

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry: Conflict Collection

Catrin - *Gillian Clarke*



CATRIN

Gillian Clarke

Brief Summary

Clarke's poem explores both the birth of her daughter, as well as the implications that both the speaker and the child getting older has on their relationship. It explores how conflict can start to work its way into a maternal relationship as it grows and develops.



Synopsis

- The speaker refers to the first time she meets her daughter, after she is born in the hospital, and mentions the umbilical cord which connected them.
- Sets up the conflict which came when the mother / speaker has to start adapting and sharing her life with her new daughter.
- Brings the poem now to the present tense, where the daughter is asking to be allowed out skating for longer than her mother initially suggests. This implies how the conflict within a mother / child relationship never fully ends, only changes form as both parties get older and they dynamic alters.

Context

Gillian Clarke (1937 -)

Clarke is a Welsh poet and playwright who has been awarded medals such as the Queen's Gold for poetry [2010] and the Wilfred Owen Award [2012]. She was also the third person to sit in the post of National Welsh Poet. When she was younger, after university, Clarke spent time working for the BBC in London. She has three children, a girl and two boys, and therefore the topic of motherhood will be a theme she has a lot of experience with. She tends to write about nature and utilise a lot of natural imagery in her work. Clarke, on her website, says the poem was written in answer to the question "why did my beautiful baby have to become a teenager?".



Catrin

The setting is introduced as a “hot, white // Room”, which connotes a claustrophobic and uncomfortable atmosphere, perhaps to reflect the intense mood and the tone of the poem and the parent-child relationship on display.

It is implied that the mother chooses to look out of the “window watching” rather than concentrate on the child, which leads the reader to question why there’s such a disconnect and detachment between the two characters.

These three lines are quite juxtaposing - the concepts of conflict and love are at odds and the noun “rope” has restrictive connotations. The phrase “red rope of love” is metaphorical for the umbilical cord, implying this is a maternal relationship. The alliteration of ‘first // Fierce’ arguably reflects the heavy breathing women experience whilst giving birth.

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.

The poem immediately begins by addressing an unnamed child, who we assume is the Catrin referenced in the title. By keeping the child without a name, Clarke may be trying to imply the distance between the mother and child as a result of the conflict the poem centres around.

This engages with the idea that relationships change as time goes on, suggested by the enjambment here, as the “Turn” which is referenced is literally occurring on the page. This could imply that as children grow up, they make literal / physical changes in addition to changing emotions and dynamics with the people around them.

This line mirrors how a child may write or draw on the walls when they’re young, to the frustration of their parents - now the child is the frustrated one, as she is angry that her mother is trying to restrict her freedom and tell her what to do.





Suggests that Catrin and the speaker are fairly balanced in their conflicts.

Refers back to the rope which symbolised the umbilical cord earlier, suggesting that they may not have this physical connection anymore, but they have a strong, intimate emotional connection, even as they grow up and perhaps grow apart. The adjective "old" refers to the time impact on a relationship.

The phrase "in the dark" may refer to there being aspects and feelings in the mother / daughter relationship they haven't explored or discussed yet.

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.

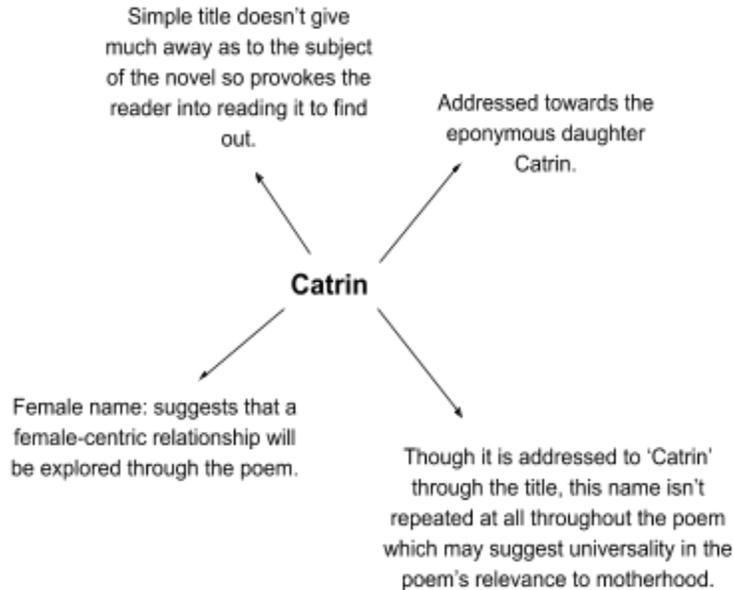
This refers to the hospital where Catrin was born

Perhaps works to reference how the now teenage Catrin is becoming increasingly powerful and strong-willed, as well as aware of what she wants and how to get it.

