

Catrin – Gillian Clarke

I have collapsed the words of the poem into alphabetical order and given them a close examination. (See 'Techniques' for how to do this)

I wanted to sort them in some way, but I wasn't yet sure what the categories might be so I made a table so that I could arrange the words any way I wanted, just to see what meanings emerged.

I did this before reading the poem too closely.

you you you you you you your	our our both both ourselves we we we	l l l l l my my
conflict fought fighting fierce shouted struggle struggle	child love love tender heart's	clean clouded coloured dark disinfected
confrontation defiant separate	stand still stood straight strong	remember remember rope rope square squares
Words still remaining:		
a about all am and and as as as ask at at be be become blank bringing can can cars changed circles environmental feelings first for from glare glass hot hour in in in it life lights long lost may more neither nor of of of off old one or over over paintings people pool red room skate taking tank that the the the the the the the the the the there tight tightening to to to toys traffic trailing turn two up us walls want was watching which which white wild window with with with with won words wrote		

It might have been better if I hadn't known the poem at all, I think. Students will be in a much better state of innocence in this respect! I was interested in the repetition of pronouns to do with the writer and those to do with the subject, Catrin. Then I saw how many words related to them both and I put them into the box in the middle.

Some words stood out very obviously. These were the ones to do with conflict; you can't miss them! But there were some words, like *child* and *love*, which I thought needed to balance these.

Then there were some repetitions which fascinated me: *remember*, *rope* and *square/s*, which I put in a box of their own. Finally, I picked out two collections of words which seemed important, though as yet, I wasn't sure why: *clean clouded coloured dark*

disinfected and stand still stood straight strong. I wanted to think about them a little more.

The central theme of conflict between mother and child stood out very clearly. But what was also interesting was the equally strong sense of togetherness, expressed in the use of *our, both, ourselves* and *we*. It also occurred to me that there was something very powerful about *stand still stood straight strong* as if the writer was quite sure of herself in spite of the generational conflict.

You – and your students – would be able to come up with other findings and hypotheses. For me, it was time to return to the poem.

Now I could see the significance of the rope, though I wasn't so sure about the squares. There was an obvious contrast (conflict?) with the wild tender circles. Is there more to be deduced from this? I think so.

Earlier hypotheses were born out. The sense of conflict is clear, but so is the love and shared feeling.

The point here is: looking at the language of the poem in this way is a very thought-provoking and fruitful way into the text. You never know quite what you are going to come up with!

Poetry as Biography

We do not know how old the Catrin of line 20 onwards is – but from information gained from the writer's biography, we gather she is a young teenager. How much should we use such information? Should the words of the poem not be enough? Someone suggests that Catrin is roller-skating but she could equally well be skating on (thin?) ice. Nor would we know that Catrin is the poet's daughter rather than a fictional creation. Is the baby in 'Baby-sitting' the same child?