Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

Hugh MacDiarmid's 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn'

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' was written by Hugh MacDiarmid. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the estate, and the publisher - Carcanet. Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Poem overview

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' is one of Hugh MacDiarmid's early lyrics, written in a revived version of Lowland Scots, or 'Lallans', described by some at the time as 'Synthetic Scots'. Two visions co-exist in the poem:

- A group of celestial bodies orbiting the night sky.
- A series of portraits that personify the planets and moon in relation to their mythological counterparts: Mars, the god of war; Venus, the goddess of love; the ancient Moon. The Earth is presented as a tear-streaked child.

Dressed in their finery, the planets and moon are indifferent to the plight of the Earth. The speaker portrays their vacuous conversation and shallow parade of power and wealth as worthless before the human value of the neglected child.

Read in the context of MacDiarmid's communist politics, 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' illustrates the gulf between social classes and the indifference of the most powerful in society towards the most vulnerable. Published in the decade after the First World War, the poem's historical context extends this reading to a critique of world leaders detached from the suffering experienced by millions.

The poem may also be read in relation to MacDiarmid's nationalist agenda. His impulse to preserve, protect and reinvent Scots, a threatened language, can be linked more broadly to his perception of Scotland as a threatened entity. In this context, the 'bonnie broukit bairn' might also represent Scotland.

Author background

Hugh MacDiarmid is the pen name of Christopher Murray Grieve (1892–1987), a poet, journalist, and political figure, who was born in Langholm in the Scottish Borders. After serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps during the First World War, MacDiarmid worked as a journalist in Montrose. There, he founded *Northern Numbers* (1921–23), a post-war Scottish verse anthology, and *Scottish Chapbook* (1922–23), a monthly journal that

featured poetry, drama and creative prose by contemporary writers working in English, Gaelic, and Scots. MacDiarmid became a leading figure of the Scottish Renaissance, a predominantly literary movement that began in the 1920s. In his politics he was a committed communist and nationalist, a founding member of the National Party of Scotland (a predecessor of the present-day Scottish National Party).

Image: Hugh MacDiarmid sculpted by William Lamb. Photo by Neil Werninck, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

MacDiarmid's writing is marked by a deep engagement with Scottish history, language, and politics, as well as a commitment to modernist aesthetics and avant-garde experimentation. His major work, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), is a 2685-line dramatic monologue written in Scots that interweaves personal, cultural and existential reflections to explore the depths of human experience through a distinctly Scottish lens. In the 1930s MacDiarmid returned to writing poetry in English and composed a number of epics that explored politics, philosophy, linguistics, and science.

MacDiarmid's work is often difficult by design, both in language and content, as part of his intellectual, political, and artistic agenda. His poetry challenges the reader with linguistic complexity, dense allusions, and shifting perspectives, which demand active interpretation rather than passive reading.

Publication details

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' was published in *Sangschaw* (1925), the first collection published under the pen-name Hugh MacDiarmid. Rejecting English in favour of Lallans, *Sangschaw* marked the beginning of MacDiarmid's efforts to revitalise the Scots language, which was central to his vision of a distinct Scottish voice in modern poetry.

Online resources

Hugh MacDiarmid on the Scottish Poetry Library's website provides a biography, a selected bibliography, and a selection of poems.

Hugh MacDiarmid: Rebel Poet, a 36-minute profile of Hugh MacDiarmid produced in 1972 by the BBC. MacDiarmid talks about his uncompromising life and the ideas and circumstances that have shaped its progress.

'Hugh MacDiarmid's legacy': a 3-minute clip from the 2014 BBC programme *Andrew Marr's Great Scots: The Writers Who Shaped a Nation*.

Hugh MacDiarmid: A Portrait, held by the Moving Image Archive at the National Library of Scotland, is an 8-minute film that includes footage of MacDiarmid at home and reading his poems.

Hugh MacDiarmid: No Fellow Travellers, held by the Moving Image Archive at the National Library of Scotland, is a 25-minute film in which MacDiarmid speaks about his life and work in conversation with his son Michael Grieve and fellow poet Norman MacCaig.

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn': a reading of the poem by Ron Butlin, the former Edinburgh Makar (Poet Laureate).

The version of 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' printed here and published on the Scottish Poetry Library website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The poem itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn'

by Hugh MacDiarmid

Mars is braw in crammasy,
Venus in a green silk goun,
The auld mune shak's her gowden feathers,
Their starry talk's a wheen o' blethers,
Nane for thee a thochtie sparin'
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!
– But greet, an' in your tears ye'll drown
The haill clanjamfrie!