The poet finally reveals the reason for the mother and daughter's fight right at the end of the poem, perhaps to distance the reader from understanding the poem and its meaning until the very end. This works to create an intimate connection between Catrin and the speaker.



The title “Catrin”



EPONYMOUS | When the title is named after a person involved in the content of the text.

Perspective

The poem is written from the perspective of a mother who is addressing her now teenage daughter. She reflects on the daughter's birth and relates this to the growing separation between them as the daughter gets older. This **direct address** implies an intimacy which contrasts the conflict presented in the poem. Direct address, personal and collective pronouns are used frequently, such as “I”, “you” and “we”.

Opening

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.

The poem immediately opens with the speaker addressing a child who is **unnamed**. By keeping the child without a name, Clarke may be trying to reference the distance between the mother and child as a result of the conflict the poem centres around. The setting is introduced as a **“hot, white // Room”**, which **connotes a claustrophobic and uncomfortable atmosphere**. This atmosphere reflects the **mood** and the **tone** of the poem and the parent-child relationship on display.



It is implied that the mother chooses to look out of the “*window watching*” rather than concentrate on the child, which leads the reader to question why there’s such a disconnect and detachment between the two characters. The opening also engages with the idea that relationships change as time goes on, suggested by the enjambment in the phrase “*taking // Turn*”, as the “*Turn*” which is referenced is literally occurring on the page. This could imply that as children grow up, they make literal / physical changes in addition to changing emotions and dynamics with the people around them.

Structure

Enjambment

The enjambment used by Clarke throughout the poem reflects the changing dynamic in relationships between mother and child as time passes and the child grows up. In the case of lines such as:

Of our struggle to **become**
Separate. We want, we shouted

Enjambment works to highlight and emphasise certain words, such as “**separate**” here. This helps establish themes such as distance and separation as fundamental to the narrative of the poem.

ENJAMBMENT | Sentence which runs over multiple lines.

Stanza Arrangement

The poem is structured into **two clear stanzas**. The first stanza is in the **past tense** and centres around the memory of Catrin’s difficult birth. The second switches to the **present tense** and now centres on the present conflict the mother and daughter have, which is whether Catrin can stay out later skating. This **stanza separation** is known as **bipartite**.

By choosing to divide these stanzas, Clarke may be trying to emphasise the time which has passed between the Catrin’s birth and the present day that the second stanza has been written in. It could also highlight the **increasing separation** between the speaker and Catrin as their dynamic changes when the daughter starts to become a teenager and wishes for more independence.

Language

Metaphor

Clarke employs **metaphors** in order to help relate the reader to the subject matter she’s talking about, especially if the reader is a mother. For example, the line “***the tight red rope of love***” is a



metaphor for the umbilical cord and shows the reader how important it is being physically close to your child, as well as having an emotional closeness.

Presentation of the hospital

The presentation of the hospital as a “**glass tank**” and “**environmental blank, disinfected of paintings or toys**” uses very **clinical and clean imagery** which contrasts with the **natural and emotional language** used in the rest of the poem as well as the personal sentiment of the piece.

Dependence vs Independence

Clarke works to **juxtapose** the dependence that the daughter has on the speaker when she was a baby, for example using the reference to the “**rope**” of the umbilical cord, with the independence that the daughter wishes for as a teenager. The lines:

Of **our** struggle to become
Separate. **We** want, **we** shouted,
To be two, to be ourselves.

Extensively use **collective pronouns** such as “**our**” and “**we**”, which juxtapose the sentiment of the passage in which they are trying to separate themselves. This contrasts with the separation shown in the second stanza, which exclusively uses **separated pronouns**, shown in the lines:

Still I am fighting
You off, as **you** stand there

Here, the pronouns are also separated through enjambment with the pronouns referring to the speaker on a separate line to those referring to her mother.

Simple language

Clarke uses **simple language** throughout the poem which **juxtaposes with the complexity of human relationships** while simultaneously indicating how feelings of motherhood can be simple and intense. It also means the poem focuses on emotion, which helps make the poem and its theme of motherhood more universally relevant to the poem's readership.

