

**Lesson
38****‘Skirrid Fawr’ and Themes
and Techniques****Aims**

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- analyse the final poem of the collection, ‘Skirrid Fawr’
- understand some of the themes and techniques used in this collection

Context

This final chapter considers the final poem, which reminds the reader of the inspiration for this whole collection. It will also consider the main themes and techniques used within *Skirrid Hill*.

Needless to say, there are numerous features of Sheers’ poems and this lesson considers a few of the most significant and recurring features. As you begin to read the anthology, you may discover some additional features of his poetry, which you will need to make a note of in your Poetry Reading Diary. You may find it useful to colour-code the features and visually record which poems display each feature.



Oxford Open Learning

SKIRRID FAWR

This final poem of the collection refers back to Skirrid – the original image of the title – and the speaker considers the physical features of the hill. The name 'Skirrid' is derived from the Welsh word 'ysgyryd', which means 'shiver' or 'shatter'. This famous small mountain has a number of legends surrounding it. Legend suggests that in the hour of darkness after the crucifixion of Christ, the mountain shuddered/shivered/split into two. This mountain does have a dramatically 'slipped' profile. There are even stories regarding angels and demons and it is called the 'Holy Mountain'. Skirrid is given religious significance, e.g. 'her holy scar'.

Throughout history, mountains have been seen as places of epiphany, enlightenment and engagement with supernatural elements. For example, Mohammed on Mount Hira received revelations that would become the Qur'an and Moses on Mount Sinai received the Ten Commandments. Perhaps the most obvious reason is due to the fact that mountains are high places and believed to be nearer to heaven and possibly offer a stairway to heaven. Furthermore, in Chinese cosmology it is believed that the mountains help to support the heavens in case they fall.

Sheers chooses free verse for this last poem. This poem is structured into eight unrhymed two-line stanzas. In this final poem Sheers again compounds the theme that has been running through the collection, which is the power of landscape and nature.

'Skirrid Fawr' is the most interesting exploration of the border state and an appropriate anchor for this collection. The mountain is a damaged 'cleft palate' and 'broken spine' but is still valued by Sheers. This reminds us of the poem 'Marking time' in which there is imperfection but there is still attraction.

The mountain is described in female terms like a goddess or prophet. Skirrid is personified as a woman. In the second stanza, the poet states: 'I am still drawn to her back for the answers/to every question I have ever known.' In the seventh stanza 'her vernacular of borders' is referred to. The mountain is portrayed as having one 'dark' and one 'sunlit' side. She is weighted with 'unspoken words/of an unlearned tongue' which implies the language split which underpins the Welsh experience in modern society.

The 'sentence of her slopes' is another reference to the numerous parallels that use the diction of writing to compare the practice of writing and the activities of every other living thing. Sheers is trying to think things through on this journey up to the summit.

The role of the hill is as the muse/inspiration behind this collection. The landscape knows what Sheers is searching for even when he is not sure. He states that 'she reveals with every step'. This indicates a strong relationship between nature/landscape and the poet. Medicine proved impotent in the previous poem, 'The Wake', and Sheers returns to nature in this final poem to look for answers. There is a high level of intimacy between hill and speaker. He speaks of her 'east-west flanks' and it is like the landscape is like his lover. The 'east-west flanks, one dark, one sunlit' also remind the reader of the anti-meridian of 'Stitch in Time'.

The final couplet refers to the fact that in life there will always be more questions than answers. It could also be alluding to the Tower of Babel with regards to 'the unlearned tongue'. There is a connection here with the biblical confusion of tongues and the premise that people of the world originally spoke one language and lived together in peace before being scattered and diversified into conflict.

The etymology of the word 'Babel' is based on a similar Hebrew root 'balal' as 'confusion' or 'mixing'. Babel became a synonym for the confusion caused by language differences, which was part of the divine punishment for the pride displayed in the building. The tower of Babel was Babylon's symbol of the pride of man and his inevitable fall – also inevitable problems of communication, the confusion of tongues and subsequent dispersal of humankind. As can be demonstrated in this biblical tale, language is a powerful force in this world but it can also be used as a tool of destruction.

The 'unlearned tongue' could also be taken for a reference to the transition and decline of Welsh culture as it once was. This is the culture that Sheers is trying to maintain by giving the mountain its true Welsh name.

This is the elegiac conclusion to an intimate journey we have all experienced throughout the collection.