Glossary

braw: handsome, fine, splendid | **crammasy**: crimson
goun: gown
auld mune: old moon | **gowden**: golden
wheen o' blethers: nonsense
a thoctie sparin': a thought spared
broukit: neglected
haill clanjamfrie: whole rabble of them

Political context and the First World War

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' was published in 1925, seven years after the end of the First World War, during which MacDiarmid served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in Salonika and France. His wartime service exposed him to the horrors and futility of large-scale conflict. This left a lasting imprint on his poetic sensibilities and political convictions, spurring his desire to forge a distinctively Scottish cultural identity while remaining critical of narrow parochialism. MacDiarmid's wartime experiences reinforced his belief in the necessity of radical change, both politically and culturally. This conviction was behind his advocacy for Scottish independence and international socialism, and his opposition to British imperialism.

Read in the context of the First World War, the speaker of 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' represents the collective voice of those experiencing or witnessing the effects of war. The speaker laments the innocence lost whilst condemning world leaders and their disconnect from the grim reality of war.

The Scottish Literary Renaissance and Synthetic Scots

In the early to mid-twentieth century, MacDiarmid led a literary revival in Scotland that aimed to revitalise Scottish writing and project an outward-looking, innovative literature for the future. The movement embraced modernist techniques to explore new ways of expressing Scottish identity and sought to revive the Scots language. Writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance shared a similar cultural and political consciousness and aimed to promote greater cultural autonomy in Scotland. Key figures of the movement included Edwin Muir, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and Naomi Mitchison.

Part of MacDiarmid's mission was to restore and modernise the Scots language. He constructed his experimental vernacular style – which he called Lallans or Synthetic Scots – by trawling old dictionaries, and other Scots sources, for inspiration and by unifying various dialects. MacDiarmid's aim was to create a dynamic literary language that could express the modern Scottish experience while being rooted in Scotland's linguistic heritage.

MacDiarmid's reconstructed Scots – which uses archaic, regional, and obscure vocabulary – can be difficult for even native speakers. MacDiarmid wanted Scottish literature to

challenge, provoke, and demand intellectual engagement. In this way, the linguistic complexity of his work can be regarded as a political act, with MacDiarmid asserting that the Scottish literary tradition should be as rigorous as any European high art.

Mythology

MacDiarmid drew on a vast and eclectic range of sources throughout his work, often incorporating complex ideas into his poetry from his wide reading across many disciplines. Mythology was one such cultural and imaginative resource, with MacDiarmid harnessing the symbolic power of myths in order to address contemporary issues. By merging the old with the new, he sought to forge a radical, forward-looking style of poetry.

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' alludes to Mars, the god of war, and Venus, the goddess of love, from Roman mythology. The Romans often portrayed the gods as powerful, immortal beings who controlled various aspects of the natural world and human destiny yet remained distant from the struggles of mortals. Gods like Mars and Venus ruled from above, intervening in human affairs only when it suited their own desires or purposes. Mortals, on the other hand, were subject to fate and the whims of these capricious gods, often suffering as the collateral for divine conflicts or punishments.

Image: Sculpture of Mars and Venus in Blüherpark, Dresden. Photo by Kalispera Dell, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Roman civilisation provided the legal, ideological and linguistic blueprint for many modern states. In particular, its influence on European and colonial empires can be seen in the use of Roman imperial ideals and icons to legitimise their rule and their cultural structures.

Full analysis

Form and structure

'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' is an eight-line lyric with an irregular metre. The rhyme follows a strict but unobtrusive pattern: ABCCDDBA. The circularity of the rhyme scheme reflects the movement of the planets around the sun. The structure may also represent a social order, indicated by the positioning of the planets on the page: Mars, Venus, and the moon at the top, and the Earth at the bottom.

Lines 1–3

Mars is braw in crammasy,
Venus in a green silk goun,
The auld mune shak's her gowden feathers,

As a vision of the night sky, the first three lines portray the crimson red of Mars, the shimmering green of Venus, and the reflecting light of the moon. Mars, Venus and the Moon are some of the most visible celestial bodies to the naked eye (often dominating the night sky), suggesting the speaker's earth-bound, human perspective of the cosmos.

Personified, the planets and moon take on the characteristics of the mythological figures with which they are associated. The strong declarative of the first line mirrors the figure portrayed: Mars, the god of war in Roman mythology, who represents strength, aggression, masculine drive and military power. The sibilance in the line's open and close emphasises the middle word, 'braw', and consequently the splendour of Mars, who is dressed in 'crammasy'. Historically, crimson was a regal colour, often used in royal garments and religious vestments, and synonymous with status and luxury. More broadly, red is associated with danger and warfare, linking to the mythology and characteristics of the god Mars.

Alluding again to Roman mythology, the second line portrays Venus, the goddess of love, fertility and desire. Less conspicuous than her celestial neighbours, Venus is presented as an alluring figure in her green silk gown. Historically, silk was associated with elegance, luxury, and the elite, particularly in the imperial domain.

