

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives

With Birds You're Never Lonely – *Raymond
Antrobus*

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WITH BIRDS YOU'RE NEVER LONELY

Raymond Antrobus

Brief Summary

With Birds You're Never Lonely follows a speaker who struggles to hear clearly in a noisy café. This triggers memories of time spent alone in a **New Zealand forest** surrounded by birds and ancient trees. In the forest, the speaker switches their hearing aids off and on, noticing how silence and sound change, which leads them to think about the relationship between humans and the natural world. The speaker describes listening to a young **Māori** woman (the **Indigenous** people of New Zealand) who can recognise **birdsong** because of knowledge passed down through her family. The poem ends by **contrasting** the richness of nature and connection in the forest with the loneliness and **disconnection** of city life.



Synopsis

- The poem begins in a café where the speaker cannot hear the barista clearly over the noise of the coffee machine.
- The speaker notices another man sitting alone and this moment makes them **reflect** on nature and **solitude**.
- They remember recently returning from New Zealand and spending time alone in a forest. In the forest, the speaker watches and listens to birds and feels surrounded by natural life.
- The speaker turns off their hearing aids because the birds are so loud, and experiences a **'silence that was not an absence'**.
- When the hearing aids are switched back on, the sound of the forest returns suddenly.
- The speaker reflects on trees, nature, and the way humans affect the environment.
- Later, the speaker listens to a young **Māori** woman who can recognise different birds by their calls, and she explains that this is something she learned from her grandfather, who taught her that **'with birds you're never lonely'**.
- The poem ends with the speaker thinking about London, contrasting the city's trees and atmosphere with the richer sense of **connection** found in the forest.

Context

Deaf identity, communication, and perspective

Raymond Antrobus is a **British-Jamaican** poet who is Deaf, and his writing often explores how sound, silence, and communication shape everyday life. This background makes the poem's opening in a noisy café especially relevant, because it reflects how public spaces can become difficult or **isolating** when speech is drowned out by background noise. Antrobus's work often shows that deafness is not simply about "not



hearing”, but about experiencing the world differently, especially in moments where listening and understanding become social challenges.

New Zealand forest setting

The poem moves from an ordinary city café into the forests of New Zealand, creating a clear **contrast** between urban noise and the intense, living soundscape of nature. **Zealandia** is a real **conservation sanctuary**, and the poem’s references to native birds and ancient **Kauri** trees connect the speaker’s memories to a specific landscape. This setting helps frame the forest as a place filled with presence and life, where sound and silence feel more meaningful than they do in the modern city.



Māori knowledge and tradition



The poem includes a young **Māori** woman who can identify birds by their calls, a skill she learned from her grandfather. Māori **culture** strongly values knowledge passed down through **generations**, including close attention to land, wildlife, and the natural world. This context adds depth to the poem’s focus on **birdsong** as more than background sound, suggesting it can also be a form of connection, tradition, and belonging that is learned through family and community.

The title “With Birds You’re Never Lonely”

The title reads like a reassuring statement, suggesting birds can replace human company by creating a sense of presence and life around you, even when you are physically alone.

It hints that loneliness is emotional rather than just social, because the poem shows how connection can come through listening, attention, and feeling part of the natural world.

**With Birds
You’re Never
Lonely**

The title also suggests this comfort is something you can be taught, because it is passed down from a grandfather to his granddaughter, linking birdsong to tradition and inherited knowledge.



Perspective and Tone

With Birds You're Never Lonely is written in the **first person**, which makes the poem feel intimate and **conversational**, as if the reader is inside the speaker's thoughts. The perspective is **shaped** by Antrobus's own experience of being Deaf and using hearing aids, so the poem presents listening as something effortful and sometimes frustrating, especially in the café where noise overwhelms speech.

As the poem **shifts** into the memory of the New Zealand forest, the voice becomes more **reflective** and absorbed, showing how the speaker finds a different kind of connection in nature than in busy urban spaces.

