

Nigel Jenkins 'Wild Cherry'

A HELPSHEET 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.)

Nigel Jenkins (1949–2014) was a poet, teacher, playwright, critic, and writer of creative prose. Brought up on a farm on the Gower peninsula, he went on to study at Essex University and work as a journalist in England (via a brief stint as a circus-hand in America). On his return to Wales in 1976 he learned Welsh and remained in Swansea, becoming a full-time writer and lecturer in Creative Writing. He started publishing poetry in the 1970s and his *Acts of Union: Selected Poems* appeared in 1990. In later years he became adept in the demanding poetic form of the Japanese haiku, as evidenced in his 2002 book, *Blue: 101 Haiku, Senryu and Tanka*. His absorbing travel book on the Welsh missionaries in northern India, *Gwalia in Khasia*, won the Wales Book of the Year prize in 1996. His work is often concerned with political and social themes relating specifically to Wales, and can range in style and tone from the devastatingly satirical to the tender and intimate. He had a beautiful, resonant speaking voice, which can still be heard and appreciated in the broadcasts he made for the BBC and S4C.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Wild Cherry'. The poem focuses on the blossom of the wild cherry tree. Cherry blossom is especially beautiful because the tree is covered in a cloud-like mass of flowers, which last only for a short time; in Japanese culture, the cherry blossom (sakura) is particularly prized, and is associated with life's ephemerality, as well as its beauty. In English poetry, too, the cherry blossom is associated with love, beauty, and ephemerality, as in A. E. Housman's lyric from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896): 'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now/Is hung with bloom along the bough,/And stands about the woodland ride/Wearing white for Eastertide.' Similarly, in Edward Thomas's poignant First World War lyric, *The Cherry Trees*, 'The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,/ On the old road where all that passed are dead,/ Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding/ This early May morn when there is none to wed' (1).

Form.

This is a free verse poem arranged in three five-line stanzas. Free verse means that the poem lacks traditional rhyme and metre. It also allows the poet considerable freedom in syntax and punctuation, opening the possibility of run-on lines (enjambment) and giving free rein to a conversational tone.

First stanza (lines 1-5)

The poem opens on a dynamic and precarious image of the first-person speaker balancing on tiptoe on a wall, in order to reach the best branches of white cherry blossom. The verb is in the past tense, so the speaker is looking back on this experience, perhaps ruefully. The blossoms are being gathered as a gift for an unspecified 'you'. The fact that the speaker makes a great effort to reach 'the fullest, the/flounciest sprays' and that he 'travelled many miles' to present the gift indicates that the flowers are an emblem of love. The fact that the speaker seeks the 'fullest' sprays suggest the excessive nature of his emotions; the intensity of his desire is also indicated by his effortful actions of 'reach[ing]' and 'travell[ing]'. The unusual word 'flounciest', both in its superlative degree, and in its meaning of 'an ornamental appendage to the skirt of a lady's dress' (OED) again connotes something excessive and perhaps outrageous. It calls to mind an old-fashioned femininity, too, indicating that the speaker may wish to please the beloved with this quaint gesture of regard.

Add a little bit of body text

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

First stanza (lines 1-5) [continued]

Alternatively, '**flounciest**' may indicate a certain self-conscious embarrassment on the part of the speaker. In any case, the speaker's positive and hopeful state of mind, when he selects the '**fullest**' and '**flounciest**' branches, is emphasized by the 'fl' alliteration, and by the assonance between 'clouds' and 'flounciest'. The diction and rhythm are quite conversational, enhanced by the enjambment in each line of the stanza.