Themes and Techniques

Sheers, in an article introducing the collection, made the following comments on theme: 'When I am writing a poem I am never thinking about the 'themes' or subject matter of others I have written before.' (Sheers, 2008, p. 31)

Remember that critics, readers and teachers may often disagree on the main themes of a text. Possibly the author's views may not be fixed. In your own reading you may have uncovered different themes and that is fine. This list isn't definitive. Be flexible in your own thinking. Consider your own interpretations and when answering

essay questions always remember to include quotations to back up your view.

SEPARATION

The title of the poem, 'Skirrid Fawr', proposes one theme of this collection, moments of separation. You could interpret the word 'Skirrid' as meaning 'divorced or separated'. Therefore, this suggests that the deterioration and decay of things may be one of the overriding themes of the collection. There is separation from family members through death e.g. 'Wake'; separation of a body part, e.g. 'Amazon', and separation from family members due to work, e.g. 'A Stitch in Time'.

Dissolution and breakdown of things/people are fundamental to the theme of the collection, whether it be relationships ending or changing due to time passing and people moving from childhood to adolescence. People may be moving from life to death or moving around the world.

WELSH IDENTITY

The final poem also highlights another key theme which is the Welsh landscape intertwined with the Welsh identity. Poems suggest that there is a restorative quality to this natural landscape. This is most notable in 'Skirrid Fawr', 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort'. The landscape also implies that life continues regardless of separation, e.g. in 'Trees' where the father acknowledges his decline and the son will rise in his place. In an article, Sheers comments that 'although none of the poems in the book are in the Welsh language I feel that all my poetry, as I am in a way is "derived from the Welsh" (Sheers, 2008, p. 31).

His 'word pools' are drawn from the landscape and culture of south East Wales and the Black Mountains. R.S. Thomas wrote about North Wales yet resonates with Sheers.

Also, the collection includes poems which reveal a darker side to the Welsh community, e.g. the sad tale of a local tough guy in 'Joseph Jones'. There is also the suicide in 'Border Country' although we are never told the reason for this death. In addition, 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort' never explain the cause of the boy's death at the tender age of 19. Furthermore, 'Flag' and 'The Steelworks' offer a darker image of Welsh life.

Yet Sheers also writes poems about the wider world, e.g. 'The Stitch in time', 'L.A evening' and 'Under the Superstition Mountains'. Also, a Hungarian poem is the source for 'The Fishmonger' poem. 'Service' informs us of the busy life of a restaurant in Bray whilst cleverly juxtaposing the servers with consumers.

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Love is another preoccupation in this collection, whether it is the familial love demonstrated in 'On going' or 'Inheritance' or the romantic series of poems from the first half of the collection. One of the most celebratory love poems is 'Song' although the majority of the poem focuses on separation. In 'Wake' the transcending power of familial love is conveyed in the following line: 'that has left a wake as that of a great ship' when describing the grandfather's passing. Family relationships are a key area in this collection. They show the impact our loved ones have on us. Sheers' love for his family, in particular his grandparents, is apparent in *Skirrid Hill*.

The central quatrain of 'Swallows' provides the clue to the poem's significance to this collection:

'Their annual regeneration
so flawless to human eyes
that there is no seam
between parent and child.'

These birds are always depicted together and Sheers states 'there is no seam: between parent and child.' The description of the swallows serves as an allegory for the constant departures and arrivals of family/family members, the sunrises and sunsets, the trees planted for births and deaths, and the way that the different generations 'fly' together. The birds flying in unison is a reflection of him and his grandfather performing castration together in the field, or he and his father climbing up Skirrid Hill together. They remind the reader of the oak that is planted in 'Trees', which will outlive the father.

Gender boundaries are also important in this collection; sexual liaisons are depicted often in erotic and sensual terms. Women are often objectified. Lovers are viewed as complementary, a 'double heart of a secret fruit' in 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two'. Women's bodies are viewed as landscape. In the poem 'Night Windows', Sheers emphasises the interdependence of the couple. Both are mutually dependent on the other, e.g. the 'invisible tendon' of the woman, which is loaded 'with our meeting'.

POWER AND MYSTERY OF NATURE

Forces of nature are seen in this collection as recurring images, which show the power of nature over mankind. Nature has the power to halt conversations, relationships and even people's lives.

