

Sheenagh Pugh

'Toast'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

- 3** SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4** SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 8** SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 10** SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 10** SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 11** SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Sheenagh Pugh was born in Birmingham in 1950, took a degree in Modern Languages at Bristol University and lived for many years in Cardiff, where she worked as a civil servant before lecturing in creative writing at the University of Glamorgan. She retired in 2008, and moved to Shetland, where she still lives and writes. Author of two novels and a critical work (about fan fiction), as well as eleven poetry collections, Pugh was – alongside Gillian Clarke among others – one of the first women to earn attention and acclaim for her poetry in Wales.

Partly as a result of this early visibility, her work has been widely anthologised, and appears in most of the significant anthologies produced in or about Wales in the course of her career, including *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001* (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno). Despite this status, Pugh does not encourage her readers to identify her particularly with Wales, although she has written poems which are located there. ‘Toast’ is unusual in its detailing of its location, although in fact Cardiff is used chiefly as frame for, rather than focus of, the poem’s central themes: the passing of time, beauty and desire.

Pugh has been a prolific reviewer for much of her career. Her sometimes trenchant views are revealed in these and other writings, including essays, features and the interviews she has given over the years (for a recent example, see *In Her Own Words: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle, pp. 135–148). As with the issue of her sense of cultural identity, Pugh has never welcomed being marked out for her gender. She has however given scholars and writers permission to discuss her work in both contexts, as long as they note her reservations.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**Toast**' appears in Pugh's ninth poetry collection *The Beautiful Lie*, published in 2002. The title is playful, humorously punning on the idea of a toast – a celebratory drink, offered by a gathering of people to honour someone or something, perhaps for a special event or achievement – and the golden crisping effect of intense heat on, say, bread, of course. The poem is thus a 'toast', to the toasting bodies of the sunbathing workmen which the poem's middle-aged and apparently female speaker mischievously savours, and anticipates remembering, with such relish.

Alongside its clever and comic reversal of poetic convention (in which a male speaker describes the frequently erotic attraction of a usually younger, beautiful, and invariably silent woman), the poem offers a poignant meditation on age, aging and memory, as well as desire. Surreptitiously, it studies the ways in which memory, as well as humour, can help to ease and console against the passage of time, and its effects on bodies, places and the self.

Form.

'Toast' is composed entirely of couplets, or two-line stanzas. In some ways this choice of form underlines the doubleness of meaning of the title, and the other kinds of doubling or reversals, both playful and more serious, in which the text is also openly interested. The couplets aren't strictly end-rhyming, in any regular or conventional way; aural echoes between different words through the poem, both at line-ends and elsewhere, help to link different lines and stanzas. This adds to the sense of fluidity in a poem in which only two stanzas end on a full stop. The remainder run on, or 'elide', across the (visual) gaps between them; this technique (also called enjambment) affords the poet the chance to exploit the tension set up between and among different couplets.

For all its apparently relaxed formality, the fifteen stanzas of 'Toast' fall into two main parts, each marked by an end-stopped stanza. The first part is nine stanzas long; the second six. The ratio of lines – 18:12, cancelling down to 3:2 – is reminiscent of the relationship between octave and sestet (4:3) of a conventional sonnet. This does not seem accidental. 'Toast' is haunted by the conventions of the love poem; the poet's handling of the form helps to confirm her not entirely playful interest in the literary traditions in which 'Toast' is rooted.

Lines 1-7.

The poem's first couplets strike the light-hearted note which prevails in the first part of the poem. In conventional fashion, they locate the poem – in the centre of Cardiff – and just as importantly anchor it in time: the '**summer**' preceding the millennial year for which Cardiff's internationally-known Millennium Stadium (now the Principality Stadium) was named and built, in time for the 1999 Rugby World Cup. However the poem's speaker deftly points us into a second time frame with the opening words '**When I'm old...**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 7 (continued).

This sounds more like a throwaway remark than it turns out to be. In the first place, it indicates the speaker's intention to retain the events and experiences which the poem rehearses for later use, in memory. By extension this means that the poem's chief theme, transience, and the remorseless effect of time on youth, beauty and confidence, is at work on the reader's consciousness from its start, for all the naivety of a phrase we've surely all used.

The first couplets introduce the events and people the poem celebrates: the **'toast of Cardiff'**. It seems worth pointing out, however, how the architecture of the first three couplets controls reader expectations, before the poem arrives at this gleeful pun. The opening couplet introduces the **'they'**, but teasingly, ends before it qualifies the pronoun. Thus we are lured over the line ending (**'I won't mean'**), to the blunt dismissal of **'the council'**. Which leaves the builders themselves. But, as if to deliberately entertain herself (the speaker is implicitly female, although the poem avoids actually gendering the voice it uses), we move to the anticipated pleasure of (**'hugging'**) the memory of the **'young builders'** sprawling (for tantalised readers, across two lines and a stanza break),

golden and melting on hot pavements, the toast of Cardiff.