Second stanza (lines 6-10)

The setting shifts here from the scene of picking the wild cherry blossom to a domestic interior where the 'you' has received the offering and has placed the sprays of blossom in a jar on the table. The '**I**' and the '**you**' face each other across the table, separated by the jar of flowers. Initially promising, since the flowers are accepted by a '**smiling**' recipient, the scene becomes tense, as indicated by the repetition of the word '**between**', emphasising separation. Words are exchanged, described as '**white clouds**', which echoes the initial description of the cherry blossom, but here the connotations of the image change from lightness and ephemerality to obscurity and obfuscation. Moreover, the phrase '**there were words**' may indicate that the two argue, since '**having words**' is often used as a euphemism for having an argument. The stanza ends, ominously, with an ellipsis, indicating that whatever the speaker has attempted to express in words has either been rejected or misunderstood. The ellipsis actually suggests a failure of words: in the gap created at the end of this stanza lies all the unexpressed disappointment or heartbreak of the speaker. The failure of communication is also indicated by the end-stopping of this stanza's lines, contrasting strongly with the run-on lines of the opening stanza.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Third stanza (lines 11-15)

The third stanza addresses the aftermath of the failed encounter and, again, the failure is partly symbolised by the cherry blossom. The speaker still retains one branch, picked at the same time as the offering to **'you'**; while this suggests a sharing of the beauty and emotional symbolism of the flowers between the two locations and people (lovers?), it also means that, projecting into the future, he will know when her flowers wilt and fall because his flowers will do so at the same time. The imagined synchrony of the death of the flowers suggests the withering of the relationship between the two people. Still focusing on **'you'**, the speaker imagines her clearing up the remains of the cherry blossom and disposing of them **'with the ashes/and empties'**. Because the cherry flowers, briefly, at Easter, as both Housman and Thomas mention, it may also be associated, paradoxically, both with the fresh new life of Spring and with the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on Good Friday. The **'ashes'** bring to mind the grief and repentance of Ash Wednesday, while also being a powerful general image of death and futility (2). The **'ashes'** are paired with **'empties'** – possibly a reference to putting out empty milk bottles or the discarding of empty bottles of wine or other alcoholic drinks – suggesting the void which now exists between the two, and contrasts effectively with the image of plenitude and beauty with which the poem opens. Noteworthy, also, is the fact that in this final stanza, it is **'you'** who is active, **'brush[ing]'** and **'toss[ing]'**, clearing up the detritus of the dead flowers, while in the first stanza it is **'I'** who is dynamic and daring in his actions. The final, bitter-sounding phrase, **'yesterday's news'** (referring to the old newspaper in which the ash is collected as well as the idiom connoting that someone/something is not worthy of attention), links up with the repeated **'words'** of the second stanza, creating an impression of the futility and ephemerality of human expression. Like that emblem of transience, the cherry blossom, the poem indicates that human relationships, too, are short-lived and lead to sadness and regret when they are over. This final stanza contains a mixture of verb tenses, such as **'I'd kept'** (pluperfect), **'I'll know'** (future), **'you brush'** (present) which contrasting with the simple past tense used in the first two stanzas. This self-consciousness about time passing may be seen as underlining the theme of ephemerality hinted at by the cherry blossom itself .

(2) Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, which in the Christian calendar is the period of penitence leading up to Easter. On this day ashes are placed in a cross on the Christian worshipper's forehead as a reminder that, in the words of Genesis 3:19, 'dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Wild Cherry' appeared in Nigel Jenkins's *Acts of Union: Selected Poems 1974-1989*. In some ways it is an uncharacteristic Nigel Jenkins poem. He is better known for politically-engaged poems which deal with the situation of Wales or with capitalism and the aftermath of colonialism. Ostensibly, this poem has no relation to any of these characteristic concerns. However, Jenkins was a poet who wrote on a very wide variety of topics; as Matthew Jarvis points out in his essay 'Repositioning Wales', 'his concerns span such issues as anti-war protest, aspects of farm life, the murder of Lorca, and poetry about punctuation.' (3) In Jenkins's *Selected Poems*, though, there is a persistent undercurrent of poems about the natural world, as indicated by titles such as 'Primroses', 'Snowdrops', 'Autumn Leaves', 'Gorse' and 'Silver Birch'. (4) Moreover, in a poem entitled 'Where poems came from', Jenkins reflects on the gap between '**words, books of them/ yellowed in the classroom cupboard**' and his speaker's childhood perception of the poetry out in the world, unarticulated in words: 'For there's a space/in things, a gap between/ the words for it and a wave's/ movement'. (5) This reflection appears to be echoed in the ellipsis after 'words' in 'Wild Cherry', along with the sense of an unbridgeable gap between the two people unable to express themselves.

