

# John Ormond

## 'In September'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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# BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

**(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)**

John Ormond was born in Dunvant, near Swansea, in 1923. The son of the village shoemaker, Ormond was not from an affluent background, but the nature of his father’s trade gave him a lifelong appreciation of the value of skilled labour and artistic craftsmanship. His interest in the arts were early encouraged by his religious upbringing, attending the village’s independent, Nonconformist chapel, Ebenezer. This was not the stern, strait-laced institution it appears from the outside: rather, the chapel was ‘the hub of the village community, its cultural life rich even by Welsh standards: choral singing, oratorio performances, theatrical productions and discussion groups were all part of the normal calendar’.<sup>1</sup> Exposed at a young age to music, poetry, art and drama, Ormond developed an early ambition to be a poet. He went on to study Philosophy and English at University College, Swansea. Here he was exposed to modern philosophical ideas, and began writing. He began publishing in poetry magazines in 1941, and by 1943 had published his work in an anthology alongside two other young poets (*Indications*, with John Bayliss and James Kirkup).

In 1945, Ormond left Swansea to pursue a career as a journalist in London. Within a matter of months, he had been made staff writer at the prestigious photojournalist magazine *Picture Post*. His work at this magazine, which combined his talent for language with his passion for the visual, would prove invaluable when, in the mid-1950s, he secured a job at the BBC in Cardiff. Starting as a television news assistant, he was soon promoted to the role of documentary film producer. This was to be a new beginning of a uniquely dualistic creative career as a poet and filmmaker. By the time of his death in 1990, he had produced some 40 films and published over 200 poems.

Ormond’s passion for music, the arts, and politics, alongside his appreciation of artistic craftsmanship, permeates all of his work in verse and on screen. Although his poems are often composed in a deceptively plain-speaking language – perhaps aimed, like television, at large, popular audiences – they are always meticulously crafted, and display an awareness and sensitivity to a wide range of cultural, religious and political references. The major theme of his work is the profound value and universal importance of human creativity, which, perhaps in place of the formal Christian faith he had earlier come to doubt, he afforded an almost religious significance.

(1) Rian Evans, ‘An Ormond Chronology’, in John Ormond, *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 33.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

'In September' is an anniversary poem, written for the poet's wife Glenys, whom he had married on 21 September 1946. Ormond's daughter, Rian Evans, has suggested that the poem was 'penned late on the night of the 20th September, probably 1970, because he'd forgotten to buy a card'. However, the resulting poem was 'deemed by them both to be infinitely preferable.'<sup>2</sup>

The significance of the title rests not only in its celebration of the poet's wedding anniversary, but also in the fact that 21 September is around the period of the autumnal equinox – when the sun aligns directly with the equator, and in the Northern Hemisphere nights begin to be longer than days, and summer becomes autumn. True to Ormond's penchant for exploring ideas and symbols from a wide range of sources, 'In September' plays with the broader symbolic resonances of the idea of the equinox – with its connotations of harmony, equality, and the equal arrangement of two halves – intricately weaving these into a poem in celebration of matrimonial love.

## Form.

'In September' is a relatively succinct poem, but nevertheless rich in allusion and reference. It consists of three septets – stanzas of seven lines in length. Given the poem's theme of diurnal turnings, these can be understood to represent the seven days of the week. The three stanzas together add up to twenty-one lines, a number which also echoes the date of the poet's anniversary. Moreover, the poem is rich in Celtic and Christian symbolism, and the number three has innumerable religious and cultural significances, from the Holy Trinity of Christian theology, to popular folklore ('Goldilocks and the Three Bears', 'Three Little Pigs'), and pagan mythology. The number three carries particular significance in La Tène symbolism (for instance, the triskelion symbol). La Tène was a widespread form of pre-Roman European culture that is often associated with the development of Celtic symbolism and craft. 'In September' strongly alludes to these in its stylistic and symbolic patterns.