You will notice that the countryside/nature/natural landscape has a noticeable influence on Sheers' poetry and choice of themes. The swans are the turning point in the poem 'Winter Swans' which

shows the naturalness of love. The third and fourth stanzas capture the graceful movements of the swans' 'icebergs of white feather', performing their natural actions, 'tipping in unison'. There is an element of the synchronicity of this bird – they were *meant* to be together. Compare this to the false and unnatural performance in 'Show' when the models catwalk. The strained human relationship at the start of 'Winter Swans' is juxtaposed with the effortless grace and elegance of the swans. At the same time, there is a strong assurance that a couple can survive the winter.

Just like R.S. Thomas, Sheers found inspiration for poetry and his spirit in nature. They had a less idealistic view of the people who lived there. Nature is seen as a means of spiritual sustenance. The landscape has a spiritual connotation. Again like R.S. Thomas in his poetry, Sheers conveys the view that just as the landscape shaped people, it will also endure long after they are gone, e.g. the poem 'Farther'. R.S. Thomas's 'The Mountain Chapel' gives a voice to the wind:

'Tis but a moment since a man's birth,
And in another moment more
Man Lives in earth
For ever; but I am the same
Now, and shall be, even as I was
Before he came:
Till there is nothing I shall be.

Yet both poets knew the hardness and cruelty of nature.

Telephone lines and power wires run consistently through the collection, e.g. 'Swallows', 'Intermission', 'Calendar' and 'Landmark'. The modern world intersects nature and interrupts/affects relationships, e.g. 'Intermission' and 'Landmark' when the couple 'noticed the telephone wires, the time'.

IMAGERY OF BIRDS

Birds and their movements are referred to throughout the collection, e.g. in 'Under the Superstition Mountains' there is an unidentified bird and in 'The Steelworks,' the nameless birds nest in the vents. The first stanza of 'Calendar' describes the movement of 'swallows' as part of the content for Spring. In the poem, 'History', the blackbirds' song drills its notes into the hillside. Swans are found in the 'Winter Swans' love poem. The use of swans in poetry recalls the poem by Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole'. This explores the cycle of life through nature and the mesmerizing characteristics of the swan. 'Song' also uses birds in its content and this time it is the magpie.

Furthermore, the imagery of birds can be found in the poem 'Mametz Wood' with the 'broken bird's eggs' and the 'nesting

machine guns'. In 'Show' the women are compared to 'high-heeled curlaws' with their 'featherless wings'. Conversely, the men are referred to as crocodiles.

In 'Border Country' the birds are predators, e.g. buzzards above us". The buzzards are an ever-present reminder of childhood. Buzzards are a type of vulture and could carry connotations of death. Birds also provide an aerial perspective and Sheers uses this technique in a number of his poems, e.g. the buzzard that circles into the sky and looks down on the solitary figure walking along the country lane in 'Border Country'. The birds provide a different perspective and also more insight into the theme of the power and mystery of nature.

WRITING FOR THE EAR AS WELL AS THE EYE

Sheers shows mastery of visual and auditory imagery. His collection resonates with evocative and striking images. He is a craftsman of assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia. For example, in 'Hedge School' he employs the aural sound to show he is enjoying destroying the fruit. He also regularly uses enjambment for emphasis and to illuminate themes.

His poems are often quite melodic with over-arching narratives, themes and symbols. He has an ear for sound and an ear for the visual. Sheers is the craftsman of poems that demand to be performed or simply read aloud, e.g. Service.

Drawn to free verse, Sheers claims to be "quite an instinctive writer, I do a lot of it on the ear." His attention to the ear is evident on this reading. The *Guardian's* praise for the way "the confident use of internal and sprung rhymes produces an easy lyricism, while his rhythms are wonderfully dexterous" is accurate.

There is a close link between music and poetry and Sheers encourages the reader to consider the comparisons between the two in his poem 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two'. For example, the different stanza lengths may well be interpreted as different time signatures. The title alludes to the *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot. This modernist poem is structured into four sections or movements, which depict an event in the couple's relationship. A symphony is an extended musical composition normally consisting of four movements. The first is in sonata form.

LIMINAL STATES

Liminal states are referred to throughout Sheers' poetry. Liminality is an unfixed position between two opposites, the experience of being on a threshold, which can be quite scary as you are not sure which way it will go. In 'The Singing Men', the men of the title hover

liminally on the edges of society. They can be found in 'corners and doorways'. They were a part of society at one point. Also, the grandfather in 'The Wake' is in a liminal state, as 'we both know there has already been a passing.' There is an image of someone walking beside the edge of a cliff, demonstrating the thin line between life and death, between sanity and insanity and safety and danger.