Throughout history, many cultures have perceived the moon as a symbol of feminine energy. 'The auld mune' embodies this ancient matriarchal power. Her 'gowden feathers' signify prosperity: gold is associated with wealth and prestige, while feathers have been used throughout history as a status symbol and were a common feature of high society fashion in the 1920s. This pairing of power and affluence characterises the moon as an aristocratic dowager of generational wealth and status. The action verb 'shak' implies an overt or deliberate display of grandeur.

As celestial bodies, the planets and moon are god-like in their positions high in the night sky. Personified, they appear like a royal pageant or members of the upper class, dressed in rich colours and commanding attention.

Line 4

Their starry talk's a wheen o' blethers,

The magnificence of the planets is abruptly diminished by the speaker, whose position shifts from passive observer in lines 1–3 to satiric critic in line 4. Alongside its literal celestial meaning, 'starry' implies talk that is pretentious or meaningless, emphasised by the derisive phrase 'wheen o' blethers' to indicate nonsense.

The tonal shift in line 4 invites a re-reading of lines 1–3: Mars gives the impression of being brash, Venus as prim or aloof, and the Moon as ostentatious. They orbit each other as if circulating at a party, exchanging shallow conversation and gaudy displays of power, beauty, and wealth. Rhyming 'gowden feathers' with 'wheen o' blethers' emphasises the speaker's disdain towards the planets and moon and what they represent.

Lines 5–6

Nane for thee a thochtie sparin'
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!

Having been sidelined by its illustrious company, the Earth is re-positioned into centre focus by the speaker, who addresses the Earth directly. A minor among major bodies, the Earth strikes a tragic figure, neglected by the celestial bodies/gods whose talk revolves entirely around themselves, reinforcing their detachment from human concerns.

The exclamation in line 6 emphasises the speaker's judgement or condemnation of the planets and moon and their treatment of the Earth. Pairing 'bonnie' and 'broukit' – beauty and neglect – suggests these qualities are inextricably linked, with this presentation of unappreciated potential resonating with MacDiarmid's vision of Scotland as well as the broader human condition.

Lines 7–8

– But greet, an' in your tears ye'll drown
The haill clanjamfrie!

The conjunction 'But' signals a turning point, with 'greet' representing both a cathartic act and a moral reckoning. Tears imply vulnerability, but the italicised lines assert the power held by the Earth to drown – or silence – the planets and moon by obscuring the night sky from vision through tears (as a child) or rain (as the Earth). Compared to the lifeless, barren environments of the celestial bodies, Earth is presented as a living, responsive entity, demonstrated by its capacity for tears/rain.

Drowning alludes to a biblical flood – a powerful symbol throughout literature, mythology, and cultural narratives – which may be read in the context of the modern environmental crisis, with the crying child representing a threatened future.

'Ye'll' [you will] indicates a promise, implying retribution or a redressing of the wrongs that the Earth has suffered. Reducing the celestial bodies to 'the haill clanjamfrie' negates and dismisses their sense of worth. The speaker's tone implies that it is the Earth which should be cherished or valued above all else.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' was written in the 1920s. What do you know about this time period? How does the poem speak to its historical moment? How does it speak to the present?
- How does the image of a neglected child influence your emotional response to the poem?
- MacDiarmid was known for his strong communist and nationalist views. How might the poem be understood in these terms?
- Who do you think the speaker is? How does their perspective influence how we, as readers, relate to the Earth in the poem?
- How would the poem's meaning change if it were told from the perspective of one of the celestial bodies?

Techniques

- What emotions does the poem evoke? How does MacDiarmid achieve this through language and tone?
- How does the contrast between 'bonnie' (beautiful) and 'broukit' (neglected) reflect the themes of the poem?
- What imagery stands out the most to you? How does it contribute to the poem's overall meaning?
- How does MacDiarmid use colour to characterise Mars, Venus, and the moon? What characteristics are usually attributed to these bodies outside of this poem?
- How does MacDiarmid create a contrast between the celestial bodies and the Earth? What is the effect of this juxtaposition?

Themes

- How does the poem reflect issues of power and inequality?
- What is the relationship between strength and vulnerability in the poem?
- The celestial bodies appear either unaware or uncaring of the Earth's suffering. What might they symbolise?

- Do you think the poem has a hopeful or pessimistic view of Earth's fate? Why or why not?
- What do you think the poet wants the reader to take away from this poem? Do you agree with their message? Why or why not?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–3.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language creates an impression of the planets and moon. (4 marks)

Look at lines 4–6.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys a sense of injustice or neglect. (4 marks)

Look at lines 7–8.

Analyse how the poet's use of language creates an effective ending to the poem. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the Higher Scottish Poetry Collection, discuss how the poets use imagery **and/or** symbolism to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Hugh MacDiarmid's 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Thomas the Rhymer' (traditional ballad)
- 'Composed In August' by Robert Burns
- 'Da Clearance' by Rhoda Bulter
- 'Summit at Corrie Etchachan' by Nan Shepherd
- '33' by MacGillivray

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.