possessiveness in the head of this household?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12.

The second stanza returns to the personality of the cook at work in her kitchen. The parallel between the hare, and the speaker's **'tender', 'freakish'** mother is explicitly if briefly drawn, only to be rapidly undermined by the **'resolute'** streak we have already seen in action. To be **'resolute'** is to be possessed by and fixed (or resolved) on achieving a particular purpose. The poem obliquely contrasts this aspect of the woman it studies with the **'mad March hare'** of rural folklore.

The hare's reputed madness refers to the courting behaviour, occurring in spring, of the normally shy brown hare: the female forces a suitor to defend and prove himself by standing on her hind legs and **'boxing'** him with her forepaws. A leaping courtship pursuit or **'dance'** usually then ensues, in which the stamina of the hopeful male is put to the test.

It doesn't seem coincidental that the poet decides here to return our attention to the woman's determination, and capacity to override her compassion for the hare: **'She peeled it to its tail. / Oh, fortitude!'** Simultaneously, and by way of explanation, the text intertwines ideas of romance and courtship into the sometimes gruesome practical detail of the cooking process, as when the cook's sparkling **'rings'** are conjured against the (presumably bloodied) **'newspaper wipes'**.

The combining of blood and expensive port in the stew's famously rich **'gravy'** finds other suggestive echoes. The word **'Sacrificial'** helps point us towards both pagan and Christian religious practice: the Christian Eucharistic feast pays tribute to Christ's sacrificing of his body and blood in the symbolic blessing and sharing of bread and wine). We might be struck just as forcibly by the sense that the feast marks some kind of self-sacrifice, of her nurturing instincts if nothing else, on the part of the speaker's mother. If there is a kind of ritualism about the preparations, the poem's readers might be being gently reminded of the rural superstitions in which hares are linked with witches and witchcraft. It was believed that hares could turn into witches, and vice versa, as and when escape or disguise seemed necessary.

Lines 13-18.

A poem which carefully avoids seeming judgemental perhaps comes closest to criticism in this third stanza, just ahead of the pivotal single line at the text's centre. The speaker chooses this moment to suggest the influence exerted by husband and marriage over the mother, and by extension how far (as the speaker reveals) the mother is prepared to stage-manage its rhythms and patterns **'On high events ... / Dramas, conciliations -'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13 - 18 (continued).

'**Conciliation**', or making up, acknowledges that this household suffers and survives the same tensions as any other. On the other hand, these lines offer an interestingly equivocal amplification, or filling out, of the previous stanza's (brief) invitation to think of the mother as victim of her husband's desires. Picking up now, perhaps, on the folkloric belief in the shape-shifting hare and its trickster-like powers of magic and enchantment, the poem's protagonist is pictured as enjoying her power to control aspects of the family's domestic life, even if this is limited: '**as a child plays house**'.

It is now, perhaps ironically, that her own watching child (a girl, the poem will eventually hint) is caught up in the work: '**She sent me out / To bury the skin**', while the heart is '**Tossed ... to the cat.**' The carelessness of this last gesture, from a figure we know is far from heartless, perhaps haunts the remainder of the poem.

Line 19.

The five short and simple words of this single sentence, arranged on its own separate line, break open the three stanzas which precede it. At its most obvious, the metaphor of a river in flood ('**spate**'), threatening to burst its banks, ascribes to the cook/mother, swept up in her own creative energies, a near-ungovernable power: her strength of purpose seems to make her unstoppable, forceful to the point of destructive violence, indomitable, and (equivocally) the more admirable in and for that.

Lines 20-26.

The several dialogues which the poem has now set up (between domesticity/food and romance/love; creativity/care and destruction/violence; and between pagan ritual and Christian self-sacrifice) are brought powerfully together in its second half. In the concluding three stanzas, our focus turns from the not always palatable preparation of the stew to the theatre '**framing**' its consumption, '**dished up on willow**'. '**Willow**' seems likely to refer to the mass-produced blue and white crockery which became popular in the 19th century (*chinoiserie* was a kind of art deriving from ancient China), the images of which are supposed to represent a tragic story of romantic love.

