Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

MacGillivray's '33'

Table of Contents

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.

'33' was written by MacGillivray. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author, and the publisher, Bloodaxe Books (https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/). Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Laura Green, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Poem overview

‘33’ is written from the perspective of Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587). MacGillivray draws on the tradition of the medieval dream vision as well as imagery from Mary’s own writing to portray an otherworldly journey that anticipates Mary’s death. The poem explores themes of fear, fate, and mortality through maritime imagery and the interplay of light/dark and life/death.

In the opening octet Mary is a passive observer. She envisions in a dream the journey of a boat, which carries the dead and whose figurehead is a representation of God. The vision intensifies her deep sense of dread regarding death.

In the sestet, Mary addresses the ship directly. Presented as a funeral barque, the ship and its journey convey the idea of a royal passage into the afterlife. This is reminiscent of historical traditions where monarchs are ceremonially transported after their death. The poem culminates with the dual symbolism of a lighthouse and a floating lamp, representing guidance, enlightenment, and the personal cost of such illumination.

The title indicates the poem’s position within a sequence of sonnets. The sequence descends from ‘35’ to ‘1’, representing Mary walking down 35 stairs to her execution. Therefore, ‘33’ is the third, rather than the antepenultimate, poem of the sequence.

Author background

MacGillivray is the stage persona and Highland clan name of Kirsten Norrie, a Scottish writer, performance artist and musician. Norrie was brought up internationally and lived for a significant period of time in both England and Northern Ireland before returning to Scotland in the early 2000s. MacGillivray’s poetic work draws on Scottish history, mythology, folklore, and traditions, and is characterised by its innovative use of language and form.

Beyond poetry, MacGillivray has made significant contributions to music and visual art. She has released nine records, collaborating with producer James Young and contributing

to soundtracks for films by avant-garde director Andrew Kötting. Her interdisciplinary approach extends to film, where she co-wrote and directed a Gaelic short film shot on the Isle of Skye.

Publication details

'33' is published in *The Gaelic Garden of the Dead* (Bloodaxe Books, 2019), which is three Books of the Dead bound as one. This trilogy comprises an alphabet of trees, ten dream pattern poems, and a sequence of death sonnets commemorating Mary Queen of Scots. Towards the end of her life, when held in captivity, Mary embroidered the epitaph-like motto 'In My End is My Beginning', which is the title given to the final 'book' in *The Gaelic Garden of the Dead*.

MacGillivray has published three other poetry collections: *The Last Wolf of Scotland* (Bloodaxe, 2013), *The Nine of Diamonds: Surroial Mordantless* (Bloodaxe, 2016), and *Ravage, An Astonishment of Fire* (Bloodaxe, 2023). Her album *In My End is My Beginning (Songs for Mary Queen of Scots)* was released in 2022 on the 435th anniversary of Mary's death.

Online resources

https://www.kirstennorrie.com is MacGillivray's own website, which includes a selection of videos that offer students the opportunity to hear MacGillivray performing her work.

https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/33/ includes an audio recording of MacGillivray performing '33' and an 'Author's Note' on the poem:

> '33' was written in situ at the Talbot Inn, Oundle where architectural features such as the staircase and windows were originally salvaged from the burnt down castle site of Fotheringhay. Composed on the anniversary of Mary Queen of Scots' execution, 8th February, 1587, '33' deploys Mary's preferred form – the Petrarchan – and is inspired by select imagery from her own highly accomplished poetry which was admired by her tutor Ronsard and his literary circle, the Pleiades, for whom the young queen glowed as their dark star. A sonnet was composed for each step Mary descended on that staircase to her brutal

beheading; engendering thirty-five in total. These were then chewed up for the fifteen minutes her lips were said to move after decapitation, and realigned in published counterpoint. All the sonnets appear in *The Gaelic Garden of the Dead*.

https://vimeo.com/519011481 : This film was shown in Imram's online Irish Language Literature Festival 2020 and features MacGillivray reading from *The Gaelic Garden of the Dead* and singing Scottish Gaelic songs to musical backdrops composed and performed by Séan Mac Erlaine, with visuals by artist Margaret Lonergan.

The version of '33' 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.)

'33'

by MacGillivray

I dreamed of a sawdust chandelier
whose crystals were drops of driftwood dredged
from all the world's shipwrecks: god's figurehead,
and it swung, as I dreamt, ever closer to my fear,
softly releasing sweet incense into the clear,
black night air, as that great barge carries the dead,
but instead of my death, it passaged my dread
and the water it ploughed comprised of one tear.

Great smouldering barque, your figurehead sings
into the dark, the death song of queens, of kings,
over sea birds that circle like faint rings of smoke,
your floating lamp burns, as a lighthouse brings
death to itself: you are moth and flame both –
so lamp lights my dread of shade, performs two killings.

