

R. S. Thomas 'A Marriage'

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, in Cardiff, to be trained as an Anglican priest. During his first curacy, in Chirk on the Wales-England border (1936–40), he met the painter Mildred Elsie Eldridge (‘Elsi’; 1909–91) and they were married in 1940. Elsi’s artistic reputation became obscured over the course of her married life and she is now mainly remembered for the miniatures of birds and plants she produced from the late 1950s onwards. However, she was an artist of considerable achievement, and the centrepiece of her work is the large mural ‘The Dance of Life’, now at Glyndŵr University.

Thomas was vicar 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 early-seventeenth-century cottage Sarn Rhiw (or Sarn Y Plas), which was austere and very cold. Elsi died in 1991, and the 1992 volume *Mass for Hard Times* was dedicated to her. The critic M. Wynn Thomas notes that in the aftermath of his wife’s death R. S. Thomas ‘teetered, at times, on the very brink of delusion and breakdown’ (1).

Late in his life, Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature but did not win. He died in September 2000.

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

(1) M. Wynn Thomas, ‘The Poet of Sarn Rhiw’, in John Barnie, ed., *Encounters with R. S.: R. S. Thomas at 100* (Swansea: The H’m Foundation, 2013), pp. 28–35: p. 33.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'A Marriage' comes from R. S. Thomas's 1992 poetry collection *Mass for Hard Times*, which is dedicated to the memory of his first wife Elsi, who had died the previous year. 'A Marriage' emerges from the personal context of Thomas's mourning, and can certainly be understood as an elegy for his wife (or at least a poetic mourning of her). However, a poem is never a straightforward drawing from life, and neither the poem's speaker ('I') nor the wife in the poem itself ('she', 'her') should be seen as some sort of simple or direct representation of R. S. Thomas and Elsi themselves: both of the individuals in the poem are literary constructions, however much they may also be responses to real-life human beings. (The 'I' of the poem should thus be understood as the poem's "speaker" rather than simply the poet, R. S. Thomas himself.)

Form.

The form of the poem on the page is visually delicate, with notably short lines – the longest are just five words long and many are only three (indeed, three lines are only two words long). The visual form of the piece is bound up with the poem's presentation of the speaker's wife, who the speaker presents as being graceful as a bird (line 8), and whose life ends (at the poem's conclusion) with a breath that has the light delicacy of a feather. The poem's shape on the page is part and parcel of its engagement with these ideas.

Lines 1 - 3.

The first line emphasises *the start of the relationship* that the poem goes on to present. Notably, the line-break at the end of line 1 creates an opening statement of apparent simplicity in the brevity of the declaration '**We met**'. However, these two words are only the beginning of the sentence that then runs on into lines 2 and 3, which quickly develop the initial idea into a far more complex scenario – in words that also introduce the poem's central imagery (that of birds).

Some contexts are important here: R. S. Thomas was a keen birdwatcher, and Elsi often painted birds over the course of her artistic life. The notion of the couple meeting amidst birdsong (lines 2 and 3) draws on such elements and constructs their initial romance as a shared experience of natural pleasures: the poem associates them with the non-human world of the birds which sing around them. This is not to say that the couple literally met amidst birdsong, of course. Rather, the poem imagines their meeting through the lens of their mutual ornithological interests.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 3 (continued).

However, the imagery of the birdsong here is not just a matter of personal interests; it also responds to the place of the poem's composition, with the wood behind Thomas's cottage of Sarn Rhiw being 'thronged with birds', as M. Wynn Thomas puts it (2). The birds at the poem's start thus draw from people and place across the poet's life.

The imagery of meeting under a '**shower**' of birdsong also deserves attention here. It is worth noting that the word 'shower' itself is left hanging at the end of a line, mid-sentence, so the placing of the line-break draws particular attention to it. As such, we should ask: what are the implications of this specific word? Does it offer up the birdsong as a 'shower' of refreshing rain, nourishing the young couple? Might it suggest the splendour of a meteor shower, with the birdsong functioning as a sort of celebratory, sonic fireworks? Might it even construct the birdsong as a sort of generous gift to the couple, given that the verb 'to shower' is idiomatically associated with giving (to shower someone with coins or gold)? Whilst the introduction of the motif of birds is clearly important, that motif is itself – in these opening lines – filtered through the particular notion of a 'shower' of the birds' songs.

Lines 4 - 7.

These lines are crucially about time and our experience of it. A full half-century flashes past in line 4 – the minimal space of the three-word line reducing the greater part of a human lifetime to a short breath. This is emphasised again in line 5, which refers to that half-century as nothing more than a moment, the briefest of spaces in which love has existed. Love, the poem therefore suggests, is fleeting. But it is fleeting not because it is lost quickly, or because these two people give up on it (they don't); it is fleeting because – as lines 6 and 7 state plainly – the entire world is subject to time. Specifically, in the poem's imagery, the world is '**in / servitude**' to its temporal existence. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, 'servitude' is 'The condition of being a slave or a serf, or of being the property of another person'; it is the 'absence of personal freedom'. The poem's lovers, then, just as much as the world itself, are in thrall to the powers of time: however optimistic lines 1-3 were, lines 4-7 are contrastingly tough-minded. Love itself is the prisoner of time.