Although the septet form could be interpreted as a reference to the Sicilian Septet (Ormond had links with Italy and spent much time there later in life), there is no strict rhythm or end-rhyme patterning as is usual in the latter form. However, the absence of strict meter and rhyme gives the poem a certain freedom and liveliness, which fits with its theme of the continuation and renewal of love between a married couple after many years of marriage. The poem is at once intimate and universal in tone, addressed in the second person to the speaker's '**wife**', yet at the same time an expression of the universality of love.

(2) Rian Evans, in John Ormond, *Collected Poems*, p. 283.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1-7.

Being an anniversary poem, **'In September'** is a celebration and avowal of the commitment, renewal, and continuation of marital love. Appropriately, it opens with the word **'Again'**, and emphasising this, two other lines in this stanza start with similar words: line 3 with the phrase **'once more'**, and line 5 **'Again'** (again). An anniversary is of course also the ritual marking of a year's passing, and therefore implicitly references the movement of the earth around the sun. Alluding to the broader celestial significance of this, the poem weaves pagan symbolism into this first stanza. The **'golden month'** is a reference to September being the month of the autumn equinox – soon after the harvest, a time when night begins to be longer than daylight, and leaves begin turn golden prior to the coming of winter. The key reference in English poetry is Keats' ode 'To Autumn': 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun'.<sup>3</sup> As Keats intimates, autumn is a time of natural maturity, when the birth of spring and the youth of summer have passed, and when the year is reaching its mature stage. Ormond's poem, written after many years of marriage, is similarly an expression of mature, enduring love. Equally, the **'golden month'** refers to the gold of a wedding ring, which the speaker vows **'I'd wind [...] in a ring / About your finger'**. Importantly, though the phrasing here refers to the memory of the ritual of marriage, the speaker does not adopt the past tense – 'I wound [...] a ring / About your finger' – but the future tense: **'I'd'**. This fits with the poem's broader theme of the enduring nature of love, which has a past, a present and a future. Moreover, the **'ring'** has a particular symbolic significance here: not only Christian, but pagan in its reference to circularity, eternity, and visual echoes of the annual 'ring' the earth makes around the sun, all of which leads circularly back to the idea of the anniversary.

## Lines 5-7.

Lines 5-7 further develop the seasonal, diurnal motifs central to the poem, but also intertwine these with Christian imagery. Here the speaker describes his love as his 'shelter, / My good roof over me, / My strong wall against winter.' These are images of the stability and strength of marital love, but moreover they relate to the biblical idea of taking refuge in God's love, as in Psalm 91: 'my refuge and my fortress, my God; in him will I trust',<sup>4</sup> as well as, of course, the Nativity. This also pursues the poem's theme of time's passing: though it is September, the speaker is anticipating the winter that is to come (of both the year's turning and of late life), but finds solace in the love of his partner.

(3) John Keats, 'To Autumn', *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics: 2003), p. 434.

(4) King James Bible, Psalm 91:2.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 8-14.

Stanza two pursues the Christian imagery, but once more blends this with symbolism connected to pagan ritual. The images of **'bread'** and **'red wine'** refer to Holy Communion, the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, but also to the sense of plenty and abundance associated with autumn, which comes soon after harvest. The motifs here are related to the idea of shelter presented in the previous stanza: of **'fire / Upon my hearth'; 'My true storm door'**. These are images of loving family refuge (the 'hearth and home'), safety and protection, but also physical intimacy: indeed 'fire' hints at sexuality, as does the image of **'lock'** and **'key'**. At the same time, the idea of the key in the lock fits neatly into the poem's broader symbolism of universal turnings. The final lines in this stanza intimate the continuation of physical love, with the speaker asking his wife to be the **'soft silk on my bed.'** This is an image of sensuality and physical love, although it perhaps indicates a certain inequality of gender roles, given the speaker's wife is presented as a passive provider of pleasure and comfort, and on a bed which is possessed by the speaker (**'my bed'**).

