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Pre-Reading Activity

Do you always get on with your parents? Why / why not?

Imagine that you are a parent of a teenager. How might you feel as your son or daughter became a teenager and started to want more independence?

Context
Gillian Clarke is a Welsh poet; she was born in 1937 and has worked as an English teacher and a professor of creative writing. She has two sons and a daughter, Catrin, for who the poem below is named.

You can listen to a reading of the poem at http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetclarke/catrinrev2.shtml

**Catrin**

I can remember you, child,
As I stood in a hot, white
Room at the window watching
The people and cars taking
Turn at the traffic lights.
I can remember you, our first
Fierce confrontation, the tight
Red rope of love which we both
Fought over. It was a square
Environmental blank, disinfected
Of paintings or toys. I wrote
All over the walls with my
Words, coloured the clean squares
With the wild, tender circles
Of our struggle to become
Separate. We want, we shouted,
To be two, to be ourselves.

Neither won nor lost the struggle
In the glass tank clouded with feelings
Which changed us both. Still I am fighting
You off, as you stand there
With your straight, strong, long
Brown hair and your rosy,
Defiant glare, bringing up
From the heart’s pool that old rope,
Tightening about my life,
Trailing love and conflict,
As you ask may you skate
In the dark, for one more hour.

Gillian Clarke

Initial Response

What event is Clarke remembering in the first stanza of the poem?
What emotions does she remember feeling at the time of Catrin’s birth?

What do you think the ‘thin red rope of love’ refers to? What impression does it give us about the emotions attached to the mother-daughter relationship?
In the second stanza, Catrin is a teenager. What emotions does Clarke feel about her daughter growing up?

S.M.I.L.E. Analysis

Remember, to analyse a poem we need to look at:

- **Structure**
- **Meaning**
- **Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)**
- **Language**
- **Effect on the reader**
“Meaning” is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and why you think the poet has written it.

**Meaning - Key points:**

- In this poem, Clarke is writing about the emotions associated with motherhood, and how mothers react as their children grow up and struggle for independence.
- Clarke portrays her relationship with her daughter, Catrin, as one which combines deep love and conflict - ‘trailing love and conflict.’
- In the first stanza, she remembers Catrin’s difficult birth as their ‘first / Fierce confrontation,’ in which they both fought over ‘the tight red rope of love’ as they struggled to become separate beings.
- In the second stanza, Catrin is a teenager struggling for independence; she wants to ‘skate / In the dark, for one more hour.’
- Clarke portrays the teenage Catrin as defiant, with her ‘rosy / Defiant glare’ suggesting that Catrin wants separateness from her mother.
- For Clarke, her battles with her teenaged daughter bring back the emotions associated with her difficult birth (‘that old rope’......‘trailing love and conflict’).
What are the two key emotions that Clarke focuses on in the poem?

What tone would you read the poem in? Do you think it is a loving poem, or a bitter one?

This is quite a personal poem, but do you think that Clarke is trying to make a universal point about mother-child relationships?
Structure

Structure refers to the way a poem is set out and organised. Here, you write about things like rhyme scheme, length, repetition and the flow of ideas throughout the poem.

Structure - Key Points

• The poem is divided into **two stanzas**.
  • The first stanza is written in the past tense and deals with Catrin’s difficult birth. It is about memory (e.g. “I remember you, child.”)
  • The second stanza is written in the present tense and deals with an incident in which Catrin has asked to stay out skating.

• The division between the stanzas could represent:
  • The years that have passed between the birth and Catrin’s adolescence.
  • The growing separation between mother and daughter (first at birth, and then later as Catrin struggles to become more independent).

• In the poem, Clarke directly addresses her daughter (“you”). The personal pronouns “I,” “you” and “we” are used repeatedly throughout the poem.

• Enjambment is used throughout the poem to emphasise key words e.g.:

  “Of our struggle to become

  Separate.” - here, the line end separates the mother and daughter, just as Catrin’s birth separated them.
Exploration - Structure

What is the significance of the two stanzas?

Find some more examples of where enjambment emphasises key words and ideas within the poem.
What is the significance of the use of the personal pronouns ‘I,’ ‘you’ and ‘we?’ How does it relate to the theme and ideas of the poem?

Imagery

This is where you look at techniques such as similes, metaphors and personification. What pictures has the poet tried to create in your head?

Image - Key Points

Please note that the following pictures and explanations are taken from BBC GCSE Bitesize, which has an extensive section dealing with this poem. Please do visit the site at http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetclarke/catrinrev4.shtml
The poem begins in the labour ward of the hospital: it is 'hot, white' (line 2) and sterile, which seems at odds with the intimate event that is about to occur. Further on it is seen as 'a square / Environmental blank' (line 9) and a 'glass tank' (line 19). Why do you think Clarke places so much emphasis on the hospital building?

Before the actual birth, Clarke looks out of the window at 'The people and cars' (line 4) going about their everyday business; she, in contrast, is about to experience one of the most momentous events of her life.