One of Jenkins's concerns in the latter part of his career was with Japanese poetic forms, and he published a volume of his own haiku, which may relate to his use of the wild cherry blossom as the central image of this poem. As noted above, cherry blossom is a key image in Japanese art and poetry, while the tradition of cherry blossom viewing in Spring (hanami) is an integral element of Japanese culture. Influenced by Buddhist thought, the cherry blossom symbolizes both beauty and ephemerality; its appreciation by humans is a kind of pleasurable duty, indicating one's understanding and acceptance of the brevity of life. Jenkins would have been aware of these connotations when he chose to focus on the cherry blossom in this poem about failed love. (6) His later volume of haiku, *Blue* (2002), includes one on cherry blossom: 'against sunned red brick/ the pink white explosion/ of a lone cherry -// and I don't want to leave it,/ the pavement, the day, the tree'. (7) Again, like 'Wild cherry' this poem appears to celebrate the transient beauty of the blossom, while hinting at the similar ephemerality of human life.

(3) Matthew Jarvis, 'Repositioning Wales: Poetry after the Second Flowering' in *Slanderous Tongues: Essays on Welsh Poetry in English 1970-2005* ed. Daniel G. Williams (Bridgend: Seren, 2010) pp. 21-59: p. 40.

(4) Nigel Jenkins, *Acts of Union*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1990), p. 33, 38, 84, 125, 138.

(5) Nigel Jenkins, 'Where poems came from', *ibid*, pp. 24-5.

(6) Jenkins suggests a similarity between early Welsh gnomic poetry and Japanese haiku in the Afterword to his co-edited collection, *Another Country: Haiku Poetry from Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2011), p. 148.

(7) Nigel Jenkins, *Blue: 101 Haiku, Senryu and Tanka* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 31.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

His interest in Japanese art was only one facet of Jenkins's internationalist outlook. His earliest published poems are set in Morocco, while some of his most impressive satirical poems deal with the United States, and his thoughtful prose reflections are often about India and its colonial history, in which Wales has been intimately involved. Thus, although much of his work bears comparison with the Welsh nationalist poets of the so-called 'Second Flowering', such as Harri Webb, his poetic horizons are much broader than theirs. Indeed, he articulated this himself when he wrote in the poem 'Advice to a Young Poet': 'Sing for Wales, sure, but don't shut your trap/on all the rest - it ain't crap.' (8)

(8) Quoted in Matthew Jarvis, 'Repositioning Wales', op. cit., p. 44; Jarvis points out that Jenkins' lines are a response to, and rebuttal of, Harri Webb's notorious couplet, 'Sing for Wales or shut your trap -/ All the rest's a load of crap', *ibid*, p. 57.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the title specify that this is a *wild* cherry tree?

What are the implications of the phrase 'head in/clouds'?