The **tone** moves between quiet isolation, wonder, and longing. The café feels detached and frustrating, while the forest feels calm and meaningful, even in silence. By the end, the poem becomes more reflective and **melancholy**, as the speaker feels **"sorry"** for London's **"grey"** trees, suggesting the city lacks the sense of family, belonging, and **spiritual richness** found in the forest.



With Birds You're Never Lonely

The conversational opening feels immediate and personal, like we're hearing the speaker's real voice. The struggle to hear suggests disconnection and frustration, showing how everyday spaces can shut people out through noise.

The focus on trees shows the speaker is mentally stuck in the memory of nature, as if returning has left them restless and unsettled.

The confident description of the birds suggests freedom and energy, creating a contrast with the speaker's quieter, more restricted life back in the café.

This shows the speaker relies on hearing aids to manage sound. Turning them off suggests the noise is too intense, and it highlights how sound can be controlled, linking to the poem's contrast between overwhelming noise and meaningful silence.

The sudden collapse of silence shows how fragile calmness is, as if

I can't hear the barista
over the coffee machine.

Spoons slam, steam rises.

I catch the eye of a man

sitting in the corner
of the cafe reading alone

about trees which is, incidentally,

all I can think about

since returning.

Last week I sat alone

on a stump, deep in Zelandia forest

with sun-syrupped Kauri trees

and brazen Tui birds with white tufts

and yellow and black beaks.

They landed by my feet, blaring so loudly

I had to turn off my hearing aids.

When all sound disappeared, I was tuned
into a silence that was not an absence.

As I switched sound on again,

Sharp sound imagery creates a harsh, mechanical atmosphere, making the café feel overwhelming rather than comforting. The brief eye contact hints at human connection, but the man reading alone reinforces isolation, suggesting loneliness can exist even when surrounded by people.

The repeated idea of being alone links the café and the forest, but it also suggests solitude feels different depending on whether the speaker feels they belong.

Rich sensory imagery makes the forest feel vivid and alive, as if it has more personality than the city.

The silence is presented as meaningful rather than empty. This challenges the assumption that quietness is negative, implying the speaker feels more connected to nature when sound disappears.

Personification makes the forest seem powerful, like it



peace can be destroyed instantly by returning to noise. This creates a sense of loss, suggesting the speaker can't hold onto that feeling for long once they re-enter everyday life.

The trees are described as endless and sturdy, symbolising strength, stability, and deep-rooted identity.

Personification gives the trees intelligence and a voice, implying nature could judge humanity.

The speaker "stumbling" suggests they are overwhelmed or changed by the forest experience, as if it has left a lasting impact. The shift to listening introduces a more reflective mood, preparing for a deeper understanding of connection to nature.

The London trees are presented as dull and lonely through colour imagery, suggesting loss and emptiness. The speaker's pity implies that without family, tradition, or spiritual meaning, nature in the city feels isolated and stripped of purpose.

silence collapsed.

The forest spat all the birds back,
and I was jealous—

the earthy Kauri trees, their endless
brown and green trunks of sturdiness.

I wondered what the trees would say about us?
What books would they write if they had to cut us
down?

Later, stumbling from the forest I listened
to a young Maori woman.

She could tell which bird chirped,
a skill she learned from her grandfather

who said with birds you're never lonely.

In that moment I felt sorry
for any grey tree in London,
for the family they don't have,
the Gods they can't hold.

controls the life inside it. The speaker's jealousy reveals longing, suggesting they want the effortless belonging that nature seems to offer its creatures.

The earthy colours make them feel natural and permanent, which makes the speaker's human life seem smaller and more temporary by comparison.

The violent reversal of humans being cut down suggests guilt and criticism, as if the speaker recognises human power has been used destructively against the natural world.

The Māori woman's knowledge shows a relationship with nature that is learned, inherited, and cultural rather than

occasional or surface-level. The grandfather's message suggests nature can provide companionship.