Once again the poem brings the speaker's memory alive with sensual detail touched, like the lingering '**Fragrance of wine and herbs**', with religious feeling. The sanctifying smell of the stew not only blesses the kitchen; the hare is depicted as having been '**braised by God**' Himself. Less obvious, but perhaps more significant, is the return to the idea of the wife and mother as artist or enchantress, using her creativity in ways which extend well beyond the culinary. Here she is made to seem more painter than witch, skilled in the use of the 'frame' to orchestrate what her remembering child (drily) terms the '**One-off scenarios**' which help her control the dynamics of her marriage.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 27–30.

The penultimate and longest of the poem's seven stanzas is also perhaps its most enigmatic. The stanza begins by considering the immediate effects of the **'feast'** on the man – and behind him the partnership – for whom the stew was made with such determination and **'fortitude'**. The stew is explicitly credited with having ignited a physical, even sexual, response:

After the feast, my father was a lover

Deeply enhanced.

I heard them go to bed,

Kissing – still inside her picture.

These simply-phrased lines don't bother with elaborate language or flowery metaphors, and seem only the more forceful for that. Above all, they dramatise the extent of the mother's power – vested in perhaps more than her stew-making – over her husband. This impression is deepened, if also ironised, by the suggestion of the speaker (sounding at this point more adult than child) that it is in fulfilment of her **'picture'** that the mother has made the stew, in order to ignite the passion in her husband which serves to transform him, enhancingly, into spellbound **'lover'**. In this way the wife's stage-managing of the lovemaking which follows the feast, seems somehow less tender catalyst of consummation, than triumphant *denouement* of all that has preceded it.

At this point the poem hovers between accusation and tribute: confirmed as deliberate architect of her **'picture'**, and to some extent the circumstances of her own life, do we want to think of wife and mother as a self-hardened, self-interested, cunning sorceress, or as a hopelessly romantic loving artist? The speaker stops short of another question: how far the scene her mother constructs for herself and her husband **'Kissing ... inside her picture'** differs from the presumably less passionate realities of life outside that picture, and how she might feel about that. Whose, we might be tempted to ask, are the desires which the meal is intended to assuage: her own, perhaps, as much as her husband's?

Lines 31–38.

That the woman desires something beyond the love-making which the stew prompts, is suggested by the misery she suppresses until her husband has fallen asleep, **'Stunned with tribute.'** The child's sensitive but also naïve assumption, that what she hears are sobs of guilt for the hare and its fate, hints at her youth. If the hare's sacrifice has haunted the 'drama' throughout, the poem's conclusion confirms that another witness might question the extent to which the meal and its ending fulfilled the cook's first purposes. Was it made to pay sincere **'tribute'** to her husband and the mutual loving relationship in which their conjoined lives and the domestic wellbeing of the household are anchored? To revive and renew that same relationship, perhaps worn and tired by use and familiarity?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-38 (continued).

More seriously still, the weeping might be read as an expression of desperation, sparked by the re-intrusion of reality: **'Outside her frame'** awaits ordinary, anti-climactic, life. Perhaps the largest, and least answerable, question which the poem asks, then, is about the mood in which she weeps. With sadness at the brevity of the interlude, the passion, which the stew helped bring about; the loss of the romance, as excitement and pleasure gives way to sleep and love itself recedes? Was the meal, in fact (and to her now adult child, understandably) a means of assuaging her own physical desires?

The last line of this penultimate stanza runs on, across the stanza break, helping to emphasise the gap between the suppressed weeping in the darkened house at the day's end, and the possible causes on which the final stanza reflects. The speaker's sense that **'marital skills'** might be hateful, even despicable, and **'lady-hands'** duplicitous (delivering both brutality and love) licenses us, in turn, to wonder whether she weeps in disappointed or frustrated knowledge of the cost of the **'One-off scenarios'** she arranges? Or perhaps for the predicament of her idealistic imaginative caring self, which must be steeled, repugnantly, to **'flense a hare / Because she wooed a man'**? The speaker's use of the verb 'to flense', a now archaic term for stripping or skinning (usually an animal's meat from its fat or skin), lends the mother a rare or special skilfulness which makes her seem almost exotic, and her powers perhaps stronger and more mysterious, for all that she seems to regret them.