The deliberate delay deepens our sense of the enjoyment to be found in replaying the scene (today, of course, two decades old) which the poem celebrates and savours. In this sense, a little like the sunbathing men it describes, the poem seems to **'open'** itself both **'to sun and the judgement / of passing eyes'**; to flaunt its own form with the same careless abandon, and to surprise us out of our expectations.

Lines 7-12.

The unabashed delight which the speaker takes in the sunbathers sprawling on the city's **'hot pavements'**, caused as much by their lack of self-consciousness as their number and beauty, is comic and infectiously entertaining. The idea that the very heart of the city – the busy streets which meet at Cardiff's parish church of **'St John's'** – is anointed, or **'blessed'**, by the **'fit bodies'**, gleefully inverts the convention that church brings spiritual sustenance to people. This summer, it works the other way. Again, there is a sense that like the builders, the speaker refuses the judgement which these perhaps (mildly) shocking views court. However, it is also now that the seriousness which we might have already sensed at work in the text emerges explicitly, as the speaker tilts us into an unapologetically erotic, rather than smutty, depiction of the bodies themselves, taut with youth (**'unripe'**).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12 (continued).

Note how the description itself stretches over both line and stanza breaks, and how the analysis neatly dodges any reproach: their very public self-display confirms that the men themselves are happy to be viewed precisely as the speaker represents them:

**[...] forget
the jokes, these jeans were fuzz stretched tight**

**over unripe peaches. Sex objects,
and happily up for it.**

Lines 12-18.

In these lines, again, the play of humour and seriousness is finely balanced. On the face of it, they invite us to witness the effect of the men's display on the nature of the city itself. Thanks to them, the sexual energy – the attraction of men for women, or as the poem points out, men for men – which daily life here as anywhere embraces, is fetched into the sunlight, as it were. The very streets seem erotically charged, and here again, the traditionally objectifying gaze which man turns on silent desirable woman is inverted, and its controlling power somehow diffused by the pleasure which the attention – figured, gently and generatively, as sunshine – produces:

'When women / sauntered by, whistling, they'd bask / in warm smiles, browning slowly, loving / the light.' In this easy environment, nobody seems to mind (**'It made no odds'**) who enjoys who: **'they never got mad'**. In the warmth of summer, the (**'heady'**) pleasures of youth, beauty, desire and desirousness – **'being young and fancied and in the sun'** – are mutual and contagious. Significantly, the poem ensures that this last point is made on a single line, and for once the sentence ends with the line break, so the stanza is firmly 'end-stopped'.

Lines 19-22.

It is here, recovering the **'now'** from which the speaker has been recollecting 'the summer they built the stadium', that the poem's mood alters, as might happen in the sestet of a conventional sonnet. The shift enables the full emergence of the text's other main theme: time, its passing, and the changes it works on people and places. Sunbathing bodies have been replaced by the **'vast concrete-and-glass mother-ship'** of the building which drew them to the city in the first place. One kind of perhaps 'awkwardly' alien experience has given way to another decidedly more inhuman and less joyous-seeming one (thanks to the **'dark'** which teeters, suggestively, on the end of the eleventh stanza). However, the poem is not yet done with surprising us, as the next stanzas make clear.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22–28.

The following lines, unfolding the remainder of the sentence which begins **'Westgate's dark'**, reveal that **'dark'** is adjective, not noun; only the **'November rain'** is darkening the roadway. The change wrought by the season and weather masks another, more deeply buried, and less bleak: the heat and youth of the workmen's bodies seem to have imprinted themselves on the city's very substance.

The comparison with **'sand'** doesn't only – again – bring the beach (thus, once more, the vanished summer) to the cityspace; the simile also picks up on the time-related diction and imagery threading through the poem as a whole. This touches the image with irony: sand is a popular marker for the passage of time (think of egg-timers), decay and the transience of human life. Something of those young men's beauty, and the pleasure they brought to the summer months, remains figured in the **'shallow cups'** of Cardiff's (**'now'**) damp pavements, and etched on the unexpectedly personified **'empty auction house'**, its **'grey façade'** and **'boarded windows'** seeming more than coincidentally elderly, lonely and unsatisfied.

Lines 29–30.

The poem's final, neatly controlled couplet imagines that, like the speaker (apparently anticipating her own elderliness and loneliness), the building revisits a memorable summer less with nostalgia or self-pity, than to resavour its bliss. The legacy of the vanished summer – **'sweat, sunblock, confidence'** (the unromantic language of this conclusion might come as a last surprise) – seems some consolation if not compensation for the passage of time and the pitiless effects of aging.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

In a short piece about herself which you can find on her website, Sheenagh Pugh remarks 'I like to use poems to commemorate people and places, sometimes to amuse, to have a go at things I don't like (censorship, intolerance, pomposity) and above all to entertain'.