Structure

Free verse

- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or metre, which makes it feel natural and **conversational**, like the speaker is thinking in real time.
- This suits the poem's reflective mood, as it moves between the café scene, memories of the forest, and wider thoughts about loneliness and belonging.



Shifts between settings

- The poem begins in a busy café, then **shifts** into a memory of the New Zealand forest, before ending with a final **contrast** in London.
- This structure mirrors the speaker's thought process, where one moment in the present triggers a **vivid memory**, and the poem gradually widens into a bigger reflection about connection and isolation.

Enjambment and flowing movement

- **Enjambment** helps the poem move smoothly, reflecting how memories and observations spill into each other rather than being neatly separated.
- The run-on lines also create a **drifting, reflective pace**, which fits the speaker moving from noisy sound, to silence, to the return of sound again.

Volta

- A turning point happens when the speaker describes silence as **"not an absence"**, which **shifts** the poem away from frustration and into a deeper, more thoughtful **perspective**.
- This moment changes how the reader understands silence, suggesting it can feel full and real rather than empty.



Ending

- The ending **zooms out** from the speaker's personal experience into a wider view of loneliness and disconnection in the city.
- Finishing on **"any grey tree in London"** gives the poem a quiet, reflective ending, leaving the reader with a strong **contrast** between natural community and urban isolation.



Language and Imagery

Sound and control

Antrobus uses **sound imagery** to show how difficult it can be to pick out meaning in a noisy world. The café is presented through harsh, sudden noises like **“Spoons slam”**, making the atmosphere feel cluttered and overwhelming rather than relaxing. The hearing aids then become a way of showing the speaker’s relationship with sound as something managed and **changeable**, not constant.

In the forest, switching them off creates a different kind of awareness, and the phrase **“tuned / into a silence”** suggests silence is something **active** and “full”, not empty. When sound returns, **“silence collapsed”** makes that quiet feel almost physical, as if it can fall apart in an instant.

Forest imagery and vivid colour

In the New Zealand section, Antrobus builds a **rich natural setting** through bright **colour imagery** and precise description. Details like **“plate-blue sky”** and the birds’ **“yellow and black beaks”** make the forest feel alive and sharply observed. This vividness **contrasts** with the duller city setting later, and it also shows how closely the speaker notices the physical world, as if nature offers a clearer kind of focus than human conversation in the café.

Personification

Antrobus uses **personification** to make the forest feel active and powerful, especially in **“The forest spat all the birds back”**, which gives nature its own force and energy. He also uses **questioning** to suggest the trees hold knowledge and memory beyond humans, asking **“What books would they write”**. This image blends nature with human language, making the natural world seem like something that could speak, record history, and judge human behaviour, even if people rarely stop to listen.



Themes

Nature as connection

The poem suggests that the natural world can offer **companionship**, even without human conversation. Birds and trees create a sense of life and presence around the speaker, so being alone in nature feels **meaningful** rather than empty.



Loneliness in modern city life

The poem **contrasts** this with the city, where noise, busyness, and routine can still leave people feeling isolated. The ending implies that **urban spaces** like London can feel emotionally “**grey**”, with less **community** and less of a sense of belonging.

Knowledge passed down through generations

A key theme is **inheritance** through learning, shown through the Māori woman’s ability to recognise birdsong because it was taught by her grandfather. The poem presents this as a form of **cultural memory**, showing how **identity** and connection are built through family and tradition.



Communication and understanding

The poem also explores how difficult communication can be, especially when sound is **distorted** or overwhelming. It suggests that connection is not always about hearing perfectly, but about paying attention and finding other ways to feel part of the world.