Mary Queen of Scots

Image: Portrait of Mary Queen of Scots (1550) by François Clouet. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587), also known as Mary Stuart, was a central figure in the political and religious conflicts of 16th-century Europe. Mary became Queen of Scotland when she was six days old; too young to rule, her early reign was governed by regents. Sent to France when she was five years old, Mary was betrothed to the heir to the French throne, Francis, and became Queen Consort of France in 1559. Following Francis's death, she returned to Scotland to rule in 1561. By this point, Protestantism had gained significant ground due to the Scottish Reformation, led by figures such as John Knox. A devout Catholic, Mary faced significant challenges in ruling a predominantly Protestant nation, leading to political and religious conflicts.

After a rebellion against her rule, Mary was imprisoned at Lochleven Castle and forced to abdicate the throne in favour of her infant son, James VI. Having fled Lochleven, Mary was defeated at the Battle of Langside in Glasgow and subsequently sought refuge in England. However, as a claimant to the English throne Mary posed a threat to the reigning Tudor monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, and was held in captivity for nineteen years.

Accused of being involved in an attempt to assassinate Elizabeth, Mary was tried for treason in 1586. Found guilty, she was executed on 8 February 1587 at Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire.

Mary Queen of Scots has remained a deeply contested and mythologised figure, with her image shifting across centuries to reflect political, national, and cultural preoccupations. To some she is a tragic martyr; to others she is a reckless ruler undone by her own ambitions and personal entanglements. In literature, art, and film, she has been portrayed as a doomed heroine, a victim of betrayal, or a symbol of lost Scottish sovereignty, embodying the tensions between monarchy, faith, and female power. '33' becomes part of this inheritance: rather than offering a fixed image of Mary, the poem immerses the reader in her final moments and inhabits the psychological space of historical inevitability. MacGillivray's work contributes to the ongoing cultural dialogue about Mary, not just as a historical figure, but as a legend whose meaning continues to evolve.

The poetry of Mary Queen of Scots

Mary used poetry as a means of communication, particularly during her imprisonment. Her compositions often served as coded messages or expressions of her personal feelings and thoughts. Writing predominantly in French, her native tongue, Mary typically turned to themes such as religious devotion, love, longing, suffering, and resilience. Her poems are mostly known through historical records and letters rather than widespread circulation during her lifetime.

Dream vision

A dream vision is a literary genre that was popular during the Middle Ages and which serves as a vehicle for various forms of revelation or exploration. The narrative is framed as a dream experienced by the protagonist, who journeys through an otherworldly landscape learning moral, spiritual, or intellectual truths.

Book of the Dead

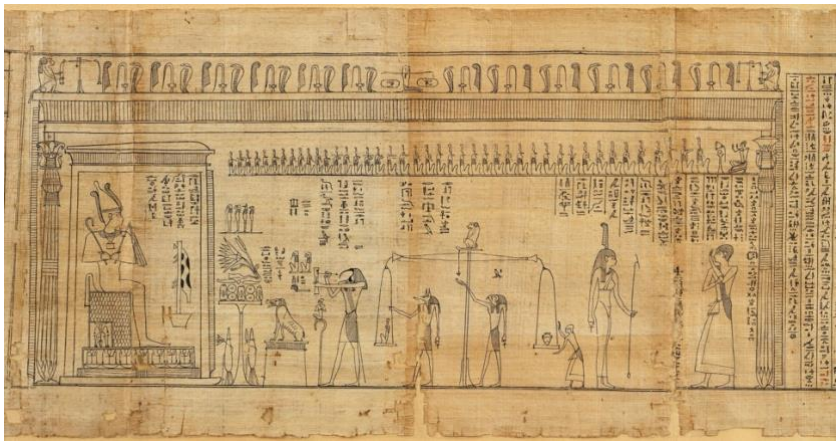

Image: Book of the Dead of Iuefankh from the Hellenistic Period (332–30 BC) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The 'Book of the Dead' refers to an ancient Egyptian funerary text intended to guide the deceased into the afterlife. Such texts collected hymns, prayers and incantations and could be tailored to the individual to help them on their journey towards eternity.

Full analysis

Form and structure

A Petrarchan sonnet, also known as an Italian sonnet, is a 14-line poem divided into two parts: an octave (the first 8 lines) and a sestet (the final 6 lines). In a Petrarchan sonnet, the octave follows a consistent rhyme scheme: ABBAABBA. The sestet allows more flexibility, with typical variations of its rhyme scheme including CDECDE or CDCDCD. The sestet in '33' uses the rhyme scheme CCDCDC.

The octave in a Petrarchan sonnet presents a problem, situation, or question. There is often a volta (turn) between the octave and the sestet, signalling a shift in tone, perspective, or argument. The sestet presents a resolution, action, or reflection.