LOVE OF TERCETS

Form and structure are crucial in your A-level work and are just as important as a discussion of language. Most of the poems in the collection are in free verse and do not adhere to a strict pattern of rhyme/structure. Some follow the rhythms of natural speech and are conversational in tone.

The shape of the poem and how it is presented on the page is significant. Think about the line lengths and how much white space is presented around the poem. In a poem, the space on the page is sometimes as important as the text. Also think about any single line stanzas and why they have been used.

When asked about his passion for the tercet, the three-line structure, Sheers stated that 'tercets require a tauter, more economic line' (Twitter!). Indeed, he uses tercets in twenty of the poems in Skirrid Hill. It is crucial to always look at the structure of the poem and consider why this has been used. You should always question the reasons behind the choice of form and think about the structure of individual poems as well as the structure of the whole collection.

PERAMBULATION

Perambulation/walking plays a key part in this collection. For example, the models walk with their high heels in the poem 'Show'; the horse in 'The Farrier' walks 'on strange ground' and the couple stroll around the lake in 'Winter Swans'. In addition, the father and son walk up the Skirrid together in 'Farther' and the boy in 'Hedge School' receives some education on the walk home from school.

The Welsh landscape and the experience of walking through this unique countryside is significant to this collection. The role of Skirrid Hill is as the muse/ inspiration behind this collection. The landscape knows what Sheers is searching for even when he is not sure. He states in 'Skirrid Fawr' that 'she reveals with every step'. This indicates a strong relationship between nature/landscape and the poet. Walking assists the mind's quickness and helps people think and connect with their surroundings.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

A number of poems within this collection refer to cinematography (movie-making) or allude to cinematic qualities. For example, Sheers employs the cinematic use of perspective to convey ideas/emotions. A number of his poems begin by describing broad exterior descriptions/ landscapes and then narrow down to focus on people. This is a cinematic technique starting with a long shot, which establishes the scene and then becoming a close up of an intimate moment. This has been shown in 'Y Gaer', 'Intermission' and also 'Border Country'. In 'Y Gaer', the narrative poem starts with a wide-angled sweeping shot of the fort and then zooms in on the 'stone pile' at the peak of the hill until eventually we see the close up of the horse's skin 'veins mapping'.

In 'Border Country', the final stanza tracks the buzzard's perspective as it rises into the sky. This is cinematic as the birds, a symbol of childhood, transport the reader 'spiralling upwards' to give us a birds-eye perspective of the fatherless boy.

Dramatic visual techniques are utilized by Sheers to create a cinematic quality to his poetry, e.g. in 'Show', the immaculate woman causes the room to go 'out of focus'. The first movement of the modernist poem 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two' begins the narrative with 'an overhead shot' of the lovers in bed. Cinematography and the language of writing and painting are used to full effect in this poem.

VOYEURISM

Voyeurism is a key theme foreshadowed by the premise of the opening poem 'Last Act' which acknowledges that this collection will be like a performance. The speakers watch the women models in 'Show': 'we watch, spectators'. Then in the second section, the speaker watches just one woman applying make-up by her mirror 'like a pianist to the piano'. The term 'scopophilia' means the love of viewing and is a synonym for voyeurism. This term is used in cinema studies to describe the voyeuristic pleasure that is gained from gazing – usually at the female form. The person gazed at is objectified and treated as an object whose sole value is to be enjoyed or possessed by the voyeur. Therefore, this poem could be criticising this kind of viewing.

The painting by Hopper, 'Night Windows', is voyeuristic just as Sheers' poem of the same name is voyeuristic in form. Sheers draws the reader to identify with the speaker who is observing his girlfriend and being watched. Performance is shown in the poem 'Night Windows' and 'the night windows opposite performed' and then at the end of the poem the woman trails the dress of her shadow. She knows she is being watched and revels in it. Does society make women act like this?

'Landmark' is a love song, which recalls earlier themes of voyeurism established in 'Night windows'. The poem uses the third person plural to convey the action of this poem as if from the perspective of an observer watching the couple. The poem begins after the act of sex. The intimacy and passion has been hidden from the reader – why? It is implied that the observer has watched them make love as the poem begins in the moments after this encounter. 'Afterwards they were timeless'. There is an ethereal quality to this opening as the passion and intense experience suggests that the rest of the world has faded for this couple.