Comparisons

Lines Written in Early Spring – William Wordsworth

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems use a first-person speaker reflecting quietly on their surroundings, showing how environments shape thoughts and emotions. Antrobus begins in an everyday café before shifting into nature, while Wordsworth sits in a grove and lets his mind wander. Both poems present nature as a source of comfort and companionship when the speaker feels alone. Antrobus finds connection through birdsong and a silence that feels meaningful rather than empty, while Wordsworth describes nature as idyllic and emotionally healing, shown through the “pleasant thoughts” it brings and the way every living thing seems linked in “Nature’s holy plan”. Both poems include a critical awareness of human damage. Antrobus questions what trees would say about humans and imagines destruction, while Wordsworth’s sadness comes from humanity’s corruption in “What man has made of man”.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>With Birds You're Never Lonely</i> focuses strongly on sound and listening, shaped by deafness, while <i>Lines Written in Early Spring</i> focuses more on emotion and moral reflection through calm natural imagery. • Antrobus uses modern, conversational detail like the café setting to show disconnection in everyday life, while Wordsworth's Romantic style is more idealised and philosophical, presenting nature as a spiritual guide. • The poems also differ in form and structure. Wordsworth's poem is tightly controlled, using six quatrains and a regular rhyme scheme, which reflects the harmony and balance of the natural world. Antrobus' poem is written in free verse, so it feels more fragmented and realistic, mirroring the speaker's shifting attention between café noise, forest memory, and reflection. • Wordsworth also uses a cyclical structure by returning to "What man has made of man", enclosing the poem's peaceful nature images within human sadness, whereas Antrobus ends by widening outward into London and the trees he "felt sorry" for using contrast to leave the reader with a sense of urban emptiness.
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Like an Heiress – Grace Nichols

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems show a speaker reflecting on nature as something powerful and meaningful, using sensory imagery to make the environment feel alive. Antrobus describes birds and forests vividly, while Nichols presents the sea as rich and dazzling through "eye-catching jewels". • Both poems explore the relationship between humans and the natural world, suggesting nature can carry emotional and even spiritual value. Antrobus connects trees to "family" and "Gods", while Nichols treats the ocean like an inheritance in "Like an heiress". • Both include an underlying awareness of human harm. Antrobus questions what nature would "write" about humans if it had to destroy them, while Nichols shows nature being damaged by pollution through "a wave of rubbish".
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>With Birds You're Never Lonely</i> focuses on loneliness and connection through listening, while <i>Like an Heiress</i> focuses more on responsibility and guilt, ending with a wider concern for the future in “the fate of our planet”. • Antrobus contrasts nature with the city to show emotional disconnection, whereas Nichols contrasts childhood wonder with adult disappointment, showing how the sea has changed over time. • Nichols uses a more direct, personal voice of shock and regret, while Antrobus's tone stays calmer and more reflective, even when he questions human destruction.
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In a London Drawing Room – George Eliot

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems present London as a place that can feel isolating and disconnected, using the city to explore emotional emptiness. Antrobus ends by pitying London's “grey” trees, while Eliot describes a lifeless urban atmosphere through “the lowest rate of colour, warmth, and joy”. • Both poets use observation to create distance between the speaker and the world around them. Antrobus watches the café and notices someone reading alone, while Eliot's speaker surveys the street as if trapped behind glass. • Both poems suggest nature is restricted or weakened in the city. Antrobus implies London trees lack “family” and spiritual depth, while Eliot shows nature being blocked out by buildings in “Cutting the sky”.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>With Birds You're Never Lonely</i> contrasts London with a forest full of sound and life, so nature becomes a real alternative, while <i>In a London Drawing Room</i> stays trapped in the city, creating a more hopeless and closed atmosphere. • Antrobus includes moments of connection through inherited knowledge and birdsong, while Eliot presents people as emotionally detached, shown in “No figure lingering / Pauses to feed the hunger of the eye”. • Eliot's tone is consistently bleak and critical, whereas Antrobus mixes loneliness with wonder and reflection, ending in sadness but also recognising that connection is possible elsewhere.