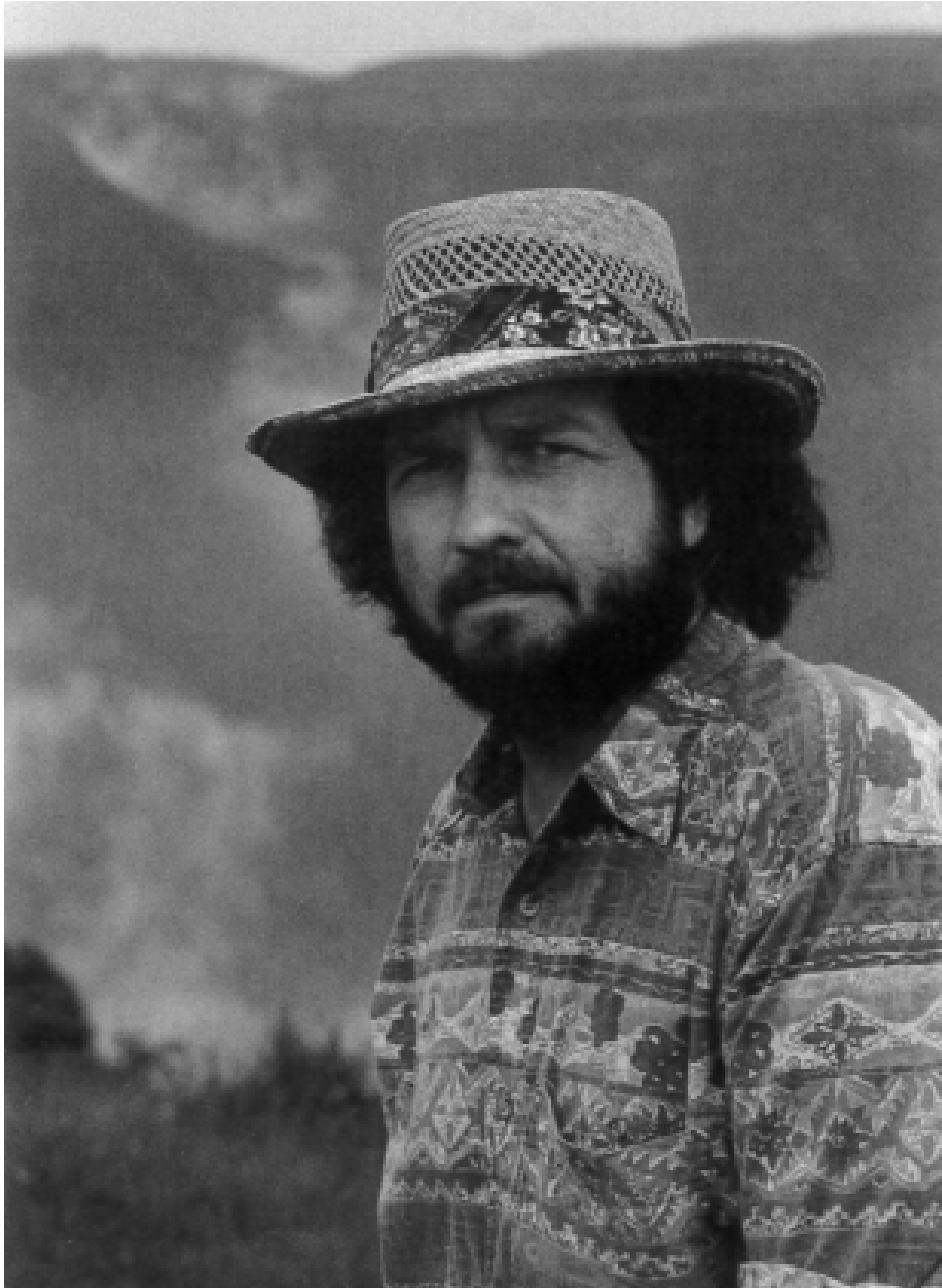
Why do you think the poem is written in free verse rather than in a rhymed, lyrical form?

Why are the 'words' spoken between 'I' and 'you' not articulated in the poem?

Is the 'you' female? Why does [s]he not speak?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/native-trees/wild-cherry/>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanami>
- <https://alchetron.com/Nigel-Jenkins>



LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/nigel-jenkins-politically-engaged-and-outspoken-poet-whose-work-often-landed-him-in-trouble-with-the-9124685.html>

https://www.planetmagazine.org.uk/planet_extra/nigel-jenkins-obit/

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-south-west-wales-25924608>

Nigel Jenkins reading from his work are available on Youtube, e.g. :

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNSU_1JOcYA

**PROFESSOR
KATIE GRAMICH**

*Cardiff University
August 2018*

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