Although a Petrarchan sonnet is typically written in iambic pentameter, '33' adopts a more fluid metre. Each line ranges between 9 and 13 syllables, which are stressed irregularly. By

following no consistent pattern, the metre of the poem creates a sense of unpredictability, mirroring its surreal and dreamlike quality.

In writing a Petrarchan sonnet, MacGillivray acknowledges Mary's preferred poetic form and signals to her classical, European education and background.

Speaker

The first-person perspective gives the reader direct access to Mary's dream as well as her thoughts and emotions, allowing for an intimate exploration of fear, mortality, and transformation.

Line 1

I dreamed of a sawdust chandelier,

Signalling to a dream vision in its opening phrase, the poem introduces the surreal image of a sawdust chandelier. The typically grandiose image of a chandelier – an ornamental feature of stately homes or palaces and a signifier of wealth and status – is disturbed by its material. Sawdust, which is created from something cut into or destroyed, suggests impermanence. The contrast between the object and its material may represent Mary's life from grandeur to downfall and symbolise the remnants of lost power and failed journeys.

It also highlights the fundamental fragility of that power. Sawdust is a waste product, something without real substance or lasting value. In the face of death and eternity, the chandelier's material suggests that Mary's wealth and status ultimately amount to nothing. The image presents a stark confrontation with power's inherent insignificance when measured against mortality.

Lines 2–3

whose crystals were drops of driftwood dredged
from all the world's shipwrecks: god's figurehead,

The imagery of crystals made from 'all the world's shipwrecks' evokes a sense of history, loss, and the repurposing of suffering or wreckage into something beautiful or meaningful.

Crystals are also a reference to the diamond imagery employed in poems attributed to Mary, such as 'The Diamond Speaks', which ends with the lines: 'I should be known / As the diamond, the greatest jewel, the mighty stone.'

The alliteration in line 2 creates a lulling or dreamlike effect. The reference to shipwrecks, alongside the poem's themes of fear and mortality, heighten the tension in the dream vision, lending it a nightmarish or unsettling quality.

A figurehead is a carved wooden decoration, often representing a human form or an animal, that is mounted at the prow (front) of a ship. Some cultures used figureheads as a form of protection. They were believed to offer protection against harsh seas, storms, or evil spirits, embodying a sort of maritime talisman. Line 3 indicates that the sawdust chandelier is a figurehead of God, representing divine oversight or destiny.

Image: Figurehead of HMS Warrior (1860) at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.
Source: The wub, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Line 4

and it swung, as I dreamt, ever closer to my fear,

The swinging movement likens the chandelier to a pendulum, a representation of time. 'Ever closer' creates the sense of inevitability, or something impending. 'My fear' is left unnamed but can be inferred as Mary's death. This suggests that although the figurehead is guiding Mary, her journey to the afterlife is fraught with trepidation rather than acceptance or peace.

The movement described suggests that what approaches is not just the event of death, but the necessity of confronting the fear of death. The inevitability of death is already known, but its psychological weight – the fear it provokes – becomes the real force pressing in on the speaker. This distinction emphasises that anticipation and awareness of death are as emotionally and mentally significant as the event itself, making fear the central burden.

Lines 5–6

softly releasing sweet incense into the clear,
black night air, as that great barge carries the dead,

'Softly', 'sweet' and 'clear' temper the sense of foreboding by creating a calmer atmosphere. Incense is often used during religious rituals or ceremonies as an offering or to purify the space. The incense released by the chandelier may represent a funeral rite and symbolise prayers or the memory of Mary's life. As a Catholic, Mary would have believed in the afterlife and the possibility of intercession by saints and prayers for the dead, which aligns with the broader Christian view of death but with a particular emphasis on divine judgement and mercy.

'Black night air' may represent hidden aspects of life, the subconscious, or the unknown future. Void-like, it unsettles the calm atmosphere of the previous line, as does the image of a boat carrying the dead. In certain cultures, such as Norse and Ancient Egyptian, ship burials were symbolic of the journey to the afterlife, with the sea representing a path to another world or a form of rebirth.

The 'great barge' that carries the dead directly alludes to Mary's own fate, but also to the broader theme of mortality among royalty, where Mary might see herself as part of an eternal journey – one in which monarchs are bound by lineage and defined by their deaths. This draws on the idea that kings and queens are not just rulers but also figures in an ongoing cycle of succession, where power is inherited only through loss. The barge, reminiscent of funeral processions and mythic crossings, reinforces the notion that royalty exists in a lineage stretching both backward and forward in time, yet built upon the inevitability of death and the legacies left behind.

Lines 7–8

but instead of my death, it passaged my dread
and the water it ploughed comprised of one tear.

Despite her anticipation of death, the unnamed fear in line 4, Mary's dream does not portray her demise. Instead, the boat travels through her dread. A passage implies a journey, which must have an end, suggesting a transition from a state of fear to one of resignation or acceptance.