MEMORY/REFLECTION

Sheers asks us, the readers, to question our memory in *Skirrid Hill* and think about what it means to remember something or someone. There are many poems in this collection which are reflective and poignant. The memory of the steelworks in 'The Steelworks,' and the quarry ('History') that were once productive are now overrun by Nature. Some of the poems are memories of childhood and growing up, e.g. 'Border Country' is tinged with a reflective sadness. Some poems are inspired by deaths in war, e.g. 'Mametz Wood'; deaths from suicide 'Border Country'; deaths from illness, 'The Wake' and 'On going'. Some poems like 'Valentine' are structured in the form of three memories. The happy memory at the end is preceded by two negative flashbulb memories of a supposedly romantic trip to Paris.

Perhaps most powerfully, Sheers eulogises his dead friend and empathises with the father in his pair of poems, 'The Hill Fort (Y Gaer)' and 'Y Gaer (The Hill Fort)', the two languages echoing both the border setting of the poems and the two aspects of the father's grief: denial and acceptance.

MOMENTS OF EPIPHANY

In 'Intermission' the use of the phrase 'I think I understand' in the final tercet repeats the exact phrase in 'Y Gaer' when the poet states 'I think I understand why the man who lost his son'. Sheers repeats this phrase to demonstrate how his writing assists him to make sense of the world and how drawing parallels between the lives of humans and the natural world has helped him come to terms with the larger issues in life.

In section two of 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two', the 'making me realise' phrase reminds the reader of other moments of epiphany in previous poems, e.g. 'I think I understand' in 'Border Country'. Sheers' poetry helps him understand the world.

The top of the hill offers perspective and a bird's eye view. 'Tretower, Raglan and Bredwardine...' He realises in this moment of epiphany that 'in these generations/we're no more than scattered grains'.

LINKS BETWEEN POEMS

Sheers links poems, foreshadowing yet also referencing back to earlier poems. This is rewarding for careful and observant readers. For example, in 'Hedge school', the opening reference is to Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale. In this tale, Death is said to be waiting underneath an oak tree. This refers back to the oak tree planted by the father in the previous poem 'Trees'. 'Inheritance' links back to the previous poem, "The Farrier", with the extended metaphor of forging. As the marriage has been tested, like a horseshoe, under the test of time: "red hot at its core, cooled dark at its sides". The testing times have forged a strong relationship.

WRITING

There are a number of writing references throughout the poetry collection. For example, in 'Border Country', Sheers uses the image of ink dot cows and the typography reference of catching fish as 'commas and apostrophes'. Also in this poem, Sheers compared the tractor's work to 'writing', creating a link between his life and that of his ancestors. A similar technique is used in the poem 'Swallows', where Sheers sees the flight-paths of the swallows and describes them as 'dipping their ink to sign their signatures / across the page of the sky'. They leave their mark on the sky just as the writer leaves a mark on his manuscript.

Birds flying and writers writing are both depicted as beautiful acts and also they allow a better perspective on things. There is also the reading that Sheers sees the act of writing, to him at least, as being just as natural as the flight of the birds.

In 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two', the relationship between writing and painting is highlighted in a similar way to the relationship between writing and photography in 'Happy Accidents'. For example, the 'impression of your breasts / against the sentence of my spine' uses the semantic link of writing. We might see this as a merging of the two disciplines, or it may foreshadow the eventual demise of the relationship as they see the world in completely different ways.

In 'Service' metaphors are again taken from the world of writing, e.g. the sea bass is described as 'a pink blank page'. There are 'book marks of mackerel' and the chef at the door is compared to 'an author, copy-editing the text'. There is another semantic link to writing. Copy-editing is the final editing stage before publication and is concerned with aspects such as clarity and effectiveness.


Therefore, in this poem, cooking is elevated to the level of art and there are strict and standardized processes in an effective kitchen.

The 'sentence of her slopes' in 'Skirrid Fawr' is another reference to the practice of writing and the activities of every other living thing. Sheers is trying to think things through on this journey up to the summit. These references within his poems help Sheers to relate to life and understand problems.

QUOTATIONS AND REFERENCES TO OTHER WRITERS

EPIGRAPHS

Just as T.S. Eliot used a number of epigraphs in his work. Sheers uses five in this collection: He uses a passage from 'East Coker' by T.S. Eliot as his opening epigraph. He also uses epigraphs at the start of 'Hedge School', 'Flag', 'Under the Superstition Mountains' and 'L.A. Evening'.