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/aboutme>

As the reading above is intended to indicate, 'Toast' can be said to do most of these things: it commemorates not only the building of what is currently called the Principality Stadium, but the workforce whose labours made this 'mother-ship' the landmark structure and focus for Wales' capital city it has become. Pugh has herself described the poem as a 'celebration' of the summer it describes, which happened to be a particularly hot one, 'and the way people felt'. But 'Toast' also amuses, and might justifiably be said 'to have a go at' certain kinds of 'intolerance' and (in its casual, even slangy words and phrasing), the kind of self-consciously 'poetic' language and mannerisms which can seem 'pompous' to some readers.

Technically, the poem can be called a dramatic monologue, partly because it uses the first-person 'I' (although there are elements traditionally associated with this form of monologue which this text doesn't observe: identifying its speaker, for example). Like most poets, Pugh positively discourages readers from assuming that the voice of one of her poems is actually *hers*. She warns students who are studying her work: 'Above all, don't suppose that "I" is necessarily the poet. Poets have a saying, "I is a lie", and it's often true. Writing in the first person doesn't mean you are writing of your own personal experience. Poets make things up; it's our job.'

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/exam-resources>

That said, it is well worth paying attention to the ways in which the voice and diction of 'Toast' help to direct and influence the way the text works, and affect the reader. Note firstly, for example, how the palette of images weaving through the text is (unobtrusively but tightly) restricted to words or expressions associated with youth, age and/or the passage of time: **'forget', 'unripe', 'browning slowly', 'clock', 'sand', 'grey'...**

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE (CONTINUED)

In its interest in time, and linking of this with bodies, youth, beauty and desire, this poem openly and deliberately converses with its own long literary history: the 'lyric poem' has been used to examine and celebrate love, its causes and effects, and to lament or disclaim the deleterious passage of time on the human body, from the very first. From this perspective Pugh is doing nothing very different from those astonishing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers who made this habit so much a part of what scholars still call the 'English' poetry tradition: Wyatt, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell and their peers. The humorous stance and flavour of this text might seem surprising, but even a casual reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, and certainly Donne will rapidly confirm that humour, sometimes in the rather obvious form of (often saucy) puns, but also irony, sardony and satire, play an important part in the courtly romance traditions which these writers drew from medieval European literature and made their own.

One way in which Pugh rings the changes on that literary history is her choice of the couplet, rather than sonnet, for her poem, even if in doing so she is careful to retain some of the sonnet's architectural balancing of scene-setting and reflection as outlined above. More seriously and significantly, Pugh's poem also discreetly upends two central habits of that same long-lived tradition. Firstly she turns the poem's gaze on the young men it celebrates. In doing so, 'Toast', as suggested, dismisses many centuries of writing in which the speaker's gaze is male, and directed, whether in tender devotion or lust, at the usually young, often unavailable, and invariably silent woman he has chosen as object of and for his desire. This swipe at literary convention mischievously reverses the gender power relations the tradition presumes on, and seems part and parcel of the poem's serious/comic intentions overall. That said, the sun-worshipping workmen are still mute, and to some extent thus silently objectified by the unashamedly desirous gaze of the speaker, as well as other shoppers who **'sauntered by, whistling'**, male and female. However, it is hard to argue with the speaker's conclusion that the workmen welcome the attention (**'happily up for it'**), given the lack of self-consciousness in their self-display. After all, those who didn't want to be constructed as **'Sex objects'** were presumably eating their lunches, clothed, somewhere less visible. In allowing us to evaluate the scene for ourselves, Pugh ensures that her speaker avoids exploiting the objectifying power of the (usually male) gaze which male poets have long presumed on, and implicitly thumbs her nose at that - again long-lived - convention.

Pugh's work (and specifically 'Toast') is discussed from a variety of perspectives in *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 248-249. Her inclination to write in ways which take her, and a wide range of poetic personae of both genders, out of familiar or recognisable surroundings is examined at more length in *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Writing Contemporary Wales* (Alice Entwistle, University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 137-142.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why do you think the poet decided to write 'Toast'? Can you explain and justify your answer?

Do you find this poem funny? When/where and why?

How does 'Toast' ask us to view the voice it places centre stage? With sympathy or disapproval? Why have you reached this conclusion? Does it matter?

What do you find surprising or unexpected about this poem? Why? To what extent and in what ways do the qualities or features you have chosen seem significant to its key themes?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(link active September 2018)

All links are clickable

An image of Sheenagh Pugh on the Poetry Archive website, taken by Caroline Forbes.

• <https://www.poetryarchive.org/sites/default/files/styles/220x170-live-recordings-block/public/Sheenagh%20Pugh.jpg?itok=hayEiiMz>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

For information about her poems uploaded by the poet, visit her website:

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh>

She manages two other websites:

<https://sheenaghpugh.livejournal.com/>

<https://sheenagh.webs.com/>

<http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2015-16/PoetryInWales2017/Clips/Toast-commentary.mp4>

All links are clickable

**PROFESSOR ALICE
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*University of South Wales
August 2018*



We are grateful for the financial support of the College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, CREW - Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.