Lines 39-40.

The poem's stark final lines help underpin its overriding ambivalence. Here, finally, a plainly adult speaker recognises both the depth of the gesture which the stew and its preparation makes to the waiting family, and the unacknowledged demands that meal, relationship and domestic life must have made on the imaginative, creative, sensitive being – artist/author/enchantress – at the heart of the household. It is to the complexities, emotional as well as practical, of the situation that the speaker, poem and poet together pay tribute.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Jean Earle's portrait of a mother's devoted and selfless (if not necessarily entirely loving) nurturing ('sustenance') of her marriage in the early twentieth century offers a sympathetic but also unvarnished portrait recovered with as much scepticism as respect. The poem implicitly takes a less forgiving view of the gendered power relations which govern the life, habits and expectations of the woman it studies, and that are likewise woven through the domestic world it seems to suggest she has created.

Straightforwardly, the poem might be read as an elegy for the hare. It also seems a sympathetic testament to the hidden complexities of the marriage partnership the speaker conjures, with affection but also insight, from memory. In some ways the implicitly critical strand which runs through the poem, emerging most powerfully in those economical final lines, helps to hold the text and its equivocal implications together. We cannot know the precise cause of the weeping which the speaker remembers overhearing, still less what that unhappiness might suggest about the mother's feelings about her situation. However, the poem also leaves us in little doubt of the speaker's suspicion that to some extent, if forgivably, the woman can be held at least partly responsible for the position in which she is pictured, for all the softness and sensitivity we glimpse in her. If she gives her labour, time and energy freely, she seems implicitly aware that there might be other ways to personal fulfilment, and – being, we know, **'resolute'** – to have decided against them. Indeed, by the end of the poem, we are invited to think of this **'freakish'**, admirable woman as being as helplessly trapped in (her blood metaphorically drained by) the deadening necessities of her domestic existence, as the hare was trapped by its hunter.

Both animal and mother, then, can be understood as victims – in their different ways – of the man whose desires are framed in and called into question by the poem. The resonances deepen when they are extended to encompass the cooking method which is (superficially) the poem's chief concern, and the parallels between the methods of preparing and cooking the hare itself, and the life of the speaker's mother. The poem implicitly suggests that the woman is herself **'jugged'** (cooked slowly in her own blood in a sealed cooking pot) by the constraints of her life, circumstances and her devotion to her husband and family. And it is in this process, in the same way that the hare is transformed into a feast of magical (aphrodisiacal) powers, that she somehow maintains her own creative powers of control and enchantment, and sustains herself, her marriage and the family through them.

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How does the poem ask us to view the woman it places centre stage? Critically? Or with sympathy? Why might it matter?

The reading above suggests that the poem draws a parallel between the **'tender', 'freakish'** woman, and the hare she is preparing to stew. What evidence can you find to support this claim?

Why do you think the speaker (and/or poet) might want to draw such a parallel? What difference might it make, or not, to your own sense of the poem's implications?

Jean Earle often wrote in 'free verse'. What do you understand this term to mean and how does it seem to describe the form of the text discussed here? Why and how might 'free verse' seem suited to the ideas and implications of 'Jugged Hare'?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5 (links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

A photograph of the front cover illustration of Earle's Selected Poems, published in 1990.

- <https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/jean-earle-selected-poems>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

There are very few scholarly materials available on Jean Earle and her work. This poem is briefly discussed in *A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry*, by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (p. 247). Interviews with Earle appeared in *Poetry Wales* in 1981 (No. 17 issue 1, with Sandra Anstey) and in *New Welsh Review* in 1996 (No. 33, with Katie Gramich).

A more recent tribute to Earle appears here:

<http://greghill.website/JeanEarle/JeanEarleHorizon.html>

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