Activity 1	Compare each of these epigraphs and the reason for their inclusion. Consider the themes, structure and tone of each poem and epigraph.
	

For example, 'Hedge School' begins with an epigraph, which is a quotation from the Pardoner's Prologue by Chaucer. The epigraph suggests the potential for evil that exists within humans.

Within the poems there are also references to other writers/poets, e.g. Robert Lowell is referred to in 'Under the Superstition Mountains'. This line from a confessional poet's sonnet helped to illuminate the theme of appearance versus reality within this poem.

The reference to bait in the poem 'Song' could be alluding to John Donne's poem 'The Bait' in which he depicts a loved one as being like bait to him. He compared the act of making and seeking love to fishing. The beloved in the poem is her 'own bait' attracting others to her. John Donne, a metaphysical poet writing in the 17th century, was widely known for his use of metaphysical conceit or extended

metaphor. This poem is an extended metaphor based on the cage, which is a metaphor for lust and emotionally shallow relationships.

We see an example of metaphysical conceit in 'Keyways' and also 'Song'. Metaphysical conceit is an intellectual device associated with all the metaphysical poets of the 17th century. This is an extended metaphor/analogy between spiritual qualities and an object in the physical world and this sometimes controls the whole structure of a poem. 'Night Windows' also pays homage to John Donne who refers to his lover as 'My new-found land!/My kingdom' ('To his mistress going to bed').

APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY

A major theme that encircles the collection is the disparity between what something appears to be, and what something is in reality. In other words, Sheers wants to distinguish between what is a lie and what is truth. Sheers' honesty is apparent in the prefatory poem 'Last Act', which intrigues the reader and cleverly prepares the reader for some personal revelations. He refers to the 'parts we played' to indicate that we all play a number of roles in life.

This theme is most notable in the poem 'Under the Superstition Mountains' which begins with an epigraph from a rock song 'Nothing hiding behind the picket fence...' This hints at the theme of appearance versus reality and the idea that falseness can hide beneath the perfect illusion of American life. The white picket fence conjures up images of the iconic American dream. However ironically the song goes on to describe images of arson, insanity and death by gun. This epigraph foreshadows the content of this poem. In addition, the reference to Robert Lowell's sonnet also highlights the horror that can lurk beneath the façade of a supposedly happy marriage. This compounds the theme of appearance versus reality.

'L.A. Evening' refers to still life photographs. Do these photos seem more real now than the person she has become? Again, Sheers illuminates the theme of appearance versus reality. The form of the poem is structured like a photograph with opening and closing five-line stanzas framing the image in the central sestet. The epigraph is intriguing as it explores the notion of fame. What does the loss of fame mean? 'None of these shall you have continually, and of their coming and going you shall not be foretold'. Looking at her photographs and reminding herself of her past is presented as a ritualistic action 'as always she leaves: before the roll call of the credits'.

The third to sixth tercets in 'Song' show the speaker watching 'others' lured by her siren song and beauty. The title 'song' could be referring to the song of the trapped magpie, which draws the male

birds to their death. 'I'd watch them strut in, squawking to their doom'.

The title also alludes to the theme of performance/façade in relation to love, e.g. the 'artful hocus-pocus' of women in 'Show'. The siren notion indicates that both birds/partners are actually trapped. In Greek mythology, the Sirens were beautiful yet dangerous creatures. They were believed to have the power of enchanting and charming, by their song, anyone who heard them. These were former handmaidens of the goddess Persephone and they were often depicted as birds with either the heads or the upper bodies of women. In mosaic art they were depicted with bird legs. The speaker acknowledges his awareness of her dark side, e.g. 'the oil spill of your plumage, the darkness of your eye'. Yet, he is so enamoured by her that he can't imagine anyone escaping her charms. Similarly, the speaker in 'Show' is also 'surrendered' by the woman's appearance. Although the title of the poem indicates this poem is highlighting shallowness and performance.

Yet the artificial facade of make-up and jewellery alluded to in 'Show' indicates pretences may be at the heart of some superficial relationships. The hocus pocus conveys a magical element to the relationship yet also distance/separation. This again alludes to the theme of appearance versus reality, which haunts the pages of the collection.

Activity 2

Choose one of your favourite poems from *Skirrid Hill* and see how many of these recurring features you can spot in it.

Can you think of any other themes and/or techniques in this collection?



Tutor-marked Assignment L

Remind yourself of the poem 'Border Country'.

To what extent do you feel this poem would provide a suitable introduction to the collection? (25 marks)