Crucially, this journey through fear can be represented and envisioned, whereas the passage through death itself remains unknowable, beyond the scope of experience and articulation. The poem suggests that while dread is something that can be confronted and endured, the moment of death remains inaccessible and resists depiction in the same way.

'Ploughed' indicates powerful motion. The need for such force implies the enormity of 'one tear', which represents Mary's emotional state or moments of personal despair.

Line 9

Great smouldering barque, your figurehead sings

At the turn of the sonnet, Mary shifts from her position as a passive observer to address the ship directly. This active confrontation of her fate suggests an internal transition; by acknowledging her death, Mary moves closer to accepting it.

'Great' may be read as a form of praise or reverence, or it may signal to the ship's magnitude either physically or in terms of what it represents spiritually. 'Smouldering' refers to a slow burn that releases smoke but no flame, which links to the incense in line 5. Although it presents no immediate danger, smouldering implies something that lingers which is perilous or powerful.

A barque is a type of sailing vessel that typically has three or more masts. In Ancient Egypt, solar barques or funeral barques were used in the burial practices of the pharaohs, symbolising the journey of the deceased to the afterlife.

The personification of the figurehead singing heightens the presence of divine guidance.

Lines 10–11

into the dark, the death song of queens, of kings,
over sea birds that circle like faint rings of smoke,

A death song refers to a song or poem that commemorates a person who has died, or one which is sung prior to the death of oneself. 'Of queens, of kings' indicates that the song honours the lives and reigns of Mary's predecessors as well as her own. In the afterlife of queens and kings Mary would be judged or vindicated by the same divine authority that legitimised her reign.

The circling sea birds can be interpreted in a number of ways. They may symbolise Mary's anticipation of her death, circling as if waiting for her fate to unfold. Their presence as detached observers may represent Mary's feelings of being under constant surveillance during the years spent in captivity prior to her execution. Given the spiritual undertones of the poem the birds may represent divine guidance, connecting Mary to the world beyond her political and personal tribulations.

The imagery of the 'faint rings of smoke' may symbolise the dissolution of legacy, representing the gradual extinguishing of Mary's reign and influence.

Lines 12–13

your floating lamp burns, as a lighthouse brings
death to itself: you are moth and flame both

The image of a floating lamp invites a comparison to a water lantern, which some cultures release to honour and remember the dead. These lanterns serve as a bridge to connect the worlds of the living and the afterlife, with water representing the boundary between the two.

The imagery of the lighthouse as both moth and flame suggests an inescapable pull toward destruction – just as a lighthouse warns sailors yet also marks dangerous shores, Mary's fate is both foreseen and inevitable. The floating lamp embodies the duality of the

lighthouse as a symbol of safety and danger, representing spiritual guidance in Mary's unavoidable journey to her death.

Line 14

so lamp lights my dread of shade, performs two killings.

'My dread of shade' alludes to Mary's fear of death, which the light of the lamp – divine guidance – exposes but also extinguishes. The final line suggests that the act of bringing light into dark places (or bringing truth to light) can be both illuminating and destructive. It reveals fears or truths, which metaphorically 'kill' ignorance but also peace or security.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- '33' is written from the perspective of Mary Queen of Scots. What do you know, or what can you find out, about Mary? How does this historical background affect your reading of the poem?
- Do you think the poem portrays Mary as a tragic figure? Why or why not?
- How would you describe the mood of the poem? What techniques does MacGillivray use to convey this mood?
- Sonnets are often used to convey deep, personal emotions. How does this fit with the poem's themes?
- Traditional dream visions often reveal deeper truths. What truth or truths does Mary realise in this poem?

Techniques

- What emotions does the poem evoke? How does the poet achieve this through language and tone?
- What shift in tone or meaning can you identify in the division between the octave and the sestet?
- What is the effect of the dream-like or surreal imagery in the poem?
- How do the metaphors in the poem relate to the emotions behind them?
- What might the image of 'sea birds that circle' symbolise?
- Explain the 'two killings' that close the poem.

Themes

- How does the poem reflect the theme of mortality? Do you think death or fear of death is more important in this poem?
- Do you think the poem has a hopeful view of Mary's fate? Why or why not?
- How does water imagery contribute to themes of fear and uncertainty?
- What does the ship/barque represent in the poem?
- How does the poet use religious or cultural imagery to explore the themes of fate and the afterlife?
- In what ways does the poem distinguish between the monarch and the person?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–6.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language creates a foreboding atmosphere. (4 marks)

Look at lines 7–11.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the speaker's anticipation of death. (4 marks)

Look at lines 12–14.

Analyse how the poet's use of language creates a powerful ending. (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 MacGillivray's '33' 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
- 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' by Hugh MacDiarmid

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.