'The tight / Red rope of love' (line 8) is the umbilical cord. It is red because of the blood that flowed between the mother and the child in the womb; but also because red is the colour of passion and love. Red contrasts with the stark, white hospital surroundings.

Clarke has also said that she was thinking of the red ropes that bind ships to the quay at a harbour. Whilst the rope is underwater and cannot be seen, it comes up dripping if the boat tries to pull away. This image is present in the poem when Clarke mentions the ‘heart’s pool’ in the second stanza - suggesting her conflict with the teenage Catrin has brought up submerged, deep-rooted emotions.
'I wrote / All over the walls with my / Words' (line 11). Are these words Clarke's shouts and screams of pain, or are they words of a poem she thinks of through her labour? She imagines the words colouring 'the clean squares' (line 13) of the hospital. Decide whether you think the coloured words would deface the hospital's clean walls, or give them new life and vibrancy.

'The wild tender circles' perhaps refer to the waves of contractions in the lead-up to the birth. Contractions get closer and closer together as moment of birth nears, as the circles of ripples on a pond are closest to the point where a stone is dropped in. The mother and child shouted (line 16). Was this in pain or joy? Or perhaps both?

Both Clarke and Catrin were changed (line 20) by the birth: Clarke became a mother, someone upon whom a tiny baby depended; Catrin became a child, still dependent upon her mother - but less so than she had been in the womb. However, in some ways nothing changed, because the fight continues: Still I am fighting / You off (line 20).

Catrin has asked to 'skate / In the dark' (line 29). This illustrates Catrin's growing independence, yet perhaps contains other layers of meaning. One student quoted on Gillian Clarke's website points out that In the dark may mean that there are still things that the mother and child have yet to find out about each other; another interpretation suggests it refers to the darkness of the womb.
The ‘red rope of love’ is the key metaphor in the poem that conveys the fierce love and fierce conflict between mother and daughter. What connotations does this metaphor have? In what kind of ways could you explore its significance?

In two metaphors, Clarke describes the hospital room as very **sterile** - it is a ‘square / Environmental blank’ and a ‘glass tank.’ How does this contrast with what is about to happen within it?
What is the significance of the metaphor of ‘circles?’ How do the ‘wild, tender’ circles contrast with the sterile ‘square’ of the hospital room?

Language

This is where you comment on the language the poet uses. What choices has he/she made, and why?

**Key Points - Language**

- The poem juxtaposes words to do with conflict and words to do with love e.g.:  
  - **Conflict** - birth was a ‘fierce confrontation,’ they both ‘fought over’ the red rope, it was a ‘struggle,’ and ‘still, I am fighting you off.’
  - **Love** - rope ‘of love,’ the ‘heart’s pool.’

  This **juxtaposition** highlights the conflicting emotions involved in motherhood, both when giving birth and when raising a child.

- Clarke uses **alliteration** (e.g. our **first / Fierce** confrontation - the repeat of the breathy ‘f’ sound could highlight her heavy breathing as she gave birth).
• The language of the poem is simple - suggesting the simplicity and depth of these maternal emotions?
• In the second stanza, her choice of language emphasises Catrin’s strength and independence
  • e.g. ‘your **straight, strong, long** brown hair’ - the alliteration of the strong ‘str’ sound emphasises that Catrin is now asserting her independence. This effect is heightened by the rhyme of the aggressive sounds in ‘strong’ and ‘long,’ - and later ‘hair’ and ‘glare.’

How does Clarke use juxtaposition to emphasise the contradictory emotions involved in motherhood?

How does Clarke describe her daughter in the second stanza?
Effect on the reader

What impression did you get about Clarke’s feelings towards her daughter?

How do you imagine the teenage Catrin would have interpreted this situation?
Did you feel that this poem successfully conveyed the intensity of the parent-child relationship? Why / why not?

Further Resources

This poem has in the past featured on other exam board syllabuses, so, unlike some other poems in the ‘Clashes and Collisions’ collection, there are lots of resources available online to help you.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMzKA2-HFmY - a S.M.I.L.E. analysis of Catrin recorded by a teacher.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english литература/poetclarke/catinrev1.shtml - BBC Bitesize has a whole section on the poem.

http://www.gillianclarke.co.uk/home.htm - As a former English teacher, Gillian Clarke is very interested in helping students to understand her poems. On this page on her website, she answers students’ questions specifically about Catrin. Make sure you read it!
3. a) “Explore how the writer presents the conflict between a mother and her daughter in “Catrin.”

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.

Comparison

My suggested poem to compare this to would be “Cousin Kate” by Christina Rossetti, as this is also about conflict between members of the same family. Alternatively, you could choose ‘Your Dad Did What?’, which is about

Look at the PDF guide for your chosen comparison poem, and fill in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Gillian Clarke - “Catrin.”</th>
<th>Christina Rossetti - “Cousin Kate.”</th>
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Sample Exam Question - Part B

*Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii*

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of “Cousin Kate” and “Catrin” present the idea of tensions between people.

Use examples of the language from both poems to support your answer.
3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of “Catrin” and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)

Use examples from the language of **both** poems to support your answer.

*NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.*

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.