(2) M. Wynn Thomas, 'The Poet of Sarn Rhiw', p. 32.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 8 - 11.

The next four lines continue to explore the same ideas as lines 4-7, except that they do so through different imagery. Here, in the seemingly romantic moment of a kiss made with closed eyes, the poet's beloved is transformed from youth to wrinkled age. But this is less nightmare than it is tragedy: the poem again makes time fly by at a rate that we do not literally experience, and love's existence seems to endure for just the briefest moment of time. In thrall to time, love seems to last for no time at all. Indeed, the poem's line-breaks help to emphasise the limited nature of the time for which love can last: the phrase 'love's moment' takes up just one line, and is bracketed by the white space of the poem's edges either side.

Working with so few words, the poem is economical in its use of language throughout. But here we find a particular moment of compression: the poem's speaker opens his eyes on his beloved's 'wrinkles'. The wrinkles here stand in for the whole of the now-aged woman: they are strictly an example of synecdoche (where a part of something is made to stand for the whole, or vice versa). But more important than the technical term is the way in which, to retain its sparse formal character, the poem relies on the one word '**wrinkles**' to imply the entire aging process.

Lines 12 - 15.

A new motif is introduced in these lines – the idea of a dance of death: a person's last dance, where the dying person (here, the wife) is partnered for the dance with death itself (3). It is interesting, however, that whilst earlier moments in the poem have been tough-minded – the presentation of love as a prisoner of time, for example – these lines are rather gentle. Death is clear but not unkind: the impossible-to-refuse invitation to the speaker's beloved is a very simple bidding ('**Come**'), rather than the violent words of a struggle. And although the beloved has no choice in the matter – it is death who does the choosing of a partner – the grim time of a long final illness (which the real-life Elsi had suffered) is not shown in its unpleasant detail. Rather, the poem imagines it in the elegant cultural form of a dance with a partner.

After the poem has looked time and its ravages so firmly in the eye, does it fail to do likewise when faced with death itself? There is an argument to be made that this is indeed the case. After all, this is not a feverish, agonised 'dance of death'. Rather, what is presented here conjures up images of polite society dancing. The poem perhaps cloaks death in the suggestion of elegance.

(3) The literary critic Tony Brown has written that 'The poem picks up the dance of death motif which recurs in *The Echoes Return Slow* [published 1988], written in Elsi's last long illness': Tony Brown, *R. S. Thomas, Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 104.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 15 - 18.

These lines return us to the imagery of birds that was established at the start of the poem. However, rather than merely using birds to provide something that remains external to the poem's protagonists - in the sense that the birdsong was something that *happened to* the lovers in lines 1-3 - here, by contrast, the speaker's beloved takes on bird-like qualities herself. This shows thematic progression over the course of the poem: the imagery of birds starts the poem in one form but by here it has evolved. By this point, the poem's '**she**' is not just amidst birdsong; here, her entire life ('**everything**') is itself the manifestation of '**a bird's grace**'. She has become *like a bird*.

As with the dance of death, birdlife here appears as elegant - strictly, in the poem's choice of words, something with '**grace**'. R. S. Thomas the keen birdwatcher is strikingly evident in this figuration: for a human to show what the poem's speaker thinks are the qualities of a bird is a high compliment. Indeed, this may even suggest that, for Thomas, birds are effectively a higher form of life than humans. As M. Wynn Thomas writes, at Sarn Rhiw Thomas could 'keep intimate company with the bird life that [...] had long solaced him for the shortcomings of humanity at large' (4). Within this poem, in other words, to equate a human being with birds is not to reduce humanity - it is to elevate it.

Lines 19 - 22.

Over these concluding lines of the poem, the imagery of birds completes its development: here, the poem's dying '**she**' does not just take on bird-like qualities; instead, in line 19, she is pictured as having a '**bill**' (beak) herself. Effectively, the transition to *becoming* a bird is complete. The critic S. J. Perry writes that, in his poetry, Thomas often 'associates his wife with the fragile creatures she so often studied and painted'. Indeed, Perry even finds a literary source for such associations in the poetry of Thomas Hardy - to which Elsi had apparently introduced her husband. Specifically, Perry points to the Hardy poem 'At the Word "Farewell"' (published in 1917), which associates his wife with 'a bird from a cloud' (5). So, through the association of birds with a beloved woman, this poem of R. S. Thomas's is also in "intertextual" dialogue with a poem of Thomas Hardy's, published seventy-five years earlier.

(4) M. Wynn Thomas, 'The Poet of Sarn Rhiw', p. 33.