## Lines 15-21.

If the second stanza's images of **'wine'**, **'fire'**, and locking doors suggest ideas of evening, shelter, and intimacy, the third stanza emerges afresh with the image of morning and its connotation of new beginnings. This is another development of the poem's broad theme of cyclical natural rhythms and renewal: where in the previous stanza the couple indulged in the fruits of the love they had harvested, this stanza suggests the possibility of continued renewal, rebirth, and abundance: **'Multiply my joy'**. Accordingly, the speaker here enumerates the multiplicity of things his partner symbolises for him. Ingeniously, and in tension with the stanza's implication of fresh renewal, these are also images of ancientness, which further interlock with the poem's presentation of the timeless universality of love: a **'rare coin'** – an image of precious value (and circularity) – and a **'Granary'**, another pagan image of shelter and safety, as a place where humans have for millennia stored grain. Grain is of course a source ingredient for bread, which again ties in with the Christian symbolism of bread in stanza two, as well as with pagan understandings of the life, growth, and sustenance gained from the earth. However, from here lines 18-20 elevate away from the grounded imagery of buried coins and grains to loftier, celestial imagery: **'my promising fair / Sky, my star, the meaning / Of my journey'** – metaphors which again overlap with the poem's central image of the earth's diurnal journey around the sun. The final lines come full circle by tying together these universal images of circularity, annual return and rebirth with the entreat to **'Be [...] / My twelve months long desire'**, the poem's closing on the word 'desire' emphasising not an ending but the eternal continuation of physical and emotional love.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'In September' is an anniversary poem addressed to the speaker's wife on their wedding anniversary. It delicately weaves images, motifs and symbolic threads around the central motif of the autumn equinox, and in doing so connects the personal and intimate nature of love with its timelessness and universality. Within three short stanzas, the poem spans a vast symbolic range of temporal and physical passages, through day and night, weeks, months, seasons, years and millennia; in so doing, it also moves from the indoor to the outdoor, the earthly to the celestial. Central to the poem are the motifs of circularity and eternity, connected to the autumn equinox and the passage of time. This is symbolised in the wedding ring, but also the orbit of earth around the sun. In addition to the strong Christian overtones, the poem is shaped by Celtic and Iron Age La Tène art and symbolism, which is traditionally characterised by elegant, intricately interwoven lines, knotwork, spirals, and overlapping, repeated patterns – often in groupings of three – that have no beginning or end. This accumulation of allusions and symbolic patterns builds towards an intricate, finely wrought yet playful poem.

# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What images of and references to time can you find in the poem?

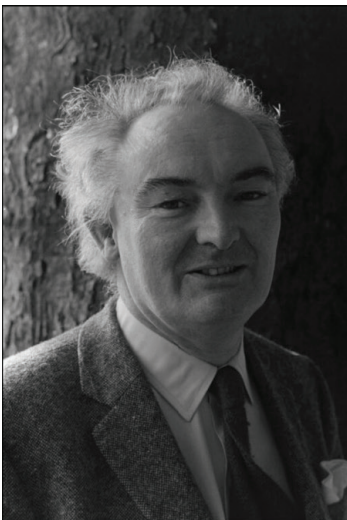
What references and images of circles and circularity can you find?

What religious symbolism is employed in the poem?

What kind of love is the speaker expressing?

## PHOTOGRAPHS

**SECTION 5**  
(links active May 2020)  
All links are clickable



John Ormond

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## LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Information on Celtic symbolism: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic\\_knot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_knot)

Information on the Celtic triskelion: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triskelion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triskelion)

Celtic La Tène Culture: [visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/la-tene-celtic-culture.htm#characteristics](https://visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/la-tene-celtic-culture.htm#characteristics)

Information (and a short video) on equinoxes [bbc.co.uk/newsround/43474501](https://bbc.co.uk/newsround/43474501)

Another short video on equinoxes: [youtube.com/watch?v=kaG6PTVrFP4](https://youtube.com/watch?v=kaG6PTVrFP4)

## FURTHER READING

Evans, Rian, 'An Ormond Chronology', in John Ormond, *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015).

McGuinness, Patrick, 'Introduction', in John Ormond, *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015).

Smith, Kieron, *John Ormond's Organic Mosaic: Poetry, Documentary, Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019).

Thomas, M. Wynn, *John Ormond* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).



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