(5) S. J. Perry, *Chameleon Poet: R. S. Thomas & the Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 272.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19 - 22 (continued).

These lines also present us with the death of the speaker's wife. Rather than the dance of earlier in the poem, however, death here is imagined as a bird's beak opening and a final sigh (i.e. a final breath) being released from it. Interestingly, Thomas describes this as a '**shedding**' of a sigh – precisely suggesting that something old and worn out is being got rid of by this process (in the way that a snake *sheds* its skin). Through this image, life itself seems to have been worn out. Indeed, the poem's final thought suggests just how insubstantial life is in any case: the wife's final breath is barely present at all, being '**no / heavier than a feather**' – insubstantial, delicate. Of course, the feather continues the poem's engagement with birds until the very end. But by the final line, there is nothing left of living birds – they have vanished. Instead, all that remains is a feather. Just like the woman's life in the poem, the life of the poem's imagery itself has drawn to a conclusion.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

R. S. Thomas's early poetry was particularly known for its engagement with the hill-farming communities of mid-Wales where he lived. 'A Marriage', however, is from his later period (which dates broadly from the time he moved to Aberdaron in 1967) and shows his increasing engagement with very basic human questions: here, specifically, time, love and death. Indeed, the critic M. Wynn Thomas groups 'A Marriage' with R. S. Thomas's poems that respond to his family and that 'contribute, and indeed participate in, [his ...] exploration of the mystery of being' (6).

However, the poem cannot be reduced to just these ideas: they cannot be divorced from its specific way of engaging with them and presenting them. Thus, for example, these ideas are bound up with the delicate elegance of the poem's form on the page (note how death is itself almost delicate in the final lines), and with the way that the poem consistently binds together human and avian life. In this latter sense, 'A Marriage' is not just simply an elegy for Elsi; instead, it is a poem that also mourns the shared experiences of the poet and his wife – their shared interest in birds. In this sense, it is an elegy for shared life, for a relationship.

The poem's language is generally simple, or "conversational", giving the impression – on an initial level – of a straightforward, heart-felt statement by the poem's speaker. However, note that not all the poem's words can be classed in this way: 'shower' is complicated in the sense of being somewhat ambiguous (as discussed above); 'servitude' is not conversational in register; 'bill' is a rather less common word for 'beak'; and the word 'grace' is well worth pausing over, given that R. S. Thomas was a vicar – and 'grace' has a specific meaning within Christian thinking (the notion of God's freely-given generosity to humanity, particularly expressed through salvation from sin and death). Thus, the phrase 'a bird's grace' may well refer primarily to ideas of delicate elegance; but it also has an undertow of meaning that points to a sort of salvation – a higher spiritual state that the phrase associates with birds (and, by extension, with the poem's bird-like 'she'). The poem, in short, is not without sophistication on the level of language – alerting readers to the point that it is very much a literary construction, not merely an outpouring of feeling.

The critic M. Wynn Thomas points out that 'A Marriage' is just one of a group of poems about his wife that R. S. Thomas wrote over the course of his poetic career (7). So the borders of this poem do not stop at the edges of the page; instead, they are in "intertextual" dialogue with other poems that Thomas wrote over many years.

(6) M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 144–5. For a collection of poems by Thomas to his first wife, see R. S. Thomas, *Poems to Elsi*, ed. by Damian Walford Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 2013).

(7) M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive*, pp. 143–4.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How important to the poem is the imagery of birds?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the appearance of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

Is this mainly a poem of mourning about one specific person, or is it more about exploring big ideas such as death, time and love?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- <https://howardbarlow.photoshelter.com/image/I0000qbVLYo7jG9k>
- <https://howardbarlow.photoshelter.com/image/I0000itqif7XYbRw>

Taken in the last decade of Thomas's life by Howard Barlow, two famous photographs of Thomas present him as an austere, gaunt individual, whose severe existence stood apart from the modern world.

This was imagery that was also bound up with the idea of Thomas the fierce Welsh nationalist, living in the remote landscapes of the far west - an individual who notably refused to engage with English-speaking tourists during his time in Aberdaron. Of course, such photographs do not present the whole picture; as we can see, the poem 'A Marriage' suggests a much gentler side to the poet's character.

- <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/mildred-elsie-eldridge-celebrating-woman-2513949>

This article from WalesOnline includes a photograph of Thomas's wife Elsi, in her youth.



R. S. Thomas and Elsi on their wedding day (July 1940, Bala)



R. S. Thomas on the day of his marriage to Elsi (July 1940, Bala)



A studio picture of Elsi Eldridge taken in the 1930s, at about the time she and R. S. Thomas met (c. 1937)

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: (a) links to a selection of R. S. Thomas poems that are available online; and (b) a substantial bibliography. A link at the side of the page provides access to an array of other materials on poets from Wales:

<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 and a substantial bibliography are available via the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University:

<http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en>

<http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/bibl.php.en>

All links are clickable

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